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Accessibility of family services in Queensland mining towns – A case study of Middlemount, Qld

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Abstract:

Most state based family service delivery models have undergone extensive review in recent times shifting, in varying degrees, from 'siloes – specialised and bureaucratic patterns of delivery' to adaptation of holistic approaches. The delivery of family services for regional communities which are situated in resource intensive locations in Australia however presents a number of distinctive challenges. This paper explores the applicability of the trend in service delivery models that emphasise integration by geographical scale and by type of service and clientele base.

A case study was conducted in the Queensland mining township of Middlemount which is located in the resource intensive Bowen Basin region. In order to evaluate the performance of family services, this study used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Along with using secondary data, the study involved stakeholder's discussion and a survey of mining employees in Middlemount.

Support for cross jurisdictional family service delivery at the local scale in combination with strong regional centre based services is evident. Central however to the successful delivery of family services is the social and human capital capacity inherent within the township. Increasing funding and integration for family services is, not by itself, going to delivery satisfactory outcomes. Community development and engagement strategies that acknowledge the distinctive challenges of resource intensive 'company' townships with highly mobile populations is required to build and maintain the communal memory of the township.

1. Introduction

Most state based family service delivery models have undergone extensive review in recent times shifting, in varying degrees, from 'siloes – specialised and bureaucratic patterns of delivery' to adaptation of holistic approaches. The delivery of family services for regional communities which are situated in resource intensive locations in Australia however presents a number of distinctive challenges. Conceptualising family service delivery models that are responsive to resource community commodity cycles with boom-bust cycles that can de-normalise communities through rapid change in population, demographic and residency patterns, is an ongoing challenge. An aspect of this challenge is not only the suitability of adopting long term planning strategies from service providers but also the utilisation of the underlying human and social capacities within resource intensive communities. This paper explores the applicability of the trend in service delivery models that emphasise integration by geographical scale and by type of service and clientele base for resource intensive communities.

2. Background to the study

The delivery of services to support families working within mineral resource intensive communities has presented unique problems due in part to the nature of mining sector employment conditions and the location of mines. The study responds to concerns about whether the existing models of family service delivery in regional areas of Queensland are appropriate and adequate. Anecdotal evidence has suggested an increase in mining families who are seeking assistance from government and non government support organisations. This research reflects efforts to evaluate the alignment of family services available to the needs of families who reside in Middlemount and elsewhere, and who also have a family member working in the mining industry.

3. Service delivery policy

Within the complex mix of family services provision there are a number of broad trends in the delivery of support services for families who reside or are in some form associated with the mining sector in regional Australia. To some extent, family services delivery points towards the changing nature of the resources industry. The adoption of policy platforms such as those related to the Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development (MMSD) Project in 2002 with an emphasis on sustainable communities is reflective of this. The concept of a 'social licence to operate', which is generally understood as an unwritten social contract that is complementary to the regulatory licence to mine (Minerals Council of Australia (MCA), 2004b) has influenced mining company practice and community expectations. In 2006, the Queensland Resources Council (QRC) adopted 'social policy' as a part of the core business of QRC and established a community development adviser position. This initiative has been replicated within some of the large mining companies although the security of tenure for some of these positions has been questioned during industry downturns.

The Queensland Governments response for family service delivery to regional mining locations is outlined, in part, in the Sustainable Futures Framework for Mining Towns (2006) and in the Sustainable Resource Communities Policy (2009). These outline a partnership model guided by a framework in which contributions are sought to assist in the provision of services.

Contributions may include increased engagement and collaboration between stakeholders, as well as the acceptance of responsibility and fulfilment of the obligations associated with resource extractive industry in regional locations.

Community engagement is identified as a key strategy in order to plan appropriately for the needs of communities and industry alike. In mining communities, concerns are held with the impact of population mobility as part of the resource community cycles with two main potentialities; that of variable non-resident populations and considerable population 'churn' through some mining communities. This, in turn, can impact on community cohesion and knowledge/identification of family services.

The current family service delivery models of the Department of Communities (DoCs) are underpinned by a number of perspectives such as the core human services of education, health and wellbeing, and the 3D perspective which focuses on preventing or reducing the burden of disadvantage, disease and disability (Williams 2009). The DoCs support model is premised on a need based system in which the outcomes or impacts on community wellbeing are linked by the social determinants (risk and protective factors) and the DoCs system performance as measured by the systems mitigations of negative community outcomes. This, in effect, is designed to form a triangulation between the service system, the community need and community capacity.

The DoCs model is based on accessing high quality, timely and accurate information for identifying disadvantage, need and risk at the community level and collating this to support policy options to service communities and families, supported by qualitative assessment from regional staff. The Department also utilises an Evidence Based Management (EBM) framework that defines core concepts such as risk and protection factors, indicators of disadvantage and measures of appropriate, effective and efficient service systems to alleviate exclusion. The service delivery system should, in theory, align broad strategic goals with local operational activities.

The needs based system and the EBM framework utilised by the Department of Communities is reliant upon accurate and timely measurement of the needs of specific communities and groups within Queensland. A review of recent literature in this area raises a number of limitations. The main issues are related to non-resident populations, population mobility and an over reliance on census based data. The temporal nature of mining workforces is also of concern along with housing and accommodation options and power relationships within mining towns.

Research into the integration and coordination of service delivery models within the human services sector have been presented as adopting a holistic approach that moves away from siloed 'specialised and bureaucratic patterns of delivery' (Fine et al, 2000:5). It is argued that integrated and coordinated service delivery is a way to 'create synergies leading to innovation' and to enhance the outcomes for consumers by providing a simplified service that is more cost effective.

While there is evidence of this occurring within some mining intensive regions many of the issues are complex and interrelated with trends and developments within the mining sector, such as the resource community cycle, as well as with broader demographic and societal change¹.

¹ The research examined the divorce and separation rates within the mining sector compared to other industry sectors and across census collections (1996, 2001, 2006). These are reported in the paper, *Divorce and separation in the mining sector*.

The intention of the research is to examine family service delivery at the local level and make recommendations for improved sustainable outcomes in the delivery of family services.

The research team engaged with miners and their families, and with key stakeholders associated with family services in the Middlemount area and are based or visit the town of Middlemount. The study involved desktop research to scan appropriate databases, a survey of Anglo Coal Australia (Middlemount) employees (n=162), and a series of face to face interviews of key stakeholders (n=8) in the delivery of services and of mining families (n=8). Participants were recruited by invitation via the employee's survey and through snowball sampling techniques.

4. Middlemount, Qld

Middlemount is a purpose-built mining town located in central Queensland's Peak Downs region with a population of 2,038 residents (ABS, 2006). The SEAT² (2008) report describes the township as 'tired and outdated' with housing and infrastructure that is in need of reinvigoration. The mean liveability rating³ for Middlemount is 5.73, compared to five central Queensland MACs Service Group mining villages⁴ with a mean score of 6.59 and the Mackay, Whitsunday and Isaac regions with 7.25. The liveability rating for Middlemount is lower than that of the central Queensland mining villages.

The median age of residents is 30 years, compared with 37 years for Australia. Only 1.9% of the population identifies as Indigenous compared to 2.3% for Australia. Middlemount contains more males than females particularly in the working age groups, teenage and young adults are fewer in number and older citizens are largely absent. The median household income is \$2113 per week compared with \$1,027 per week in Australia. Ninety two percent of rental accommodation is other landlord type, presumably mining company properties.

The most common industries of employment for persons aged 15 years and over usually resident in Middlemount are Coal Mining 54.5%, School Education 5.4%, Cafes, Restaurants and Takeaway Food Services 3.2%, Supermarket and Grocery Stores 3.1% and Employment Services 2.1%. In 2006, there were 449 families in Middlemount (Broadsound Shire - Suburb): 59.9% were couple families with children compared to 45.3% for Australia, 33.9% were couple families without children less than Australia with 37.2%, one parent families (6.2%) were less than Australia (15.8%). Of the 267 couple families with children, 236 were intact families with no other children present, 15 were step families, and 16 were blended families (ABS, 2006). There has been an increase in the number of single people and contractors in the township, and a corresponding decline in the number of families. The decline in families in Middlemount is attributed to the work block shift patterns which allow for commuting to mainly coastal regional centres of Mackay or Rockhampton.

The SEAT (2008) report noted a decreased level of participation in community groups which was attributed to the itinerant nature of residents. Approximately one third of the population were at a different statistical local area (SLA) a year ago. There were 458 people counted as at the same address five years ago as opposed to 1,050 at a different address. Almost

2 Anglo Coal Australia, 2007-2008 SEAT Final Report Middlemount

3 Based on survey results – See Greer et al 2008. Based on liveability rating from 0-10, with 10 indicating the highest level of liveability.

4 Greer, L., Akbar, D., Rolfe, J., 2009, *Sustainable mining futures and the liveability of mining villages*, SEGRA 2009, Kalgoorlie-Boulder.

eighty-two percent of dwellings have an internet connection with seventy-nine percent of those having a high speed broadband connection.

The study participants had differing accommodation arrangements and had their main place of residence in Brisbane, the Capricorn Coast, Mackay, Middlemount, or Rockhampton. Half of the families described their current working and accommodation arrangements as permanent while the other half described them as part of a lifecycle plan indicating that they would change in the future. While most of the families could be described as mobile and/or transient, three of the families had maintained their arrangement for between 6-10 years, including one family that had their main residence on the coast while the mine worker had resided on-shift in mining camps for the last ten years.

There were different reasons given for working in Middlemount ranging from simply following the work opportunities that came along to more targeted strategies such as recovering from business losses and using employment in the mining sector to '*rebuild and regain finances*'.

5. Survey respondents

The survey respondents were predominately Anglo Coal mining employees (n=77, 49.3%) or contract workers (n=71, 45.5%)⁵ with eight respondents either government employees or other service workers. Respondents were located at Middlemount at the time of the survey and were mostly male (86.5%) with an average age of 38.5 years. The majority of respondents were either married or in a de facto relationship (70%) with 21% percent being single and 9% divorced or separated. 65% of respondents described their current family arrangement as a 'nuclear family', with 9.7 % being single parent families, and 7.3 % step families.

The majority of the workforce had been at the workforce for less than five years, and just more than a quarter indicated that they intended to stay for more than six years. When asked to nominate their main concerns, less than half (42.45%) of the respondents indicated their financial situation; this was followed by their employer relationship (20.86%) and living arrangements (20.14%). The majority of families (76%) believed that they had experienced either the same amount of stress as other families or less stress than other families, with one in four families indicating that they experienced more stress than other families.

The most frequent condition cited was anxiety or depression followed by marital/relationship problems. The survey respondents were asked to rate on a five point scale which of the thirty one factors they thought would create stress/tension within their family. There were six factors that are likely or very likely to contribute to stress/tension within the family. 'Employment security' is the highest ranking factor followed by 'being somewhere that suits the family', 'having a shiftwork pattern that suits my lifestyle', 'access to family and friends including extended family', and 'mining sector down-scaling'. In relation to direct family services the highest rated factor is 'specialist medical services'. Of interest is that 'family support services' rates at 27th out of 31 as a factor that may cause stress or tension within the family.

6. Family services in Middlemount

A third of all respondents indicated that they were aware of services that supported families in the Middlemount area. The most frequently recalled service related to health provision with

⁵ Reflects the increased number of companies working within the mining sector.

the local general practitioner, community health nurse and medical centre being recalled forty-nine times. Direct child support services were the second most frequently mentioned service (n=23) followed by education based services (n=18). When asked about whom respondents would seek help from, professional counsellors (both independent and work place based) were selected more frequently along with a general medical practitioner. While employed in Middlemount only 11% of respondents or their families had sought the assistance of family services. A quarter of all respondents would advise friends or colleagues to seek assistance for family services from the nearest regional city of Mackay, with a similar number giving preference to the local option of Middlemount, while one in five recommended Rockhampton⁶ based services. Only 10% suggested using an online or phone service and eight percent the regional service centre of Emerald.

The most frequently used family service in the last five years was the local hospital or general practitioner service followed by accessing a specialist medical practitioner. The number of respondents who indicated that they had accessed programs or services provided through the employee assistance program was very low with just 6.6 percent (n=9) of respondents.

7. Responsibility for family services

When asked who they considered should be responsible for the delivery of family services respondents indicated that the primary responsibility should be with the state government (35.34%) followed by the local government (28.11%). More than a quarter of the responses (26.1%) stated that the employees company should be responsible; however there was little support for responsibility to rest with the private sector or church based organisations (6.83%, 3.61%).

The consensus from interviewed families is that the responsibility for the development of family services needs to be shared between governments, the large companies involved in the mining sector (on a regional basis) and the communities involved. The opportunities to sub-let the service delivery to regionally based organisations offers great promise to improve services across the region. Although subsidisation will most likely be required the calling of expression of interests from external parties should increase competition and encourage innovative partnerships. Improvement in family services will require additional funding and an increase in personnel. Consideration is also required of innovative strategies to recruit qualified staff and provide suitable accommodation.

In relation to who would take the initiative in the case that support services were required for their family, a high proportion (43%) indicated that they would initiate contact with a family support service a further 35% indicated that the partner would initiate contact and in 22% of cases neither would initiate contact.

8. Future family services

When asked which type of family services respondents would like to see available in Middlemount, the most frequently cited family service related to health services. This was headed by a number of respondents calling for a hospital to be established in Middlemount and

⁶ Second nearest coastal regional centre

for seven day a week access to a general practitioner. Other services suggested included better health and specialist services; youth support services, single parent group, emergency accommodation, relocation assistance, financial literacy and retirement planning as opposed to financial advisory visits, education and recreational facilities, transport facilities and entertainment for all ages and groups.

The survey respondents were also given the opportunity to list the community activities which they believe could assist families in the Middlemount area. Activities suggested were a wide range that included activities for young children, individual music lessons, underage disco, BMX track for young kids, improvements to the gym, extended pool hours to cater for shift hours, yoga and fitness classes, an all age sport carnival, visiting entertainment suitable for all age groups and many other suggestions.

A comment of particular interest was that it was not the lack of community activities in the area but the time available to participate in activities that was a concern. This restriction of time related to shift work and those employees who reside elsewhere

9. Stakeholder and family engagement

A thematic analysis was conducted of stakeholder (n=8) and family (n=8) interviews for the project. The themes for both the stakeholders and families were similar with – issues of community building, the role of the company, community resentment and inability to engage with the company, isolation, lack of services including transport and specialised services highlighted. Direct family issues include education in regards to parenting issues and also community education regarding federal legislation around leaving children of a certain age unattended; alcohol abuse in youth and men. Financial literacy (as opposed to financial planning) is also a theme.

10. Challenges from a regional development perspective for stakeholders and families

There are many challenges from a regional development perspective in Middlemount but the two dominant challenges are the monopoly that Anglo Coal maintains over the township and the tyranny of distance with services being provided with visits to Middlemount briefly, every now and again.

10.1 Anglo Coal Monopoly

The impact of the monopoly that Anglo Coal has over the township, means that it is incredibly difficult for new businesses to start up in the township, and this thwarts new service availability. Frustration with the way Anglo Coal ‘runs’ the town was an ongoing theme in the interviews. For example, Anglo Coal subsidises the medical centre and this ‘directs’ how the services from the centre are run. The caravan park is owned by a mining accommodation company that will not allow visitors use the park for more than one night’s accommodation.

‘The monopoly by Anglo Coal means that the town is ‘run’ by the company and that the town is also restricted in its ability to build community capacity’.

10.1 Geographical boundaries

Geographical boundaries around Middlemount present challenges to both stakeholders and families. Middlemount is under the jurisdiction of the Isaac Regional Council which incorporates

the towns of Clermont, Dysart, Glenden, Middlemount, Moranbah, Nebo, Coppabella, St Lawrence, Carmila, Clairview, Greenhill and Ilbilbie. Previous to amalgamation the Isaac area consisted of three shire regions of Broadsound, Belyando and Nebo. Middlemount is situated in the Qld Health district of Mackay (although Qld Health district online maps do not depict Middlemount). According to Education Qld Middlemount Community School is situated in the Central Qld region. Middlemount is included in the electorate of Capricornia, an area of approximately 91, 049 sq kms.

10.2 Cross-sector collaboration

There were many challenges in relation to service delivery that arose during interviews with stakeholders. Cross-sector collaboration provided a challenge around implementing Queensland Health programmes within an Education Queensland framework although both departments appear to be keen to work together. A lack of nursing staff and community assistance is an issue; trying to instil health issues within the school curriculum is seen as a challenge. Parental involvement is another challenge – twenty five health surveys were distributed to parents and only three responses returned.

10.4 Shortage of skilled workers

Middlemount also experiences a shortage of skilled workers in the area of service delivery. This is amplified during the economic downturn times within the mining sector and filters through to a perception at the very least of less support for community engaged training. Managerialist approaches to training budgets add pressure to justify investments in shortened timeframes instead of longer term community enrichment terms. All stakeholders should be aware of and concerned by the tendency to cut corners on the critical up-skilling of the community. This is necessary for the sustainable transfer of social and human capital within the region.

10.5 Alcohol misuse and parental supervision

Alcohol misuse is another key challenge in the community. One stakeholder commented

'I feel like I am hitting my head against a brick wall when the issues (alcohol abuse) I deal with the kids are really the issues that the parents are experiencing themselves'.

One example of the general acceptance of alcohol at community based functions was at a recent Christmas Carols event, when representatives of Anglo Coal made a request that alcohol be available. Several people from the community got together and opposed the request, however the boundary between what is an appropriate community event at which to supply alcohol and what is a company-sponsored event is unfortunately very thin. This paper does not suggest that Middlemount is in anyway unique in having problems with alcohol and other substance abuse. It is probably ore that it is more visible in a small community and that it is supported culturally by many of the parents. The following quote is very straight forward:

'Here, it is generally the parents who will provide or go and buy the alcohol for the kids and I'm trying to deal with the abuse of alcohol, how it affects their lives, they come to school on Monday and they tell me they got into trouble with the cops, they slept with this person and they don't remember who it was, you get to the middle of it and it's a family issue here'.

Parental supervision is also another key challenge for stakeholders.

'It's not uncommon for Mum and Dad to leave town and leave the kids here, the kids jump on their motorbikes around town. The parents will go away to Mackay shopping for the weekend and they will leave their 14 or 15 year old kid here; and the local copper will tell you this too, overnight and weekend situations when kids are out drinking and the cops pick them up or I will come across them and there is no one to take them home to'.

10.6 Social dis-connectedness

The resilience of mining families reflects the capacity to negotiate trade-offs of employment in the mining sector in rural Queensland such as isolation from family and distance from specialist services. The characteristics of this resilience may be indicated in the following measures. In relation to who would take the initiative in the case that support services were required for their family, a high proportion of those surveyed (43%, N=61) indicated that they would initiate contact with a family support service if necessary; a further 35 per cent (n=49) indicated that the partner would initiate contact; and in 22 per cent (n=31) of cases neither would initiate contact.

The predominant key challenge from interviews with families in Middlemount was that of social dis-connectedness. Analysis of the family interviews gave the impression that a significant proportion of the community had a disengaged attachment to the township. This is summed up by one respondent who insisted that he didn't *'live'* in Middlemount but was only there to work and earn good money (this respondent spent five nights a week in a mining village accommodation camp and returned to the family home each weekend). Isolation and disengagement was a consistent theme with respondents feeling as though there was *'nowhere to escape to'* and the tedium of *'locking yourself in a small box each night'* (mining village accommodation). The impact on children of residing in Middlemount was raised with comments about the lack of cultural and social capital within the children's learning environments and for teenagers the disincentives for academic achievement being due to the promise of good money in the mining sector. One respondent summed up this by saying *'Culturally mining towns have no entertainment; they are really like the outer suburbs of big cities where lives evolve around takeaway shops and the video shop'.*

10.7 Accessing specialised services

Another issue that arose from family interviews was that of the challenges involved with accessing services particularly for families who had children with a disability. Two families interviewed talked about their experiences of trying to access services such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy. One family decided to move to Brisbane to access those services and the other family remained in Middlemount. The family that relocated to Brisbane continued in their employment in Middlemount and commutes to and from Brisbane to Middlemount. The family felt that it was in the best interest of their child to move to Brisbane. The family intimated that they did not expect to access highly specialised support while living in Middlemount; they did however expect to be able to access basic therapy support such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy.

The other family who chose to reside in Middlemount painted a very dismal and disempowered picture of life in Middlemount for a family who has a child with a disability. *'There is nowhere to escape to, absolutely nowhere, you are stuck at home with a child with a*

disability and he gets really bored with what we have at home. The park has nothing appropriate, there is only one ride I can stick him on, the park is full of prickles and sticks. No recreational stuff at all for a child with a disability. Sometimes I go over to Tieri but that is a 45 km trip each way. It's nearly two hours to take him to the pool in Capella'.

The interviewee described accessing services from Disability Services Qld (DSQ). Visits from DSQ therapists included rushed visits made to Middlemount. These visits were sporadic so the family tried to accommodate DSQ therapist's restricted availability by setting a time to meet the therapist's at a halfway destination (outside of Middlemount) at an agreed time. The interviewee drove her family of young children for an hour, then sat in the car and waited as the therapists were running late (for various valid reasons) and then endeavoured to undergo some semblance of a therapy session in the car on the side of the road. The interviewee spoke at length about the complexity of their situation; the mining sector provides this family with a wage that they are unable to access elsewhere but their child with a disability is severely disadvantaged from an educational, health and developmental perspective.

11 Recommendations

The study managed to engage a broad cross-section of the Middlemount community and with key stakeholders within the region to form a number of general recommendations. There is evidence both quantitative and qualitative to suggest that the current services for families in regional Queensland in locations such as Middlemount can be improved. While the research findings are generalisable there are circumstances in Middlemount which cannot go unnoticed. Disenchantment within the township as expressed through both interviews and from the survey suggests quite strongly that while our focus initially was on improving family service delivery into the township efforts need to be focused on building up the human and social capital of the town.

A substantive conclusion from the research is that a clear opportunity exists (and need) to strengthen through community capacity building (shared community knowledge and directories) of the township of Middlemount and the emerging central Bowen Basin region as a multiple industry region with a special character. Central to this opportunity is the encouragement of non-company enterprise and community ownership (company/government funding of programs through third parties based in the community).

While the current family service delivery system is supported by dedicated individuals and organisations and has an outward appearance of adequacy there are shortcomings which become evident through close engagement with the Middlemount community. The level of community knowledge regarding the type and the access arrangements for family services is particularly poor for both Middlemount residents and the non-resident workforce. The utilisation and rating of the company supported employee programs is low compared to the evidence of need from the workforce and seems reflective of a general level of disengagement from the community. Problems within the community appear to be accepted as part of the trade-off of working within the resources sector and the tolerance level correlated with the financial incentives of the industry.

In response, a series of practical recommendations have been made. In brief, those recommendations include support from the mining sector and Anglo Coal to subsidise the position of a full time highly skilled Community Development Officer (CDO) and to engage with the community around enhancing social and cultural capital. For the Department of

Communities to engage with Anglo Coal (Middlemount) around the need for a full time CDO and to support the CDO with and other agencies – particularly around raising the awareness of legal obligations of parenting. In general, at a regional level it is recommended that stronger regional coordination and a clear allocation of resources in a predictable and regular way between service providers and the community be instigated through dedicated regional partnerships.

Finally, it is recommended that stakeholders in the delivery of family services to the Bowen Basin region undertake collaboratively a regional scale strategic review of the multi-service hub model with a dedicated regional coordinating committee including all sectors associated with family services delivery. The Moranbah and District Support Services have supported a Feasibility Study for the purpose of a Regional Community Services Hub in Moranbah and an initial memorandum of understanding with CQUniversity offering support to the service. The Moranbah Community Services Hub should be independently accessed through ‘action research’ as to the appropriateness of expanding the community hub service for other locations, such as Middlemount.

Acknowledgement:

This paper is based on research⁷ conducted by CQUniversity that examines family services in the mining township of Middlemount, which is situated 900 km North-west of Brisbane and 250km South-west of Mackay in the state of Queensland.

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⁷ Greer, L., Mann, J., Rogerson, S., Hopkinson, S., Shea-Hart, A., Rimal, N., 2009, *Family Services in the Mining Sector: A case study in the Bowen Basin, Qld*, Final Report, CQUniversity Rockhampton.

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