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## Making Bendigo a child friendly city: a set of indicators of child and young people's well-being to galvanise action

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In 2007, the city of Bendigo in central Victoria was the first city in Australia to be granted Child Friendly City status by UNICEF (UNICEF 2011). Two years later, St Luke's Anglicare established a Bendigo Child Friendly City Leadership Group to coordinate effort across the Local Government, the community sector, State Government departments, business and other critical stakeholders working with children and young people. One of the Leadership Group's most significant achievements to date has been establishing a set of indicators to galvanise action, support strategic planning and monitor progress (UNICEF 2011). This article outlines the process undertaken to produce the indicator set, released as *The State of Bendigo's Children Report* (Pope & Nolan 2011), as a lesson for others who may wish to replicate it.

## **A strong authorising environment and networks that bring in capacity**

The Bendigo Child Friendly City Leadership Group provides a forum for organisations involved in improving the wellbeing of children and young people to discuss ideas for implementing the nine UNICEF principles for a Child Friendly City (UNICEF 2011). It recognises that impacting on the wellbeing of children and young people is complex and will require the combined efforts of government, the non-government sector, business and the community itself. One of the Leadership Group's first decisions was to implement the UNICEF principle that a Child Friendly City should produce a regular report to monitor the wellbeing of its children and young people (UNICEF 2011).

In 2010 the desire to create an indicator set was raised at a workshop run by the State Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to review Bendigo's Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) results (a national measure of children's development taken from all Australian children in their first year of school in 2009) (RCH 2011). A researcher (one of the authors) from the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) attended the workshop and offered St Luke's Anglicare a week's volunteering leave to write an indicator framework. At the completion of the volunteering leave DEECD offered a small grant for a research assistant to be supervised to complete the data collection and for St Luke's Anglicare to publish the report.

## **A community owned indicators framework**

Deciding what indicators to use is a critical decision for a community. Indicators highlight public policy issues and attention is drawn to issues with measures. If designed carefully indicators can become an effective and trusted public information source that can galvanise action and ensure policy is just (Innes 1994). If poorly designed, indicators risk being seen as a biased account of the issues communities face and ignored (Innes 1994). The first task of the indicator project was therefore to create an indicator framework that told the story about what was important to the community about its children and young people.

Developing the framework began with a review of:

- the Leadership Group's strategic documents;
- a significant body of strategic and research work undertaken by the Local Government (City of Greater Bendigo) as part of its earlier child friendly commitment;
- State, Federal and international indicator frameworks; and
- the notes from the AEDI workshop.

During the review the developing framework was iterated with key stakeholders in interviews.

The resulting framework is a statement that acknowledges that the wellbeing of children is dependent on the wellbeing of families (and vice versa) and that family wellbeing is in turn dependent on the wellbeing of communities (and vice versa). The framework statement reads:

“In a child friendly city...

- **Children are ...** developing well; safe and secure; engaged learning and earning; happy and healthy; and active citizens;
- **Families are ...** providing a positive lifestyle; supported by child expertise; creating a positive learning environment, safe; modelling good citizenship; and
- **Communities have...** quality organisations, services and programs; capacity; quality infrastructure; broad networks; well planned, safe environments; community government and business working together; mechanisms for involving children’s voices, and those working with children, in decision-making”) (Pope & Nolan 2011).

The importance of writing the strategic story first – before looking at data – can not be overstated. It ensured the story was not driven purely by available data and that important policy issues did not slip off the agenda simply because there are no measures. This was important when the Leadership Group came to select eight priority issues for action from the indicators, as half were data gaps.

Once the framework was determined, data sources were reviewed for potential indicators in each topic area. To be included, indicators needed to come from a theoretically sound/accepted and technically accurate time series data collection that described a topic at the Local Government Area level as a minimum (Innes 1994).

The draft framework, populated with forty potential indicators, was presented to a workshop of around forty stakeholders from Local and State government, the community sector, schools and academia. The workshop examined whether:

- the framework included all topics important to the community; and
- the best indicators (including gaps) for each topic had been selected. To keep the story coherent, and focused on the issues of greatest importance, indicators were only allowed to be added if others were removed.

At the conclusion of the workshop there was a very high level of agreement on both the overall framework and the indicators to populate it. This process created a locally relevant strategic story and ensured data gaps were identified.

### **The final report**

The report was designed to compare each indicator for Bendigo to the state average using a simple traffic light graphic (green meaning Bendigo was doing better than the state average, orange same, red worse). Time trends were included if they were available. Detail was also given about when the next data would be available and how the community could find data for future reports. The report highlighted data gaps and noted if these would be filled by forthcoming data collections. The report also included summaries of one-off research projects in Bendigo that described aspects of children's wellbeing in more detail (such as research run by the City of Greater Bendigo into children's favourite places). Adding further research "case studies" in the future will build up a compendium of information about local children and young people's wellbeing over time.

It has been important that funds were provided by DEECD to produce a high quality report for the community. It has also been important that the work of the community has been publicly acknowledged by significant people outside of the community. This has included a foreword by the Director of the Centre for Community Child Health, Frank Oberklaid, and the report being launched by well known children's rights advocate Moira Rainer and the State Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development, the Hon Wendy Lovell MLC. These endorsements added a sense of priority and commitment to the child friendly agenda.

### **Action resulting from the indicators: strategic planning and building support**

The indicators have since been used for strategic planning and to build support and interest in partnership work. The Leadership Group has selected eight indicators as priorities, of which four are data gaps. Selection was made considering local energy/interest, key stakeholders existing strategic plans and budgeting opportunities. Creating priorities allows communities to focus on issues for which there is passion and enthusiasm and prevents them becoming overwhelmed by the enormity of complex problems that may take considerable time and effort to address.

The Leadership Group presented the priority indicators to a workshop of its broader stakeholders to develop an action plan. Workshop participants were asked to reflect on how their work could positively impact the indicators and to specifically consider:

- How data gaps could be filled;
- The actions required to create improvements in the indicators; and
- Ways organisations could join up resources to progress action in these areas.

The Leadership Group has also agreed to take every opportunity to speak on the group's priorities and a *Communications and Community Engagement Strategy* is currently being written that includes explicit opportunities to raise awareness of the report to strengthen community ownership of Child Friendly City activities.

### **Conclusion**

The Bendigo Child Friendly City Leadership Group has created a high quality indicator report, *The State of Bendigo's Children* (Pope & Nolan 2011), that provides a snap shot of the wellbeing of children and young people living in Bendigo. The indicators populate an ecological framework that sees the wellbeing of children, their families and the community as interrelated.

The creation of the indicators report has involved engagement of a wide range of local stakeholders. This has had the dual benefit of building local interest in, and ownership of, the

Child Friendly Cities agenda and grounding its planned actions in the local policy and program environment. Stakeholders reported they enjoyed taking the time out from their regular work for a "big picture" strategic discussion about outcomes at the indicators workshops.

There were four reasons this project was a success. The first was the authorising environment and networks that initiated it. Bendigo had already built a network of individuals and organisations dedicated to this area of work. This meant there was a significant amount of community energy, support and assistance available when writing the report (particularly from the Local Government). Second, the Leadership Group used its broader networks to bring capacities and resources into the community that were not available locally. The relationship between the State government and the community in particular generated resources that made the project possible. Third, the engagement of a range of stakeholders throughout the project created a high quality report, fostered enthusiasm for the work and generated innovative ideas for future activities. Finally, the Leadership Group's networks have allowed local stakeholders to see interest in their work from a variety of influential people outside of the community, which has fostered continued motivation for the work.

Overall, this project has worked because it brought together the three types of knowledge that underpin effective community planning: technical information, local knowledge and strategic/political knowledge (Innes 1996; DPCD 2011). Few organisations hold all three (DPCD 2011). Professor Fiona Stanley has described this as the "know – do gap" and argues it is an important barrier to overcome to improve the wellbeing of children and young people (Bammer et al 2010). Impacting on the indicators will require this collaboration to continue.

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