

FARM GATE PILOT PROJECT

REPORT

February 2008



Southern Grampians & Glenelg Drought Committee

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1. Farm Gate Pilot – Report

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19 February 2008

Overview

The Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee implemented a ‘Farm Gate’ pilot between November 2007 and February 2008. The aim was to assess how farm families responded to a ‘cold calling’ approach to providing drought support.

90 farms were visited. 60 farm families were home and written information was left at the 30 households that weren’t. Completed feedback surveys were received from 19 people.

The results of the pilot were very positive with only 1 household responding that they didn’t think it was a good way to communicate. All others responded very positively, welcoming the opportunity to speak with representatives in person. 79% of respondents to the written survey stated they were more likely to contact a service as a result of the visit.

1. What got us started?

In September/October 2007, the Southern Grampians and Glenelg (SGG) Drought Committee discussed the ‘cold calling’ approach being undertaken by the Drought Committee in the Campaspe area. A Drought Committee member visited the Campaspe to learn more.

The Drought Committee voted to pilot the approach with the aim of identifying whether the approach would be well received. We had in mind interviewing 40–50 farm households to deliver drought information packs; to provide the opportunity for one-on-one discussion of any issues; and to glean information from them about their needs and those of their wider community. We set about doing this over a two-month period, commencing late November 2007.

We believed this method was likely to get the plethora of information on services and support to people who were otherwise not really “hearing” what was out there, or were just confused or overwhelmed by it all, and it gave us a chance to hear first hand from locals what they saw as their needs.

2. How did we set it up?

It was decided that **financial information** was likely to be of prime interest to farmers, so our local Rural Financial Counsellors and Centrelink Rural Service Officer were enlisted to visit, together with **community health and counselling** personnel.

We expected the northern areas of the two Shires to be the most obviously affected by the ongoing dry conditions, so **selected roads from the fire maps** that looked likely to give us good numbers.

For this trial run, we decided it would be best to alert people that we were going to be calling in their area, so each selected road was **letterboxed with a small flyer** to tell the household that representatives of the SGG Drought Committee would be calling in coming weeks. The Balmoral Bush Nursing Centre also decided to mention in their newsletters that the visits were happening

in their district. Whole roads were visited, with **no deliberate targeting of households intended** (see exception, below), and **names were not taken or required if households chose not to give them.**

In one instance, an 'executive decision' was made by the callers on the day to visit a road that had not previously been letterboxed, because it was believed that some families there were in distress. The whole road was then visited, so as to avoid singling out anyone.

The initial **information packs** were those left over from local drought information nights. We then used packs from the Department of Human Services, with generic State information and general advice from beyondblue. We always **added in local information** on financial /counselling and community support services. A 'sorry we missed you' note was left with the packs where no one was home.

A brief **feedback survey** was devised, and Hamilton Produce kindly donated a \$100 voucher as **a Lucky Draw** (to be drawn in February) which we used as encouragement for people to provide us with their views.

3. Safety considerations

We arranged to travel in pairs. Most visits involved one male, one female, although Kate and Debbie broke that convention. We pre-mapped where we were going, carried mobile phones, and used our discretion about where we parked the cars and where we felt comfortable about conducting our conversations. However, none of this entirely precludes something weird happening, given the unknown nature of the households we were calling on.

4. Who went where and when?

The six people involved in this pilot were:

- Phil Clapham, Rural Service Officer, Centrelink (Hamilton-based);
- Greg Lowe, Rural Financial Counsellor (Hamilton-based);
- Kate O'Sullivan, Social Worker/Counsellor, Community Connections (Hamilton /Warrnambool);
- Evelyn Jack, Senior Counsellor, Western District Health Service (Hamilton);
- Kim Dufty, Drought Project Coordinator /Nurse, Balmoral Bush Nursing Centre;
- Debbie Milne, Rural Financial Counsellor (Hamilton-based).

The dates and roads covered were:

Thu 29 Nov	Kate /Greg	Balmoral-Harrow Rd., from Balmoral to Coleraine Rd.
Fri 30 Nov	Kate /Phil	Coojar La., and Coleraine-Harrow Rd b/w McFarlane's La and Balmoral-Harrow Rd
Wed 19 Dec	Evelyn /Greg	Casterton-Chetwynd Rd., from the Glenelg Hwy.to the border of West Wimmera Shire;McFarlane's La.
Fri 11 Jan	Kim /Phil	Glendinning Rd and Hamilton-Natimuk Rd, back to Balmoral
Fri 18 Jan	Kim /Phil	Five Ways Rd., Burdett's La., Moree-Culla Rd., unfinished.
Wed 30 Jan	Kate /Debbie	Melville Forest-Vasey Rd. (to Gringegalgona Dip), Watts Rd., Budds La.,
Thu 31 Jan	Kate /Debbie	Coleraine-Balmoral Rd fromWatts Rd back to Balmoral; completed Moree-Culla Rd.

5. How many people did we get to?

In all, 90 households have had information packs left with them, and of those households, 60 face-to face conversations have been held. Many conversations were of substantial duration, with men, women, old and young and middling.

The impression of all those doing the visits has been that they have been almost always well received. Certainly, there has been no aggression or major unease experienced by the callers.

6. Some of my own impressions from the visits

We received many comments highlighting people's reluctance to face the form-filling required to explore eligibility for financial assistance. Therefore, the visit by Centrelink and Rural Financial Counselling services was much appreciated.

Numerous people had not fully explored their eligibility for financial help, or were not entirely clear about the details of the assistance they were receiving. There are often comments about farmers being dismissive of or too proud to accept "government handouts". However, many people thanked us for the visit and congratulated us on conducting the pilot; some commented that it was 'just nice to know somebody cared'.

The more detailed conversations usually revealed some involvement with community activities (CFA, sport, Agricultural Society, social group, the local Bush Nursing Centre) which helped 'keep them sane', and also allowed support to be given where it became evident one of their members was struggling personally. Concern was expressed for those who opted out of any community groups and tried to battle on alone – these people were seen as the most vulnerable. Comments were made on several occasions (by the women interviewed) about the number of surprising marriage breakups they knew of. One woman said that despite marriage difficulties, many were too embarrassed to seek counselling. Comments were also made from parents feeling their kids were "missing out".

7. Feedback Surveys

Simple Feedback Surveys were handed to every household where any significant conversation was held. Some respondents completed the surveys then and there; others undertook to return them in the pre-paid envelope provided. 19 surveys were completed, representing a 31% return rate of all households visited. The following results are noted:

- 18 respondents reported that the farm gate approach was a good way to communicate with them.
- 15 respondents reported that they are more likely to contact one of the services as a result of the information provided at the visit.

The following key themes were noted in the comments section regarding any further support required:

j) Activities:

- For young people
- Exploring retraining opportunities for farmers
- Idea of getting (Jeff Kennett) beyondblue to speak in conjunction with Show Committee
- Activities in Casterton/Coleraine
- Any programs/activities for our 7 year old daughter. We are all so busy and unfortunately she is always asked to tow the line in doing what mum & dad need to do.
- Is there support financially for community groups to run programs/activities to get socially isolated members of the community to participate?
- Need for coordinating community functions – men's and women's health forums

ii) Further information/assistance

- Form-filling ie: youth allowance, IPTAAS, Centrelink etc
- Broadband, cost of satellite
- Animal health information
- Where do farmers access water once their dams are dry and at what cost financially
- I live outside Casterton and I found that the drought has hit us hard. It would be greatly appreciated if we had some assistance with water.

iii) Comments on the approach

- I think that the door to door approach is a great way of catching up with people who maybe feel they shouldn't call you or people who are too proud to call you.
- Keep in touch, revisit or phone – a one-off visit may only scratch the surface.
- Well Done!. An old fashioned approach to a current problem.
- Not required. This program would have been better to have taken place 12 months ago – when drought assistance measures became available.
- I think this Farm Gate Pilot information package is fantastic. I only hope people who need this info the most are the one that use it. Quite often the most needy are the ones that battle through and the less needy get it all because of greed.

iv) Other

- Community transport assistance

8. What have we missed?

Reflecting on my own practice, I think there's still room to improve on finding a way to ask the direct personal question of "how are you travelling?" – the financial and livestock questions tend to be easier than the emotional.

We deliberately targeted farm households, but rural businesses should also be offered the visits. Solo visiting should be safe in this instance, although the breadth of knowledge is less with only one of us present.

The Feedback Surveys received so far show substantial intention of using services as a result of these visits, though we are unable at this time to show concrete evidence of this.

9. Lessons Learnt/Things to do differently**i) Pre – letterbox drop**

- Hand delivering every household beforehand is labour-intensive and not sustainable. Using newsletters or a general mail out via Australia Post will be used in future, with the option for people to advise us if they wish not to be called on, or if they wish to seek contact more urgently.

ii) Information packs

- Generic fliers that are left with households (particularly those where no one is home) will include the phone numbers of representatives to ensure easy contact from farm families.
- Making sure the right information is available and included in every information pack is very time-consuming and may need to be reviewed.

iii) Safety considerations

- Visits by two people, preferably one male and one female will continue. Safety considerations will be made more explicit by all Committee members to receive a safety policy (from one of our member agencies) outlining simple and practical measures to increase safety while visiting.

iv) New or revisits

- One suggestion has been for households already visited to be re-visited after a 3-month gap; another view is to keep visiting along new roads for the foreseeable future. The

Drought Committee has agreed with the later approach to ensure the limited resources are spread to as many farm families as possible.

v) Monitoring of service uptake

- The results indicate a greater willingness for farm families to access services as a result of the visit. Methods to monitor any additional uptake will be considered by Drought Committee agencies.

vi) Links to other initiatives

- Other community responses are being considered through the funded Drought Counselling services, such as the Victorian Farmer's Federation 'Looking Out For Your Neighbour' project, and the Bouverie Centre's 'No Bull Support' training project. Both these approaches would add to the community group support available in the district, and would somewhat reduce the labour intensity of the Farm Gate approach.
- Visits to local businesses to be explored, particularly where business are eligible for financial entitlements.
- A process for responding to the concerns and requests for further information will be coordinated by the Drought Committee.

vii) Agency pairs

- The pairing up of Committee members has worked not only to ensure safety but has increased the understanding of each other's service. It has been agreed that different pairs will be used over the next few months to enhance this sharing of information. Such an approach is effective in building closer inter-disciplinary teams and augers well for our 'working together' for drought or other priority community issues.

10. What next?

There appears to be consensus that this approach gets information out to people who would otherwise not access it or would not act on it – too busy, too complicated etc. Personal contact seems to have been welcomed by the households contacted, and enjoyed by the visiting Drought Committee members.

There is a willingness by our various agencies to continue, with all 6 Committee members agreeing to support weekly visits for the next 3 months. Visits will again target areas of greatest need which are the northern areas of Southern Grampians and Glenelg Shires (ie. Casterton, Balmoral and surrounding areas).

The continuation of the Farm Gate approach is supported by the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee.

Many thanks to all those who have participated in and supported the Farm Gate Pilot. It has been a good experience – and thoroughly enjoyable.

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2. FARM GATE VISITING – “Reflections on a day of cold calling”

**Evelyn Jack
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24 January 2008

The Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee made a decision in September 2007 to complete a small piece of research in regard to “Cold Calling”- by designated members of the group calling at farms to give information to any interested farming families in regard to Rural Financial Counselling, Centrelink EC entitlements and Emotional Well Being information.

This style of “hands on” research/assistance had been highly successful in the North East of the State, where the drought had had a far tighter grip on the land, and it was felt that a comparison with a part of the state that was affected but in a less dramatic way might be of use.

I have to say as a worker in the area of mental health, I was less than convinced that this style of work was of value. My background and training initially led me to believe that calling on people who have not previously requested help to be intrusive, and might be seen as ‘positively rude’.

Oh how wrong I was! Our group has spent several days in December 2007 and ongoing into January 2008 calling at farms in designated spots. We did decide on one change to the other region’s previous work. Leaflets stating who we were and why we were calling were dropped at every farm in the designated areas, a week prior to attendance in person. Most of us felt more comfortable with that strategy, feeling that people would at least know we were coming and could make up their own minds as to whether they allowed us onto their properties. For myself, I also own up to feeling that with pre-warning, people would not think that strangers were entering their property to either evangelise, or to break into their homes to steal.

When it came to my turn to complete a day with one of our Rural Financial Counselling colleagues, an area was chosen in the northern part of the region where the drought has bitten harder. It was a hot and dusty day and we drove for an hour or so to get to the area.

My farm-gate partner had already completed a similar day, so was more aware of what to expect. We went armed with “Show-bags”, full of information on a variety of drought related topics, - financial, Centrelink, and health. As we drove along I wondered how many people would be home and how many would have any time to talk as they rushed to get hay baled and into shelter before Christmas. Hay cutting and carting had been later than usual in this region due to a wonderful few days of rain in October.

My initial trepidation about calling on farmers was very soon dissipated. At the first farm we called upon, the husband was indeed sitting on a tractor way off in the distance and a group of dogs greeted us. But then the wife came out and asked us if we would like a drink on such a hot day and we were off and running. This kind woman asked about farming apprenticeships for young sons, and this led on to information about farm subsidies and rate reductions. We were able to give information with names and contact points, and left a show-bag. This time last year this farmer had been carting water weekly to survive- she felt that this year was much better as there was still some water in the dams and there was some hay to cut. I looked around at the parched pastures and got some ideas of how bad it must have been last year if this year was considered better.

At another farmhouse, an older woman told us that her sons had taken over the farm but she was still worried about how it would be for them in the future.

This woman had read up on climate change and felt that this would be the real challenge for the future of farming. She laughed though, when she said her husband was out enjoying himself fishing– it was the first time in years that he did not need to be at the farm all the time. At that farm we scored a cuppa and cake, which was delightful and gave us time to hear about what the local “worries” were.

At another farm we were greeted initially with suspicion- a lone male farmer thought we might be Mormons, despite me being female and neither of us being young and in suits with ties. He was able to say that he was going well but went off to find a colleague who was in difficulty and had not received much in the way of constructive help when he tried to get it. Naturally, in this circumstance, he was wary of “do-gooding” but relaxed when he had spoken for a while and realised we were giving him “No Bull”. He smiled as we left with a promise from my colleague to follow up financial assistance he had missed out on due to a misunderstanding with Centrelink.

As the day progressed I began to wonder why I had ever doubted this way of initiating services. “Taking it to the people” seemed to work and gave people the opportunity to have a say and to identify what would be of most help to them and their community.

A call on a remote property led to a long and serious conversation with a family in distressing circumstances. Follow up was arranged immediately as this situation could not wait. At another smaller property I sat with a woman who grieved for the loss of what had been a beautiful garden until there was no water to use on it. For her it was the last straw.

We met elderly folk who did not want to retire despite the burden of hard manual work with no younger employees or family to help. We chased cows up a road for one farmer, and stopped to admire a lone rose left in another farm garden. Work yards were dusty and dry, but refreshment offered at regular intervals. We spoke of stock and crops, exit plans and people’s health.

As my Farm-Gate colleague stated- “if we only help one farmer this way per day it is a good days work”.

At the end of the day I went back to my own small property which has not suffered unduly in the drought conditions, feeling that “Farm-Gate” or Cold Calling” on farms has a lot of positives attached and can help spread the load, and get issues identified by those who really know- the farmers who are out there in all weathers.

As one farmer said” It has been pretty bad but we aren’t as bad off as others and it is going to get better any day now”.

Since that day Queensland has been inundated with the biggest rain driven flood in the State’s history.

Evelyn Jack
Drought Outreach Worker, Western District Health Service

24 January 2008