

Mareeba Connected Beginnings Project Description

1. Background

Many Indigenous families in Mareeba are experiencing complex, difficult, often traumatic circumstances that have severe impact on the health, wellbeing and capacity for participation of all family members, particularly children. This lack of participation is reflected in the 2018 AEDC (Australian Early Development Census) figures for Mareeba, which show that 21% of 151 Prep children were developmentally vulnerable in relation to language and cognitive skills, and 18.5% were vulnerable in relation to communication skills and general knowledge – in fact Mareeba AEDC data show that since 2009 the trend is increasing numbers of developmentally vulnerable children across all domains of the AEDC.

In recognition of this complexity, in 2009 Mulungu Aboriginal Corporation established the CIOM (Collaborating for Inclusive Outcomes in Mareeba) Network of service providers in the interests of encouraging collaborative service provision – ultimately enabling families with complex needs to have a single Support Plan that includes all service providers required (rather than individual service providers working with families in isolation).

Since then most organisations have become aware of the importance of collaborative service provision, and research has shown that the major barrier is lack of coordination – as one service provider has put it: “Coordination takes time and none of the participating organisations has any to spare. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.” (NintiOne (2017) Collective Impact – A Literature Review).

A major aim of the Mareeba Connected Beginnings Project is to provide the supporting infrastructure required for cross-sector information sharing and collaborative service provision to parents/families/caregivers of Indigenous children from conception to 5 years of age.

2. Theoretical Framework – Collective Impact model

Underpinning the Connected Beginnings project is the Collective Impact model of systemic change, which is specifically tailored to address complex problems, understood as situations in which:

- No one actor alone can remedy the situation
- There are gaps and silos in the system
- There is lack of coordination among actors
- New policies or significant policy change are needed
- Innovation or new solutions are required

(Ninti One (2017) Collective Impact – A Literature Review)

Five conditions distinguish the Collective Impact framework from other approaches to collaboration:

- Common Agenda
 - ◇ Vision for change shared by all participants
 - ◇ Common understanding of the problem
 - ◇ Joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions

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- Shared Measurement
 - ◇ All participating organisations agree on how success will be measured and reported
 - ◇ Short list of common indicators used for learning and improvement
- Mutually reinforcing activities
 - ◇ Plan of action coordinated by a diverse set of cross-sector stakeholders
 - ◇ Activities are differentiated so that each actor's role reinforces the others
- Continuous communication
 - ◇ Frequent, structured, open communication between all actors
 - ◇ Builds trust, assures mutual objectives, generates common motivation
- Backbone Support
 - ◇ Independent funded staff dedicated to the initiative provide ongoing support to nurture the common agenda – the MCB Team provides the backbone support for the Mareeba Connected Beginnings project

Currently there are 22 Connected Beginnings projects across Australia in remote, rural and metropolitan communities. Backbone support workers in these projects participate in regular Connected Beginnings / Collective Impact community of practice events/activities.

3. Mareeba Connected Beginnings Project description

The Mareeba Connected Beginnings Project is informed by the Collective Impact model for systemic change, so the first major focus of the Project is to begin the process of establishing a shared vision for Mareeba Indigenous children from conception to 5 years of age among and between the community and early childhood service providers.

To do this the Mareeba Connected Beginnings Hub is being established in an office building in Byrnes Street Mareeba, with a team of three staff (MCB Project Manager and two MCB Research & Engagement Officers) skilled in listening and communication and able to help people to see the overall system and its complexity, and establish and maintain dialogue to get greater clarity.

These staff will design, develop and deliver surveys for community members and service providers in order to establish the current baseline in terms of community and service provider aspirations and actual experience, identifying current gaps and beginning the building of shared meaning and a shared vision.

Surveys will seek information about:

- What are the current relationships between service providers and between service providers and the community? These will be mapped so that the overall pattern of relationships is easily seen.
- What are the current gaps in those relationships?
- What are the current barriers within the service system?
- What would a service system that is working well look like?

Survey data will be reported in story format rather than the usual dot points, in line with Indigenous cultural tradition of embedding teachings in stories, especially to assist participants with hearing each others' voices, developing a shared understanding of the way

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the system is currently working, a shared vision for achieving aspirations, and shared goals for achieving aspirations – what are our shared challenges *and* our shared strengths?

During this process two groups will be established: a Service System Reference Group that includes participants from organisations delivering early childhood services, and a Community Reference Group that includes local Elders and young leaders from Muluridgi, Djungan, Western Yalanji and other peoples as appropriate, as well as interested community members and community service providers.

The Community Reference Group will focus on maintaining awareness of community aspirations for their children, and monitoring family and service provider efforts to assist with achieving these aspirations.

The Service Provider Reference Group will focus on processes for best practice collaborative service delivery, including sharing information and data and a common referral process, as well as maintaining awareness of community aspirations and how current service provision is meeting these. Mulungu already has strong relationships with service providers to Mareeba children (from conception to age 5) and their families, and some work on mapping service provision has already been done through the Queensland Government's Early Years Partnerships Facilitator.

Data from the surveys will be used by the two Reference Groups (which will have established protocols for communicating with each other within their respective Terms of Reference documents) to develop a Mareeba Connected Beginnings Activity Plan that has consensus approval, and that is understood to be fluid and flexible so that: "When something does not work we stop it or change it. When something works we look at how to leverage this to extend the benefits." ('The Hive' Collective Impact Project, Mt Druitt NSW).

As the Activity Plan is developed, data and tools required to measure progress and outcomes will be identified and agreed upon by both Reference Groups, with focus on constant, continuous evaluation for improvement (the action learning process). This will require IT input from Mulungu's Data Officer for apps specifically designed for sharing data and information safely between services, as well as apps for recording and uploading community stories via iPads and/or other appropriate devices.

As Mareeba's shared vision for children from conception to age 5 emerges, community aspirations will be shared on the walls and screens of the Mareeba Connected Beginnings Hub – as visibly as possible, with all community members and service providers encouraged to come in and participate, or just check it out.

Mareeba's shared vision for children will also be on display during quarterly Mareeba Connected Beginnings Family Celebration Days. Sharing with early years funding agencies will occur both directly and through reporting to quarterly CIOM Network meetings.

The process of developing and maintaining shared vision across a whole community is an evolving one and community ideas will change as they are encouraged to think about an issue. Over the 3 years of the Mareeba Connected Beginnings Project it is intended that the MCB Team will survey community and service providers every six months, updating shared vision and priorities displayed in the Mareeba Connected Beginnings Hub as relationships are built.