



Department of State and
Regional Development

First for Regional Business

Townlife Development Program

Crookwell – community planning model



Crookwell Shire is a rural community located about 30 minutes north of Goulburn and 2 and a 1/2 hours south west of Sydney. The Shire is home to 4,800 people, with just under half the population living in the Crookwell township.

The major industry is agriculture – specifically fine wool, fat lambs, beef cattle, potatoes and certified seed potatoes

Crookwell background information

Crookwell Shire is a typical rural community which has followed traditional farming practices for generations. The area has suffered from the decline in the rural sector and population loss. The impact of the loss of cash-flow from the local economy has resulted in the small business and service sectors slowing, in many cases forcing the closure of long established family businesses within the shire. With the loss of banking services and the imbalance in the retail mix, many local shoppers were taking their weekly shopping budget to regional centres such as Goulburn. Remaining local businesses were threatened by this loss of income. Crookwell Shire was at this point when Council successfully gained Townlife Development Program assistance.

How the project began

Crookwell Shire Council was offered a community planning package in the first funding round of the Townlife Development Program. This package included funding for an interim coordinator, an initial community workshop, a strategic planning workshop, a business retention and expansion survey and a business marketing workshop.

The workshops were to involve a broad cross section of the community including representatives from the smaller villages within the shire. Brian Wilkinson, General Manager of the Crookwell Shire Council was keen to ensure that a shire-wide approach be undertaken, with a focus on individual communities as well as the shire in general.

The Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD) aims to revitalise rural

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communities with populations of 2,500 or less through the Townlife Development Program (TDP) by providing a community planning process and/or project funding to assist with their economic development.

The Crookwell Planning Process

A well known local resident, Sylvia Cullen was employed as the interim coordinator for the project. Sylvia's local knowledge and networking skills were a critical factor in gaining the confidence and support of the broader community and, as a result, excellent participation at both workshops.

Sylvia's hard work paid off with the first workshop, held in late February, attracting a large attendance of 126 people. A broad cross section of the community including farmers, business people, councillors, investors, young and old were keen to participate. Villages involved in the process included Bigga, Binda Tuena, Grabben Gullen, Roslyn, Isabella and Laggen as well as the township of Crookwell. The workshop process enabled the development of plans for the shire as well as the individual villages. Important components such as SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and issues analysis helped the groups to identify and prioritise a range of issues that were effecting the prosperity of the community. The meeting broke into a number of groups that focused on priorities for individual villages and general areas such as strategic planning collaboration and coordination, business and economic development, marketing and promotion, events and physical improvements.

Issues identified at the meetings were:

1. State of the local economy – slowing agricultural industry and pressure on farmers to subdivide and sell to cover debt.
2. Unsealed roads – including the State road to Bathurst as well as other unsealed roads within the shire to the various villages.
3. Communication inequity – inadequate fast internet, poor mobile phone access, split television/radio region across the shire
4. Population loss – The decline in young families and youth.
5. Failure rate of small business – The serious loss of retail trade in the main street.

Opportunities to try to address some of these issues included:

1. Potential for new residents to move to the area and introduce alternative farming practices and/or establish/relocate new businesses to the area from capital cities such as Sydney/Canberra.
2. Tourism ventures capitalising on the unique history of the region in particular the villages with Crookwell being the focal point to explore the Gold rush country. Also the country lifestyle experience – farm-stay accommodation.
3. Location and Climate being a major opportunity with the Shire's proximity to Sydney, Canberra, Goulburn, Bathurst and the Orange/Cowra/Mudgee food region.

The second planning workshop was held two weeks later with an overwhelming attendance of 135 people. The meeting was broken into

focus groups where action plans were developed to address some of the key issues. The instructions for this were to ensure that the action planning was undertaken from within the resources of the community. Each group focused on short term achievable projects as well as medium to long term activities. A commitment to undertake the projects was made by the community. Team coordinators nominated to form a steering group to ensure the projects were undertaken. The General Manager of Crookwell Shire committed to continued support for the process and the group. John Coombs and John Joseph (two capable local leaders) were nominated to chair the process.

The results so far

A strong three way partnership has been formed between the community, business and Council to undertake the projects identified in the planning process. Each community (village or town) has formed an action group involving existing organisations such as ratepayers associations or hall committees and have a list of projects which they are undertaking.

The shire-wide group brings a representative from each village group together to report on the status of their projects. This group is jointly chaired by two community members who then sit on a committee of Crookwell Highlands Advancement Group (CHAG). CHAG acts as the umbrella organisation and brings other organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Farmers and Tourism Associations together.

Issues such as infrastructure are addressed by Council with various applications for support and funding currently being considered. Other tasks such as branding and signage are being developed by the local committees in conjunction with the tourism group. Local festivals are being developed and local organisations are working collaboratively.

The strategic planning process revealed a need for assistance for the business community. As a result the assistance from the Department was amended to incorporate the Townlife Survey and to develop marketing strategies to stop leakage and assist business to become more viable.

"We are so excited by the positive response from the community to this process," said Sylvia Cullen. "It has given new residents an opportunity to become involved and existing residents a chance to consider a change for our future without losing our identity." Crookwell has taken the first steps in planning a positive direction for their community's survival. The future is now filled with opportunities and positive action is being taken. Clear vision, hard work, determination, good leadership and partnerships, both locally and with Government, will see this program succeed.