

INCOME SUPPORT PROJECT—SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT

Background

This report is a summary of the final report of the Income Support Project. It is the last of a series of papers on the BSL's income supplementation services. Other papers from the Project are:

- Working Paper No.1—Data collection and service users
- Working Paper No.2—Overview and history of income supplementation services in the BSL (1972–1996)
- Working Paper No.3—Report on service user and service manager consultations
- Working Paper No.4—External agencies perspectives on issues for future service delivery
- Working Paper No.5—Final report of the Income Supplementation Service

The major concern of this report is to identify the key issues for service attention relative to Directions 2000.

In this sense the report represents a framework for strengthening service activity relative to Directions 2000, in turn providing a basis for the workplan of the Income Supplementation Services Practice Group.

1. Rationale for the development of services

Since the 1970s income support services in the BSL have developed in various times:

- to provide additional support to low income people to assist them to meet basic needs because their level of income is inadequate;
- in order to meet local needs as part of the BSL's community development focus;
- for advocacy and policy development for the purposes of broader social change focused on government policy; and
- for the purposes of demonstration and innovation (particularly empowering practice approaches).

The emphasis which individual services have placed on any one of the above elements has varied between services and over time. This is due to a range of factors which are identified in the background papers. However, in more recent years the Project noted:

- advocacy for policy purposes has been most consistently linked to the Emergency Financial Relief service at Whittlesea, although Material Aid services have also been involved in the Victorian Emergency Relief Committee (VERC) spot surveys and the Peninsula Material Aid Service has most recently been conducting its own spot surveys on issues arising from the impact of education costs on families using the service;
- there has been less of an emphasis on demonstration and innovation. However Furniture Works at Frankston can be seen to represent an innovative solution to the ongoing issue of inadequate furniture supplies relative to demand in material aid services;
- No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) programs are relatively new, and have been predominantly concerned with establishing services in the local community and in establishing a viable funding base; and
- Material aid and emergency relief services have been concerned with the continuing struggle between the increasing demands on the service and resource availability and adjusting or modifying service practice policies to this end.

Importantly, consultations with service users and external agencies suggest that BSL services are valued both because the services assist people who are poor to meet their needs in a practical and immediate sense, and because of the way in which services are provided. That is:

- they provide a service environment which is perceived as non-judgemental and which emphasises dignity and choice (within the constraints of resource availability); and
- they acknowledge that people are poor due to structural factors and can provide important information to support advocacy and policy work aimed at improving the circumstances of those people.

External agencies perceive that continued BSL service provision in this area is particularly important because of the potential direct links between service delivery and credible advocacy and policy work at State and Federal levels which the BSL is well placed to undertake, given its history and profile in services, research and political advocacy.

However, the potential of services to support advocacy for social change has not been fully realised for two reasons.

First there are problems with data collection. These include difficulties in obtaining an accurate picture of service use because of the lack of consistency in methods used for recording and reporting service use both across services of the same type and within a service over time. For most services there was little information available on unmet demand except through anecdotal information and services have a different capacity to collect and collate information based on access to computer technology.

Second, the project found that the organisation's use of service data for advocacy or for service planning purposes has been poor and inconsistent. For example, it appears that until more recently, the BSL's requirements for service data have mostly been linked to financial accountability and budgeting, and the information most frequently requested of services has been that which relates to resources required or the overall amount of aid provided. The BSL has expressed no regular requirement to collect information about service users except for overview information on numbers of people assisted for annual reports.

In the absence of such a requirement and when there are often other more practical and immediate demands on time, data collection for the purpose of providing information about who is using services, how often they are using services and to meet what need, was not always given a high priority by service providers. Even where service providers had access to information about service use, there was a perception that there is not much point in collating data and in producing reports on a regular basis if they are not going to be used.

These problems were less obvious where services were linked into networks such as the Victorian Emergency Relief Committee (VERC) and there was some value in collecting information which is pooled and used for advocacy purposes at a broad level. Service providers consulted as part of the project

suggested they would put more emphasis on data collection and would produce reports if someone could tell them what it was they wanted.

While some work has been commenced to address some of the issues since the Income Support Project originally identified them, *it is nevertheless recommended that further work to address the issues of data collection and usage should be undertaken as a priority.*

* For fuller information on data collection issues see Internal Working Paper No. 1.

2. Policy context

The socio-economic outlook for the next three to five years is harsh due to the persistence of factors which contribute to poverty coupled with Federal Government and some State Government changes which could reduce protection for people.

The overall poverty risk factors for people include joblessness, housing status, disability and low wages.

Groups who are likely to be most at risk are: indigenous Australians, sole parents, young single people, families with large numbers of children and some NESB people.

Implications

There will be a continuing, if not increasing, need for the BSL's services.

There is a renewed need for political advocacy and community education which highlights the impact on people of the combination of the harsh environment and changes to the welfare state.

* For fuller information on the policy environment see Internal Working Paper No. 5.

3. Directions 2000

In considering the 'fit' of current service activity with Directions 2000, the Income Support Project identified the following key elements of Directions 2000 as those which should underpin service activity at both the functional and individual service level:

- the importance of a focus on poverty, which includes special consideration of those groups who are most vulnerable to poverty;
- the importance of a focus on advocacy for social change at the individual service level. In particular Directions 2000 emphasises the requirement for services which create direct opportunities for advocacy and social change;
- the importance of ensuring a focus on service activity which supports and contributes to the empowerment of people who are poor;
- the importance of ensuring that there is a distinctive case for the BSL's involvement in service activity;
- the importance of a renewed focus on the inter-connection between services, research and policy work, and advocacy; and
- the importance of flexibility. That is, that the BSL as an organisation is prepared to shift its focus in response to changing needs and the changing external environment, and is prepared to support and resource service delivery and staff involved in service delivery to make changes and continuous improvements for these purposes.

4. Overall findings and recommendations

The overall findings and recommendations are presented in the context of strengthening the capacity of the services to more closely reflect some of these key elements of Directions 2000.

Focus on poverty

All of the income support services work with people who are on low incomes. Most people using the services are receiving DSS payments, particularly job search allowance, disability and sole parent pensions. Services have also reported an increase in service use by families affected by low wages and older people who have used up their retirement savings.

The policy information developed for the project suggests that there will be an ongoing and perhaps increasing need to provide services in order to support people to meet their basic needs.

Particular groups will be especially vulnerable to poverty.

While BSL services work with some of these groups; others are not represented in individual service statistics and will require special consideration in service delivery. In particular, while NESB groups are highly represented in service statistics from the Fitzroy and Peninsula Material Aid services, NESB groups are not well represented in all services. Single young people and indigenous Australians are not highly represented.

The work of the Income Support Project suggested that young people were generally not well catered for through income support services (both within and outside the BSL).

Recommendations

- That conscious attempts are made in service delivery to give consideration to the service needs and participation of vulnerable groups. This should include exploration of ways of improving the access of NESB groups, indigenous Australians and young people; and to develop service environments and practices which are mindful of the needs of these groups.
- Participation of these groups should be monitored through data collection and strategies to increase their access to and participation in services documented.
- Strategies should build on to existing service activity. For example, service users consulted at Fitzroy Material Aid suggested that while the service provides valuable assistance to a number of people from NESB, its work could be further enhanced in this area such as through exploring the

use of NESB volunteers to assist with communication issues. Craigieburn and Whittlesea NILS have both identified a need to further advertise the services. Within this, the services could undertake work to target NESB people in the promotion of NILS.

- In instances where it is apparent that the BSL is not the best agency to meet the needs of particular groups, work should be undertaken to develop and/or support other agencies in the community to address their material aid and financial relief needs.

Focus on advocacy

All services are committed 'in principle' to using service activity to pursue particular social change.

However, the extent to which this is perceived as a formal or major objective of the service varies, as does the degree to which current services are practically involved in advocacy for social change.

In the context of Directions 2000 it is important that the BSL place an emphasis at the individual service level on the importance of advocacy for the purposes of social change.

Some work has been undertaken in 1996 to assist services at the individual level to explore and increase their direct role in and capacity for advocacy. For example, SAR staff and staff from some services have been involved in workshops to assist service staff to identify and implement social action opportunities arising from service experience.

It has been agreed to both pilot joint SAR and services meetings (combined SIG/SDG) in order for SAR to inform service staff of SAR's policy agendas indicating areas and points at which service data would be useful; and to use service practice group meetings to more regularly inform SAR staff of issues emerging from service experience. It is desirable that SAR and services continue to build on this work.

Consultation with external agencies suggested that the BSL could play a broader leadership role in the field in relation to working with other agencies to develop a coordinated state wide campaign on the nature and experience of poverty as evidenced through the BSL and other agencies involved in income support services. This idea should be explored further through discussion with SAR, VCOSS, VERC, ISTAP, Public Affairs and the Community Service Directorate before any further action is taken. Should joint campaign work be desirable and feasible, the way in which this could best be done may be through participation in campaigns around broad themes e.g. unemployment.

In order to support services to increase their capacity for advocacy, attention should be given to developing client data systems, including reporting, analysis, and feedback arrangements which take into account advocacy considerations.

Recommendations

- All BSL income support services should incorporate the objective 'create direct opportunities for advocacy and positive social change' as a formal service objective.
- Services should be supported to identify ways to implement this objective by exploration of ways in which service experience could be utilised for advocacy purposes at the local community level, sector level, state level, and national level. This would need to include discussion on how to undertake advocacy without compromising other service objectives.
- SAR and services should continue to give attention to strengthening and consolidating the relationships between SAR and services for this purpose.
- The BSL should give attention to developing client data systems, reporting and feedback processes, in the context of both broader advocacy considerations, as well as for service planning needs.

Advocacy, demonstration, community development

Contributing to positive social change for people on low incomes and to their empowerment is contingent upon a strong community development focus in service delivery both in terms of developing working partnerships with other agencies or groups to develop appropriate service responses and for broader social action purposes.

However, the Project found that the degree to which services emphasised a community development role and emphasised strong links with other services or groups at the local community level, varied between services and over time.

Recommendations

- Work should be undertaken by services staff to identify and implement strategies to locate service activity in a broader community development framework and to strengthen links with other services or groups at the local level, particularly in those services where this is not emphasised in the current operation of the service.
- In working with other agencies to develop services or to create opportunities for low income people, service staff should emphasise and

demonstrate approaches to service development and to service delivery which are inclusive of and empowering for service users.

Focus on empowerment

Organisationally there are varying views on empowerment. This is reflected in the income support services.

In the absence of a shared organisational understanding of what empowering service provision means, the Project suggests that it is important that BSL income support services continue to emphasise the necessity of a dignified and non-judgemental service environment. The Project acknowledges that this represents a component of empowering service practice, but that this on its own is not enough.

The Project suggests that BSL services should be aiming higher than this and suggests that empowerment needs to be more broadly conceived by all services in order to realign service activity in the spirit of Directions 2000.

A particular issue identified during the course of the project was the absence of any formal arrangements for service user consultation and feedback in most of the services.

* For fuller discussion of the issues concerning service user consultation see: Internal Working Paper No. 3.

Recommendations

- That given organisational confusion regarding the concept of empowerment, SAR and services identify and implement a process to facilitate broader organisational discussion on the meaning of empowerment

In the interim:

- The delivery of income support assistance within a broader context of empowerment should be reflected in formal services objectives.

In developing service strategies:

- all income support services (Material Aid, Emergency Financial Relief, NILS) should seek to engage service users in a relationship with the service that is broader than the receipt of goods and services.

Specifically:

- Opportunities should be provided to consult service users and otherwise engage their participation in the development, delivery and evaluation of

BSL services.

- SAR and services should identify and implement a process to jointly discuss the issues raised in the project concerning service user consultation, and to assist services to establish useful and relevant service user consultation arrangements.
- Opportunities should be provided to encourage and to engage service users in participation in broader activities at the service level or at the broader community level. For example, building on the example of the Peninsula Material Aid Service, services could generate opportunities for service users to be involved in recycling programs; to participate in BSL surveys for the purposes of identifying the impacts of particular policies or arrangements on people on low incomes; and to become directly involved in advocacy.

Continuation of a dignified non-judgemental service environment

The minimum business of the BSL's income support services is the delivery of practical assistance to low income people in a manner which emphasises dignity, choice, and which is non-judgemental.

It is crucial that services are supported to continue to be able to provide services in this way, despite increasing demands on resources.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that the relevant senior managers in the Community Services Directorate ensure that processes are in place for assisting staff to regularly monitor service delivery against key service practice criteria. The Service Practice Principles developed by the Income Support Focus group during 1994 provide a framework for the further development of practice criteria and protocols in specific services.

5. Conclusion

There will be a continuing, if not increasing, demand for the BSL's services.

In the context of Directions 2000 the distinctive case for the BSL's involvement rests on this continuing need, coupled with:

- a continuation of a dignified, non-judgemental service environment;
- the use of service involvement and experience for advocacy for positive social change with this reflected in formal service objectives; and
- the delivery of income support assistance within a broader context of empowerment with this reflected in formal service objectives.

Services need to locate individual service activity and promote what is learnt from BSL service activity in a broader community development framework. Within this, services should give an emphasis to promoting and demonstrating empowering practices in service development and in service delivery.

Services should be mindful of the needs to develop service strategies and responses which are inclusive of groups who are particularly vulnerable, including some non-English speaking background groups, indigenous Australians and young people.

The BSL needs to resource broader processes to reach an organisational understanding of empowerment and to discuss issues concerning the practical implementation of service user consultation arrangements. However, in the interim, Income Support Services should be assisted to address these issues.

SAR and services both have a role to play in strengthening the BSL's activity in the Income Support area.

Since services are operating in a situation of resource constraints, it is anticipated that improvements in line with the recommendations would be incremental, and developed from the existing service context.

6. Priorities for implementation of recommendations in 1997–8 are:

- Executive Council agreement to recommendations.
- Revise service objectives to incorporate empowerment and advocacy objectives.
- Attention to data collection systems (including arrangements to monitor the access and participation of more vulnerable groups).
- Resource and facilitate broader discussion on empowerment.
- Facilitate discussion and resource action on service user consultation arrangements.
- Facilitate and resource further workshops on advocacy, giving priority to those services who have not been part of previous training, utilising the experience of staff from the Peninsula Material Aid program and/or the Whittlesea service.