

Partnerships for Healthier Communities



A study looking at the nature and extent of partnerships between a rural area health service and the local councils in its region

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Executive Summary

Background

The achievement of healthy populations challenges health services to look beyond partners who traditionally had responsibility for the provision of health care. Local governments clearly have a key role to play in influencing the overall wellbeing of their communities.

The *Partnerships for Healthier Communities* initiative of Greater Southern Area Health Service (GSAHS) aims to build on existing ways of working with local government, using social planning mechanisms to achieve mutual outcomes for the health of target communities. This initiative aims to create solid partnerships between the key drivers of the broader determinants of health, to enable them to plan jointly and to achieve mutual outcomes for the health of their community.

For area health services the value of partnerships in general are as a mechanism for strategic collaborative work that supports the achievement of cross cutting health outcomes. From a rural health service perspective, there is a clear need for a realistic framework for the establishment and development of workable relationships with local government partners that can survive the challenging rural context and consequently influence the achievement of healthy community and, in the longer term, social determinant outcomes. It is anticipated that findings will be beneficial to both the NSW rural context and the wider sphere.

Objective

The strategic and policy context influencing new approaches in this sphere drives the need to undertake a baseline study to examine the nature and extent of the alliances that currently exist with local government in a rural region, and to determine the essential partnership characteristics that foster healthy community outcomes.

Literature review

The literature review synthesised the available evidence from the literature, policy and strategic documents, surveys and from unpublished papers that provided insight or commentary on partnership work that has been undertaken to address health outcomes, specifically between area health services and local government, where available. The review further aimed to bring together the evidence that describes the critical elements of partnerships that aim to address broader health outcomes

In summarising the findings from the literature review we can conclude that partnerships have both a policy and a practical mandate to address a range of outcomes in the health arena, and are particularly suited to tackling social determinant issues due to their ability to involve stakeholders across the sectors, including communities themselves. local government is clearly an appropriate setting from which to launch this approach.

In considering key characteristics of good partnerships, there is a clear set of ideal components that comprise good partnerships, with a specific set of conditions required for partnerships that address broad health outcomes. It is apparent that no one partnership formation or process fits all. Critical success factors are determined by the needs and reality of the local context, the level of community involvement, and the capacity of partners.

In looking for answers to questions about the nature and extent of partnerships between area health services and local government that address broader health

outcomes, the search strategies for the literature review did not uncover any studies that comment specifically on such partnerships within the Australian, rural context. The majority of the literature reviewed reports on studies involving relationships mandated by policy or funding requirements and none involved voluntary partnership arrangements between rural health services and their counterpart councils. There is clearly a gap in the literature in relation to these specific, rural, voluntary partnership formations.

Data collection method

A survey was considered the most appropriate data collection instrument for both ethical and validity reasons to capture a broad range of baseline quantitative and qualitative data. The survey was distributed to the 39 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the GSAHS region.

The quantitative data collected related to: numbers of partnerships; partnership establishment and activity characteristics; priority issues including the numbers of partnerships that have an explicit focus on social determinants or that adopt a Healthy Communities approach; perceptions of partnership efficacy; indications of organizational support for partnerships; and details about regional or strategic alliances that councils participate in.

The qualitative data collected related to the nature of partnerships including those that specifically addressed social determinants and broader healthy community issues; council willingness to form partnerships; explanations of the benefits and challenges of partnering with GSAHS; suggestions about partnership characteristics and approaches to address broad population level outcomes.

Results

The key findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative data in this study indicate that **partnerships are a key strategy** for councils **irrespective of size or rurality rating**; that the partnerships currently operating in the GSAHS region **reflect evidence from the literature** in relation to critical partnership formation and sustainability factors; that councils do **value and prioritise broader population objectives** in their partnerships; and that councils consider partnerships both **useful in addressing council aims** and effective in **addressing social determinant outcomes**

Partnerships have been a mainly positive experience for councils and encouraged them to continue to work in partnership with GSAHS. Councils value partnerships to achieve broad and specific health outcomes and consider them effective in addressing social determinant aims, irrespective of size of council.

New findings

In comparing the results of this survey with the literature and other surveys, we can conclude that some new findings have been uncovered in relation to:

- Rural councils do participate in partnership work, irrespective of size
- Seeking funds is not the key reason for councils to establish partnerships
- Rural partnerships are more well developed than previously reported
- Smaller councils are just as likely to undertake partnership work
- Rural councils prioritise broader outcomes over health protection outcomes, particularly the smaller ones
- Half of respondent councils have a specific social determinant focus in their partnership work
- Impact of health service restructures on partnership outcomes

These are interesting and beneficial results for practitioners that focus on developing partnerships to address structural determinants of health in rural local government areas.

Conclusions and implications

In reviewing the implications of the key findings from the data, we can conclude that rural health services in NSW should continue to develop and enhance partnerships with the local governments in their region. Partnerships with area health services are valued by councils and support them to achieve their strategic aims.

We can conclude that rural councils do have some understanding about the determinants of health and that working to achieve these outcomes is a clear priority for them in any partnership work with an area health service. Irrespective of size of council or capacity to form partnerships, these approaches are important to rural councils.

Recommendations for the future

- **Research translation**

Use the findings of the baseline study to develop tools and models that strengthen local government partnership work focused on broad health outcomes, specifically for the rural NSW context. This will be beneficial to area health services in general, and specifically to GSAHS. The findings are also expected to be useful to local government in the emerging policy context in achieving strategic aims in relation to building healthy and sustainable communities.

The findings from this research will be shared with the members of the NSW Strategic Liaison Group which is a network of professionals in NSW working in this partnership sphere.

GSAHS plans to utilise the findings from this study to inform its Working with Local Government Framework. The intention is to develop a strategy that outlines a clear plan of action based on the new evidence to inform and enhance its way of working with partner councils. This process will continue partnership thinking in reporting these findings to all of the councils in the health service region to enable them to integrate relevant findings into their strategic planning. A component of the strategy will be for willing partners to review existing partnerships based on the evidence and determine how best to improve on any aspects to better achieve social determinant outcomes.

- **Further research**

Use data and findings from the baseline study to develop a second stage to this research to gather in-depth data about the partnerships that have broader social determinant aims and determine whether any evaluation/measurement instruments are being applied that can comment on the efficacy of these partnerships to address community level outcomes. This could lead to the development of appropriate indicators to measure changes in community wellbeing as a result of partnership formation between local government and an area health service, and potentially communities themselves.