

**Submission  
No 36**

**INQUIRY INTO STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ALCOHOL  
ABUSE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW**

**Organisation:** Leeton Shire Council

**Date received:** 1/03/2013

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**SUBJECT: Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues re: Inquiry into strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Leeton Shire is located within the prominent food bowl region of NSW – The Riverina. The Council itself has a vision to be the Centre of Excellence within the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area fostering work best practices in all its endeavours, ensuring the people of Leeton Shire enjoy a rich and diverse lifestyle in harmony with our unique landscape.

Within the Leeton Shire there is a significant population of youth well above the regional NSW average – 20.2% of the population within the 12-24 years age groups compared to 17% across regional NSW. (Source: Cat. No. 2001.0 – 2006 Community Profile Series, Australian Bureau of Statistics; Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2006, 2001, 1996, and 1991.)

Leeton Shire Council's Community Services Division recently undertook research and consultation into the impact and issues surrounding youth binge drinking in our Shire in preparation for a funding application. The information gathered, and the respective information gained through the project implementation directly relates to the term of reference 'alcohol harm minimisation strategies targeted at young people' as part of the NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues regarding the inquiry into strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW.

**INVOLVEMENT IN THE ISSUE**

In October 2011, the Community Services Division of Leeton Shire Council put forward an application to the Australian National Preventive Health Agency and was successful in gaining funding through the National Binge Drinking Strategy Community Level Initiative Third Grants Round. The project titled 'Bidgee Binge' kick-started in April 2012 with specific objectives to target youth binge drinking issues.

The preliminary evidence sourced indicated that, as with a number of rural communities, there is often:

- a lack of access to facilities, services and entertainment,
- medium-high levels of anti-social behaviours,
- lower socio-economic levels,
- and in Leeton Shire's case a high percentage of youth.

The Bidgee Binge program aims to reduce the attractiveness of binge drinking in the Leeton, Griffith and Narrandera Shires by educating and up-skilling local youth, offering out of school educational and entertainment activities and delivery of key messages through the arts (theatre, film, advertising) for young people in the area along with a series of alcohol free events at specific key times to highlight alternatives to binge drinking for entertainment.

So far in the Bidgee Binge project the following objectives have been undertaken:

- 'Think B4 U Drink' was a 5-day theatre workshop facilitated by TransVision Arts to develop a 'Forum Theatre' production showcased through multiple performances in the Leeton, Griffith and Narrandera Shires. The workshop incorporated theatre skills as well as engagement with service providers in relevant fields to safe drinking such as Headspace,

Youth Safe, COPE, Drug Action & further afield, reachout.com, party safe, [www.kidshelp.com.au/teens](http://www.kidshelp.com.au/teens) and offered facts and perspectives to educate and up-skill the participants involved along with the audiences. The following link is a Youtube clip completed by a community member throughout the Forum Theatre process. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrNVVs2C148>

- Change Media coordinated a 4-day hands-on film workshop with 15 local youths up-skilling them with hands-on 21<sup>st</sup> century digital media experience in film making, film narrative, research, acting for film, presenting to camera, recording interviews, directing, editing, producing and online distribution to create a 45-sec TV commercial to help raise awareness about the issues surrounding excessive alcohol consumption it then was passed to the WIN Television Network where it aired during the Christmas New Year break covering an audience of over 72,000. Check out the Change Media website which has links to the TV Commercial and behind the scenes footage. <http://www.changemedia.net.au/leeton-nsw-september-2012/>
- As a follow on Event for the Change Media project we created an outdoor event to showcase the premiere of The Bidgee Binge 'Be a Mate, Don't be that Guy' television commercial with live music, a special presentation for the 15 participants, behind the scenes footage on our outdoor cinema in Mountford Park for the youth of Leeton and the wider community which was followed by a movie (Johnny English – Reborn) under the stars.
- We also have had 'Sunsets' an umbrella of three alcohol free Dive-in-movie events held at public swimming pools throughout the duration of summer. These events utilise an outdoor cinema package creating three separate music and dive in movie events each with their own unique and fun theme.

Outside of the Bidgee Binge project, Leeton Shire was also involved in an extensive case study known as 'The Alcohol Action in Rural Communities (AARC) Project. Whilst current staff members within the Leeton Shire Council Community Services Division were not involved directly, the subsequent results of the study provide complimentary evidence to the benefits of community level initiatives. "AARC is now the largest and most methodologically rigorous alcohol community-based trial undertaken internationally" (Source: FARE 2012)

## **COMMENT**

It is acknowledged that there is an entrenched culture and attractiveness to binge drinking that is beginning at much younger ages. This culture seems to be inherent in some sporting clubs, not just in Leeton, but also the wider rural communities of NSW. This is further aggravated by current marketing and promotions of alcohol especially in regards to 'alcopops' and other new beverages on the market that are specifically targeted to be attractive to the youth market.

Anecdotal evidence through liaisons with the local police suggest that alcohol consumption by minors is still of concern with the current trend leaning more towards consumption in private premises rather than in public places which is a shift from the past. This in turn links and raises stronger concerns about supply of alcohol to minors by parents in the home environment.

Education of both youth and parents seems essential to combat this issue. There appears to be a limited understanding, or possibly acceptance, of the short and long-term health effects of binge drinking in both youth and parent generations. Furthermore, parents need to be made aware of their responsibilities in terms of supply, the law, party preparation and harm minimisation.

Sporting clubs as a whole are often an established institution in regional and rural communities. Local police have indicated a number of recent concerns with sporting clubs deeming it 'necessary'

to have alcohol for sale at games. It is also noted that at times these clubs are failing to adhere to the appropriate licensing requirements to sell and supply liquor.

The Bidgee Binge project and Council's acknowledgement of the need for a holistic approach to combat youth issues – such as binge drinking - is supported by the following priorities listed in Leeton Shire's Community Strategic Plan "Leeton Living Towards 2024"

- 1A: Lobby for improved health services including better communication of existing services.
- 3A: Offer educational opportunities for youth to support the transition from school to work including areas related to life skills.
- 4D: Develop a program of activities and events that are tailored to various age groups
- 7A: Offer a variety of programs and activities for the Community to participate in
- 10B: Implement drug and alcohol education for parents and children
- 10D: Review the closing hours of licensed premises and ensure that adherence to the RSA regulations.

At present, the Bidgee Binge program is unable to substantiate long-term or even medium-term results due to the infancy of the program. However, it is evident even at this early stage that the program has been able to make some great inroads and gain substantial insight into the characteristics of our youth demographic.

The feedback from the 'Think B4 U Drink!' Forum Theatre project highlighted the following benefits:

- "Western Riverina Arts (in partnership with Leeton Shire Council) contracted TransVision Arts to run the first arts based project for our Bidgee Binge project, funded by ANPHA. The five hundred teenagers who witnessed and participated in TransVisiosn Arts Bidgee Binge project will no doubt at some time, think back to the issues they saw presented so succinctly by the youth of The Real Theatre Company. They will be in a better position to make more informed decisions. I can't imagine a better way of engaging young people with the dangers of binge drinking." - Dr Greg Pritchard, Western Riverina Arts.
- "Thank you, that was excellent. A great way of communicating these ideas to kids. Not telling them what to do – letting them work it out for themselves." – Local High School Teacher.
- "There should be more of this. In the smaller schools out of major centres. We need this type of presentation to really look at issues and not just for young people." Local Teacher and Parent.
- "I thought it went very well. It was good to see the interaction, planting the seed and giving them [the audience] something to think about." Local Drug and Alcohol Counsellor.
- Not only did the participants in the workshop indicate significant improvements and up-skilling in performance skills and increased confidence, but they all agreed that their understanding of the issues and opinions around drinking have increased either 'quite a lot' or 'heaps'.

The feedback from 'Be A Mate' Change Media project highlighted the following benefits:

- "I believe that the television commercial will appeal to a large portion of my age group and while it may not completely stop binge drinking, it will discourage it and the whole 'be a mate' idea should work well." - Workshop participant.
- "I think that some may relate to 'that guy' [in the commercial the main character is 'that guy' and it highlights how no one enjoys the behaviour of 'that guy' who drinks too much] and think about how much they're actually drinking and consider cutting back and not acting so terrible." - Workshop participant.

- “Yes, I think it is effective because it is something everyone can relate to. However, the time frame limits some of the ideas portrayed and some people have had difficulty in deciphering the intended message. I think it will affect some people, however it is quite a huge problem and more things like this need to be done to raise awareness and truly make a significant difference on this issue” – Workshop participant.
- Similarly to the Forum Theatre Project, participants were significantly up-skilled and educated in performing and media as well as with information surrounding drinking. Furthermore, participants were able to provide further insight through open forum discussions about on-going local issues, including binge drinking.

Education of youth ensures that local youth are aware of the factual information proximate to the issues of binge drinking. Through education, youth are also able to be up-skilled in various fields providing incentive and encouragement to progress their life in a positive direction. New skills allow greater ability to be involved in the community, reducing the impact of boredom and anti-social behaviour. Congruently, the Bidgee Binge project will host a number of alcohol-free events to alleviate boredom, provide an alternative to drinking and other anti-social behaviour for youth.

It is noted that through localised community initiative projects, programs can be tailor-made to suit the demographic and their respective interests and link with local existing services and service providers as required. The Leeton Shire Council Community Services Division has been able to establish a working group that meets bi-monthly to discuss youth issues. Representatives in this group include local schools, drug and alcohol counsellor, regional arts development officer, centrelink services, local police, road safety officer, and local Council. Through this group a valuable forum has been established for the discussion of local issues affecting local youth. In addition it allows for greater across service partnership reducing duplication and unnecessary waste of services, assists with implementation of greater projects to address targeted needs, and gives a sense of ownership to important stakeholders within our local community.

Key findings from the AARC project support the benefits of community action and how it outweighs the costs. The project acknowledges that communities are complex in nature and offer a large proportion of demographic variables. Further findings from the project suggest greater benefits can also occur through a larger number of interventions that are specifically targeted towards the various harms associated with alcohol relevant to each community. The project coordinators suggest the development of a ‘hub’ to share ideas of successful community-based approaches that can be adapted to suit the dynamics of the relevant community it is to be implemented in with the overall goal being to achieve cooperative work among successful programs that can drive potential future programs.