

The Albury Project Story: From Collective Discontent to Positive Action

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About Albury

Albury is a regional city, a short hop across the Murray River from the Victorian town of Wodonga. In everyday terms it is Albury-Wodonga but the services in Albury are accountable to Sydney while services in Wodonga are accountable to Melbourne. In many ways Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) are similar jurisdictions but policies and funding and programs can be quite different, sometimes the advantage is on the Victorian side, other times NSW.

As a regional city, Albury is hundreds of kilometres distant from the main centre of power in Sydney. So, dropping into the central office of Family and Community Services (FACs), now Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), is not a short taxi ride or train trip to Ashfield. Many workers and agencies in similar situations grumble about the 'tyranny of distance' and how rural and regional services miss out on opportunities and are under-resourced. It is perhaps debatable whether this is truly the case but it is a common perception. On the other hand, there are some advantages. In a regional context, workers and agencies often seem to be more cooperative and collectively self-reliant. Perhaps, this is the positive side of parochial.

In the early days when youth homelessness was just beginning to be recognised as a social problem in its own right, a group of community activists in Albury established the first local youth refuge, which became known as Broughton House in central Albury. The refuge could support eight adolescents of 12 to 18 years of age and when it started there was only one worker. Over a few years, additional funding through

the Youth Services Program lifted the workforce to four workers. In the wake of the 1982 Senate Standing Committee on Youth Homelessness, an incorporated organisation, the Albury-Wodonga Youth Emergency Services Ltd was formed, and in 1985, the same year that the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) was founded as a joint Commonwealth–States–Territories program, the new agency was able to offer an Adolescent Family Counselling Service. As the range of services expanded, our organisation rebranded as *Yes Unlimited*.

The Recharge Conference in 2015

The Yes team had been actively involved with the peak organisation Yfoundations in NSW for many years, including maintaining a position on their board, and attending AGMs and conferences. At one such event, *Recharge Conference* held in Sydney on 6–7 August 2015 on the issue of youth employment, our team attended a Friday afternoon session presented by David MacKenzie on the Geelong Project in Victoria. David laid out the basic features of a model of early intervention and argued a case for system reform along the lines of a systemic roll out of this community-based model. This was not directly about youth employment but it was something fresh and new that spoke to many of our concerns about and critique of the homelessness and youth services systems.

What About Change in Albury?

We could not help but continue to talk about these ideas and how they might be applied in Albury. We actively downloaded whatever material we could get our hands on and in early 2018 after the publicity that followed the February

Youth Matters Forum in Geelong, made direct contact with David MacKenzie of *Upstream Australia*. Yes had already begun reaching out to the Albury secondary schools.

Our local readiness for change in Albury can be found in an article written by Yes Client Services Manager Jon Park, entitled *It's about systems not programs*. The abstract shows the advanced thinking that had been incubating in Albury:

'It is difficult to question the intention of a "no wrong door" approach to homelessness. It is also difficult for service providers not to cringe at the term when looking at the persistently high level of demand, under-resourcing and the consequences of improving access to a system already under pressure. Following the New South Wales reform of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Yes initiated a local systems change process in the Albury area that saw the transition to a Centralised Intake, Assessment and Brief Intervention Model (CIAB). In conjunction with four partner agencies this model aims to simplify access, prevent people from bouncing between services, manage the mismatch of demand/resources through brief intervention and provide a structure for services to work as a system rather than the program based responses that had resulted from historical funding arrangements.'

Jon Park reached out to David MacKenzie in late in 2017. The following is taken from a series of e-mails highlighting the early thinking that was going on at this stage of the change process.

'6 Dec 2017

We have been having lots of conversations at a local level about trying to do something from a systems perspective in response to the TEI reforms and have had a Geelong type project in the back of our minds for the last couple of years. We recently pulled together a group of a few services who are TEI funded and there has been some energy around this kind of thinking. The challenge in Albury is that we are really the only youth focused service, but we do have a reasonable service infrastructure that could be re-aligned to make something like this happen. We also have strong existing relationships with local schools.

Up to now our Targeted Early Intervention Program funding has been funding our youth resource centre 'The Hive', Adolescent Family Counselling program and a small component of assessment/brief intervention type work. We are also the lead for SHS's in the area, which includes Broughton House Youth Refuge. Recently we have begun to realign these services into more of a spectrum of youth/therapeutic responses with the idea that interventions are designed around presenting needs, drawing on the whole spectrum, rather than the traditional referrals into narrowly defined programs. We think this realignment could be a perfect structure for something like the Geelong project and the access point created through population screening.

Our experience of implementing a centralised intake system for homelessness following the Going Home Staying Home reform has completely sold us on systems based approaches and we get a pretty solid sense that FACS would be more than happy to take our lead if we put up a good model. We are just at a point of trying to work out what we need to know, what's some of the core learning/evidence we should be drawing on, and what it would look like to progress this. Wondering if this might be something we could have an initial conversation about with you either by skype or teleconference?

The availability of the Targeted Early Intervention Program funding and the preparedness of the local FACS Office to support innovation has to be acknowledged as a success factor, with the Albury team taking a big step forward on this basis.

The 6 March 2018 Public Forum

When David MacKenzie agreed to come to Albury to work with us and support our efforts to create a COSS Model site in Albury, he suggested that it might be useful to convene a community meeting of interested organisational and individual stakeholders. This we did, drawing on our work of many years with various Albury services as well as the local schools to develop an invitation list.

The forum was held in the Hive facility and about 60 people attended, including representatives from the Department of Education, Albury High School, Family and Community Services, LaTrobe University, Albury Community Mental Health, headspace, Housing NSW and the Mayors of both Albury and Wodonga. The level of community interest was high. As a spirited discussion subsided, Darryl Ward, the Principal of Albury High School spoke up: 'David, if we do this, are you going to be there to support us?'. MacKenzie smiled, and retorted: 'Well, Darryl, if that's an invitation, then the answer is yes!'

In a written report back to all the organisations and individuals who participated in the event, the Yes team declared that 'we left with a strengthened resolve to pursue some movement in the early intervention space'. A summary of key insights and conservation points reflected back in the written report is quoted below:

A general consensus of frustration in foreseeing the likely trajectory of young people with early indicators of risk and not having the necessary service mechanics in place to adequately respond. Often this means that we are left waiting until a young person shows up with a 'problem' before we start responding.

While there is positive work happening in different spheres this is usually dependent on the significant amounts of good will and relationships built up over

time, which means communication and true collaboration can be fragile. The tendency for programs/key staff to come and go only exacerbates this problem.

Historically, educational disadvantage and social disadvantage have been framed as separate issues, resulting in schools being expected to take care of one and services taking care of the other. These two issues are fundamentally linked and services or schools cannot address the complexity often involved in these situations in isolation.

By reducing the demand at the 'pointy end', this kind of early intervention model has the potential to impact outcomes of the entire service system i.e. by getting in early the potential to reduce the pressure on acute mental health services, increased school engagement is likely to improve employment outcomes, early support for families means less likely to need child protection involvement etc.

With the right framework and more nutting out of the detail a number of services would be willing to commit to an Albury Project.

Ideally this would be a cross border Albury-Wodonga Project, though the challenges of managing the two different service systems, the number and structure of schools and the vastly different funding buckets could make this a difficult starting point.

David MacKenzie summarised the compelling outcomes of the project in Geelong. Between 2013 and 2016 there was 40 per cent reduction in young people presenting to crisis accommodation services, a 20 per cent reduction in early school leaving and 50 per cent improvement in school disengagement. (See more here in the evaluation report: <http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/project-achievements/>)

Following the forum and on the basis of the support, and interest within the community, *The Albury Project* was launched in April 2018. A brief was published on the

new initiative, announcing that a collective including Albury High, James Fallon High, Murray High, *Yes Unlimited*, Albury City Council, Headspace Albury-Wodonga, and Albury Wodonga Community Mental Health, began to meet regularly to progress a six-month period of research and development.

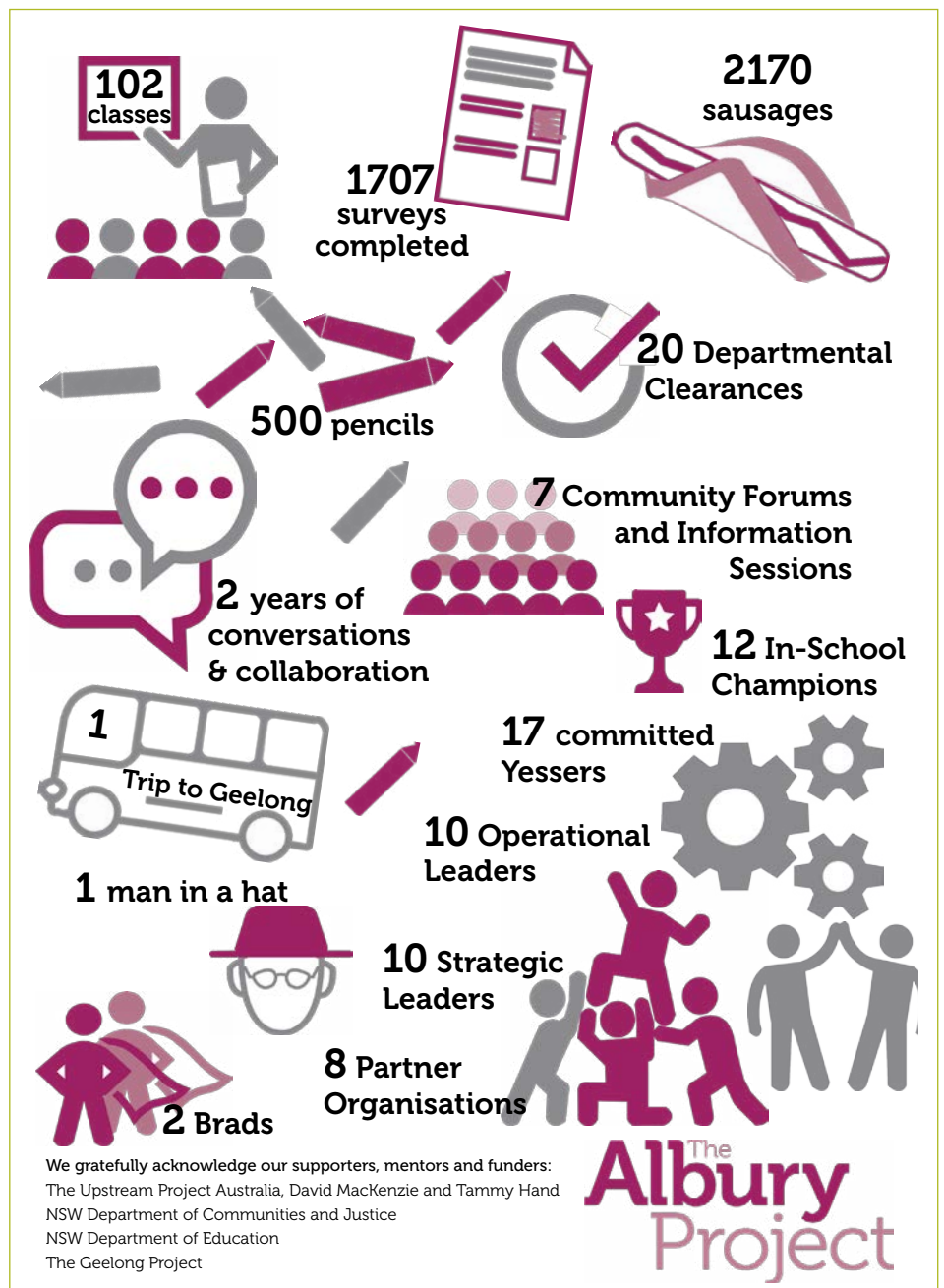
Associate Professor David MacKenzie and *Upstream Australia* were committed to provide ongoing support for the project, including high-level expertise, and access to the learnings and materials used in *The Geelong Project* and support with lobbying and advocacy.

Two local units of FACS NSW showed interest in the potential of the model by granting up to \$60k seed funding to support the research and development phase. As part of this process, *Yes Unlimited* began an internal realignment of its counselling and early intervention services, gearing them towards the potential rollout of *The Albury Project*.

Thus, *The Albury Project* embarked on a journey of development that was fuelled by an aspiration for local system reform but with no guarantee of major government funding. The invitation was issued to all those in Albury who saw the need. The journey would take around 30 community sector and education staff to Geelong in November 2018 to meet with people involved in the rollout in Geelong. An outreach to government began in an attempt to identify a funding pathway that would support the change process. Other services with a potential role in the project were engaged to explore what participation would look like and the support of wider community was seen to be a crucial factor in the long-term future of sustainable change.

The ongoing discussions explored the following questions:

- Who are the key stakeholders at different levels that need to be involved and consulted with?
- How do different parts of the service system fit into *The Albury Project*?



- What does a sustainable funding model look like for *The Albury Project*?
- What are the operational details and logistics we need to understand before starting?
- What would be an achievable starting point and implementation plan for a rollout?

From these early stage conversations, there was clearly a unanimous commitment to implementing an approach that brings together schools and services in a united front for young people experiencing disadvantage. The strong evidence base of the 'community of schools and services' approach, its verified outcomes and the scope for

locally driven innovation saw the community quickly get on board to support this development.

We would claim that *Yes Unlimited* has really striven to innovate in practice by designing interventions that realign our suite of services into a spectrum of youth responses — with the intent to create a system that flexibly 'bends' around the young person. The *Yes* goal is that interventions should be designed and tailored for a young person and their family, so that rather than young people forced to 'fit the program box' the support fits the needs of the young person and their family. This approach enables and requires staff to work beyond traditional program roles, with an ability to move with a client across the



spectrum of services/interventions where needed rather than handing clients over to another program and/or another worker as their situation changes. Our local systems thinking sought to leverage the COSS Model to resolve a reoccurring issue raised by schools that accessing services was inconsistent, with programs coming and going, and only ad-hoc or relationship-based collaboration between schools and services able to be maintained. What we wanted was a different system on the ground for services, for the schools and most importantly for the young people needing our support.

One of the lessons of *The Albury Project* is how important critical thinking and 'constructive discontent' are in driving reform. *Yes Unlimited*, in exploring new ways of delivering early intervention services to young people with the goal of preventing a future need for the organisation's SHS services, was able to visualise how their internal service reform, combined with the COSS model, could create real change in the local service system and for the young people of Albury. This is the power of bottom-up, as opposed to top-down, change. *The Geelong Project* provided inspiration as well as an architectural exemplar and tools for how this change could be implemented.

2019 — The Universal Screening and Support Project

Funding of two early intervention pilot projects was signalled in the five-year *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023* under a core priority of Focus 1: 'prevention and early intervention' alongside Focus 2: effective supports and responses' and Focus 3: 'an integrated person-centred service system'. In total \$4.8 million was allocated for this work, titled the '*Universal Screening and Support Project*' (USS).

On 7 December 2018, *Yes Unlimited* was advised that our tender for the USS had been successful. Prior to this, *The Albury Project* had already made significant progress. The community development foundations had been laid down. Much of the new collaborative infrastructure was in place — with the COSS Model representing a tangible anchor for the often abstract pursuit of 'collaboration', partners were able to co-design the unique ways of working that would bring the practical elements of the COSS Model to life. With key organisational leaders around the table, the development work had progressed rapidly, with decision-making about commitments and investments able to occur in real-time, maintaining a pace that was both productive

and energising. *The Albury Project* remains truly owned by the partners in the 'community collective', who are heavily invested in leveraging and realigning existing resources to effect the local system-level change.

The Albury Project was in an excellent position at the beginning of 2019 to implement the COSS population screening soon after being awarded the USS pilot tender. Progress was paused, however, as the two participating Departments; Education, and Family and Community Services — worked through an inter-departmental MOU, which included reviewing and resolving issues about privacy. The first population screening was able to be completed in August 2019, and in March 2020 the second population screening was accomplished expeditiously, only to have the Covid-19 pandemic crisis roll over everything.

Covid-19 is certainly a new challenge for everyone, but the needs of disadvantaged young people and families remain to be addressed notwithstanding.

Over the course of three years, *The Albury Project* has taken what was a mixed bag of directionless frustration with a system that was not working well enough, and turned it into a bottom-up community reform process oriented to early intervention. Two elements have been critical to this significant change:

- (a) the rigorous architecture and practical tools of the COSS model to rally around and to galvanise a collective vision
- (b) a cultural milieu within the partnership of vulnerability and safety that has facilitated real innovation and risk-taking.

It is a firm belief within *The Albury Project* that young people belong in communities, not in programs, and the community of schools and services model for local system reform represents an important step forward in doing things differently and more effectively.

* We are so grateful for the ongoing support of Dr Tammy Hand and Associate Professor David MacKenzie of Upstream Australia.