

## **Living Smart - For a Sustainable Community: An innovative and collaborative approach to sustainable living in the City of Fremantle, Western Australia.**

Keywords: community, local government, sustainable living

Achieving sustainability at the household level is seen as vital in achieving real reductions in the ecological footprint of each person. In response to the increasing need to change our behaviour to reduce our footprint, the “Living Smart - for a sustainable community” program was developed. The co-operative and innovative approach to the Living Smart program involved a collaborative partnership between the City of Fremantle, The Meeting Place Community Centre and Murdoch University as well as community, Regional Council and State Government input into the design of the program and Federal Government funding.

The aim of the Living Smart program was to show participants what sustainability means in the context of their lifestyle and their community, as well as demonstrate how they can take action to contribute to sustainability. Evaluation of the program found that participants increased their environmental knowledge and increased the number and frequency of their sustainable actions. In addition 95% of the participants felt more a part of the community and 80% increased their sense of wellbeing from undertaking the program.

The Living Smart program demonstrates that community based education programs developed in collaboration with different organizations, to meet mutual visions and expectations, do achieve positive outcomes for the benefit of all parties involved. Key challenges for the collaborative partners have been meeting the different needs and expectations of the participants, meeting the increasing demand for the program and ensuring consistency in approaches from Local, State and Federal Governments in addressing the issue of sustainability at the household level.

### **Introduction**

Partnerships are becoming an increasingly common approach to the development of programs and products particularly where resources are stretched amongst different stakeholders and each has a unique level of knowledge and skills that are of value and benefit to each other. The City of Fremantle, The Meeting Place Community Centre and Murdoch University have formed a unique partnership to deliver the innovative Living Smart program for the residents of Fremantle, achieving success in sustainability and community development.

### **The Collaborative Partners**

Following a presentation by the City of Port Philip on their “Sustainable Living at Home” project in May 2002 at the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives Seminar for the Cities for Climate Protection program, The Meeting Place identified a need for a similar program in the Fremantle community. The Meeting Place then approached the City of Fremantle to determine possible opportunities for delivering a similar program, designed specifically for the Fremantle community. At the same time, Lucy Sheehy, a PhD student from Murdoch University also approached the City of Fremantle to be involved in a household program aimed at testing different techniques for environmental education and behaviour change. The City of Fremantle, through the City Plan 2000-2005, requires the organisation to deliver environmental education programs aimed at sustainable resource consumption within the community and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the community as part of its commitment to the Cities for Climate Protection Program (CCP). It became clear that there was an ideal opportunity to involve all parties in delivering one program that met all expectations and needs.

A joint meeting was held in July 2002 between The Meeting Place Community Centre, Murdoch University and the City of Fremantle to discuss the pathway forward for delivering a program that met the collaborative partners expectations and needs. It was agreed that while a similar approach to the Sustainable Living at Home project would be taken, the program would be designed specifically for the Fremantle community. The topics addressed were also expanded to include other facets of sustainable living including health, indoor air, chemicals, simple living, empowerment and how to take action. In order to facilitate actual behaviour change the technique of goal setting was also incorporated into the program.

In September 2002, the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council appointed a Regional Greenhouse Co-ordinator (Dr Stephanie Jennings) to progress the implementation of the Regional Greenhouse Strategic Action Plan for the Cities for Climate Protection program. As part of the Regional CCP program, there is a requirement to develop and implement community based education programs for households to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and reduce transport related greenhouse gas emissions. The Southern Metropolitan Regional Council's involvement since November 2002 has been to assess the relevance and opportunity of delivering a version of the Living Smart program to the broader regional area to achieve the objectives of the Regional Community Greenhouse Strategic Plan.

### **Planning, developing and delivering the Living Smart program**

Planning for the Living Smart program involved regular joint meetings between the collaborative partners, resource sharing including in-kind support and knowledge and skills and equal sharing of roles and duties to prepare, develop and implement the program. One person represented each organisation at each meeting and meetings were not held unless all were present. This was to ensure fair and equitable decision-making at all stages of the project.

In order to meet the expectations and needs of the Fremantle community, a series of information sessions were held at The Meeting Place in October 2002 to introduce the concept of the Living Smart program and to seek feedback from those attending on the kind of topics and information they would like to be covered in the program, when and at what time the program should be held and other factors which might affect the delivery of the program. A draft Living Smart booklet was then prepared incorporating community feedback and sent to key State Government agencies including the Department of Environment (formerly Department of Environmental Protection), Water and Rivers Commission, Department of Planning and Infrastructure, Water Corporation, Western Power, Alinta Gas and the Sustainability Policy Unit of the Department for the Premier and Cabinet as well as other interested Environmental Officers in Local Government for comment and feedback.

The purpose of seeking comments from the key agencies was to ensure a consistent approach to addressing sustainability issues from the State to the Local level. In addition, it was to seek some form of endorsement and support for the program as the collaborative partners had always intended on making the program available to others in the future and by providing an opportunity to be involved at the planning stage, this gave other parties a way of incorporating their key messages and needs in the Living Smart program.

All of the feedback, expectations and needs from the community, State agencies and the collaborative partners culminated in the development of the Living Smart program covering 12 sustainability topics ranging from goal setting, waste, energy, water, chemicals, indoor air quality, gardens, health, empowerment and simple living. The program was delivered as a seven week workshop series at The Meeting Place in February and March 2003 and limited to 30 participants based on funding from the Australian Greenhouse Office.

An important aspect of the Living smart program was the inbuilt evaluation process. Evaluating the Living Smart program allowed the collaborative partners to ensure the program was effective and suited to community needs, identified ways in which the program could be improved and provided valuable information for research at Murdoch University. The evaluation results showed that the Living Smart program was effective at increasing the number and frequency of the participant's sustainable actions at home as well as their environmental knowledge. Thus both the City of Fremantle and Murdoch University's needs and expectations were met.

### **Living Smart Achievements**

Living Smart, as a community based education program, achieved the collaborative partners expectations as well as the participants. The key achievements realised by the participants of the Living Smart program were that:

- Goal setting was seen as effective and thought to increase motivation.
- 70% of participants stated the program changed the way they think about lifestyle/environmental issues.
- 95% of the participants felt more a part of the community.
- 80% increased their sense of wellbeing from undertaking the program thereby achieving The Meeting Place's needs and expectations.
- Participants felt they were more environmentally positive in all of the topics after the program.
- Participants felt the most important parts in the program in helping them change was information, followed by goal setting and the supportive group.
- 65 % of the participants made changes which related to their goals and 55% made changes that they didn't set goals for.
- 50% of the participants felt that goal setting had impacted on other areas of their life.

For more information on the evaluation process and results see Sheehy & Dingle's paper Goal Setting, Education and Sustainability: Living Smart in the City of Fremantle as part of this conference.

### **Factors attributing to the success of Living Smart**

The key factors that attributed to the success of the Living Smart program were:

- Mutually endorsed and supported visions and expectations for the program.
- Shared ownership of the program.
- Commitment to the program by providing resources and support.
- Openness and willingness from the collaborative partners to work together to achieve an agreed outcome.
- Fair and equitable decision-making processes from the initiation to implementation stages of the Living Smart program.
- An honest approach encouraged at discussions to ensure all issues were being discussed.
- Warm and inviting venues to hold meetings and the Living Smart program.

### **Lessons learnt from the Living Smart program**

All community education programs evolve over time and the Living Smart program has now been in varying stages of development and implementation for more than 12 months. The lessons learnt from development and implementation of the Living Smart program over the last 12 months have been:

- State very clearly each collaborative partners expectations and needs at the beginning of the project with a review process mid-way and at the end of the project to allow for flexibility and any changes required. A Memorandum of Understanding is particularly important amongst partners to establish the project on common ground.
- Gain written approval and/or endorsement to be involved in the collaboration to support your actions and involvement.
- Connect and directly link the project to other approved programs and/or policies and make it relevant to multiple parties.
- Be flexible and adaptable to changing needs and expectations, particularly where the change occurs at the community level.
- Evaluation is the key to successful programs and always ensure it is a component of your project design.
- Expect a program like Living Smart to take time to evolve and to require modifications over time where evaluation results indicate a need to change.
- Learn from others and ask “what didn’t work?” to avoid a potential waste of time and effort.
- Share effort, knowledge and experiences with others.
- Actively seek partnership opportunities where the expectations and visions of those involved are mutually beneficial and have broader benefit to the community as partnerships offer resource sharing advantages.
- Seek partnership opportunities that complement and add value to the project either from access to new and different resources and for community projects, with community based organisations with already established networks.
- If problems arise, seek assistance from others to resolve the matter.
- Maintain a positive approach to working with other partners in a joint project to gain the most from each other.
- Most importantly, starting a new program like Living Smart does not require a large budget and only needs commitment from collaborative partners to willingly spare time and effort to work together.

### **The future of Living Smart**

The future of the Living Smart program is to continue with a modified style of delivery based on participant feedback and results of the evaluation. The new program will be trialled in February 2004 and will run for six months to allow for greater community development opportunities. The same collaborative partners will be involved in delivering the new Living Smart program since it continues to meet the expectations and needs of the partners.