

Reflections on Local Area Coordination when at its best in Western Australia

Semi-formal notes from an informal gathering held in Perth on the 24th June 2018 with a group of highly experienced people with deep experience of LAC since the 1990's in Western Australia, and some keen people looking to learn from the long-term experience of when "LAC was at its best" in the original location in WA.

Present: Jane Eacott (Family leader living in South Perth), Chris Yates (current LAC Director and previously LAC Supervisor in Upper Great Southern country region), Bronia Holyoake (CEO of Valued Lives and previous LAC and LAC District Supervisor in metropolitan), Kim Proctor (long term LAC for South Perth District), Catherine Viney (Director of Bapcare which now has LAC contracts in SA and Tasmania), Tania Loosley-Smith (Executive Director – WA Department of Communities working on system transformation, who experienced LAC first hand as a colleague in the Disability Services Commission), Sian Fenwick (WA Department of Communities looking to learn about LAC) and Eddie Bartnik (previous WA Director of statewide Local Area Coordination then Metropolitan Services Coordination from 1995-2009, independent consultant supporting LAC development internationally and now across Australia through the NDIS).

Eddie created the event and facilitated the evening with Sian, Catherine, Jane and Kim all providing draft notes which were then shared and edited by the group to produce this record.

Brief context

The impetus for the evening came from the recent May 2018 Local Area Coordination Learning Exchange held in Thurrock, London as part of the International Initiative for Disability Leadership (IIDL). Eddie and Catherine were part of that event and are keen to set up a broad international LAC network through IIDL. Both Bapcare and WA Department of Communities are reviewing international best practice for LAC and this event was part of that discovery process.

The format of the evening was informal and each participant was invited to share stories of examples that illustrated LAC at its best in WA; not to dwell on how/why circumstances had changed or the current situation but rather to elicit some depth of information through collective reflection that would add value to the written literature. Participants were encouraged to focus on those examples that generated the most passion or depth of meaning for themselves.

Eddie provided a brief historical overview of Local Area Coordination (LAC) which commenced in Western Australia (WA) in the 1980s, with the initial aim to assist people with disability, their families and carers living in regional areas. The program started in Albany in 1988 and was expanded to other key regional areas over the next 2 years. It was then introduced to Perth in 1991, with full WA coverage achieved by 2000

LAC has spread internationally to New Zealand, Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland and now across Australia as part of the core delivery model of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. In addition to the increased geographical coverage, LAC started with supporting people with intellectual disability, gradually expanding to support those with a broader range of disabilities. More recently in the UK, LAC has included older people, mental health/psychosocial disability and also young people leaving care. Evaluation studies continue to produce evidence of a high level of effectiveness and value for money of LAC, where there has been fidelity of design and implementation, across a wide variety of geographical settings and target groups.

Summary of fundamental ‘good’ elements of early LAC practice contributing to it being recognised as a highly innovative, effective and respected program that benefited the lives of many Western Australians with disability, their families and carers, as well as the broader WA community.

1. Relationships are the key

- A fundamental element of LAC was the building of productive and meaningful relationships with not only people with disability, their families and carers, but the local community as a whole.
- It was acknowledged that meaningful relationships took time to develop and embed, and LACs were given that time to ensure they could make meaningful change at the local level.
- These relationships were based on equal power and were non-judgemental – not based on ‘expertise’, personal or professional opinion.
- “LACs never gave up reaching out to build trust. Different approaches included just being available, intentional malingering at community events, not obviously working with a family but working around and between them”.
- Knowing people well and having a trusted relationship meant that crisis could at times be averted. One example is of a man with a serious mental health condition who had stopped taking his medication. The LAC observed the deterioration during their regular engagement and strategically liaised with the young man, his work and General Practitioner to get things back on track. Another example was of a family who contacted their “old LAC” many years later to discuss their concerns regarding their son’s living arrangements (despite the LAC having moved from the area into a senior role)
- Strategies are used to develop relationship with people - hard to reach and disengaged.

2. Connection and belonging to the community

- Understanding the characteristics, dynamics and history of the local community was critical to the LAC role.
- Early recruitment practices stipulated that LACs had to be members of the community in which they worked, to ensure they had the necessary local knowledge and passion for their community.
- LACs used their own community experiences and relationships to provide tailored advice and informed strategies for connecting individuals and families with community (for example, connecting a local student music teacher who taught their own kids).
- live locally and have a sense of ownership of the local community
- people have connectedness in community, opportunities to capitalise on local connections and other informal connections.

3. Building and developing community ownership with and alongside people with disability

- LAC was at its best when LACs had the time and consent to be out in the community, and actively contribute to building the community (for example, working with local governments to establish access and inclusion reference groups, using a connected process to generate local leadership and ownership and inclusion of people with disabilities in a sustainable way).

- Having fostered trusting relationships with a large number of people in the local community over an extended period of time, the LAC was well-positioned to identify suitable people to contribute to community development initiatives. These people would not otherwise have self-identified or been confident in the value of their own contribution. It remains a fundamental element of inclusion to promote participation for individuals with disability, family representatives and LACs on community reference groups. Through co-participation, the LAC supported a range of individuals and family representatives to share their experiences, views and to advocate their needs.
- Power of being in the community – this increased opportunities to build community
- LACs would identify opportunities for people with disabilities and their families to connect with key community representatives, in order to influence policy and to discuss and generate ideas on making communities more accessible and inclusive.
- LACs established connections and networks between local people with lived shared experiences, so that they would be able to support each other (for example, organising local parent gatherings, where families could connect with each other and establish meaningful friendships and support networks outside of LAC).
- A key role of the LAC was to facilitate and strengthen existing links/connections between people with disability and their community.
- Formal supports were a last resort - exhaust all options and linkages first before funding. Whilst LAC acknowledged the need for and value of individualised funding for many people with a disability and their families, funding was generally not the default solution for meeting individual needs. Facilitation of connection with others, in particular with family, friends, community and formal system supports was a key priority for meeting most people's needs.
Supporting people to develop the confidence to initiate and interact with these contacts was a powerful and intentional strategy to promote empowerment, independence and enduring connections. On many occasions, these connections alleviated some/all of the pressure that may otherwise have been attended to with formalised funding.
- Strength of family and community, LAC “oil the wheels”
- Strong investment in and commitment to values driven asset based community development principles. LAC was often the catalyst for the steering of local community initiatives, alongside people with disabilities and families.
- Networking needs to include local community connections with and alongside people with disability
- “We would take people with us to go to things like “The biggest morning tea” with no fixed agenda and be open to possibilities and chase connections”
- Regional communities such as Hyden have strong resilience and welcomed all its people as community members
- Strong emphasis on family, friends and community. For example, a young man returned to his small community after being away at the senior high school in a town some two hours away. He faced a crossroads – could he resume life in his own community? Where would he be accommodated and how would he be supported? The local community was in the process of developing ‘young singles’ accommodation and one of the units was earmarked for him. The community made it very clear through this action and through strong public statements from community leaders that this was his home and there would always be a place for him because he belonged here.

4. Partnerships with families and strong family leadership

- There was equality between LACs and families – LACs walked alongside families and families driving.
- Families leading and respected for their natural authority
- In undertaking their role, LACs recognised that it was critical to work with the whole family unit, rather than just the individual.
- Families were responsible for driving change, forming ideas, and providing critical peer support to one another.
- Families attended strategic planning events to help shape the activities of the Disability Services Commission (DSC), and ensure all strategies were informed by lived experience and local priorities.
- Investment was made in families to build their leadership capacity and strengthen their voice by offering training opportunities and inviting them to present at DSC planning days.
- Encouragement by the system for LAC to develop partnerships between families and local communities
- A responsive system through LAC in first instance, to family initiated advocacy;
- A responsive and supportive system through LAC in first instance, to family led initiatives i.e. 'parent to parent'/peer group initiatives, inclusive education networks.
- A sense of partnership between families, individuals and the formal system through the active LAC network.
- LAC was about building individual and family capacity. A family member once stated to a consultative group on LAC that, "my LAC teaches me how to catch fish as opposed to catching the fish for me".

5. Information and "the right amount of challenge"

- LACs were encouraged to be transparent and share information with individuals and families. This information sharing was driven by values, rather than just policy and regulations.
- A key skill required by the LAC was the ability to share the right information at the right time and in the right way so that it could be accessed and absorbed, while also being respectful of the needs of the individual and family.
- A key purpose of sharing information was to encourage individuals and families to think outside the box. Essential to doing this effectively would be to share the information/ sew a seed, leave it to take root, and then, if appropriate, follow through.
- Right amount of challenge for a family - intentionally and challenging the families - have you thought about, have you considered? Example of the older mother who was very reluctant but with the encouragement of her LAC, attended and contributed to a planning and writing project ("Caring into the future"). She was so glad she did and fondly said that she appreciated the LAC making this suggestion.
- Information was tailored for people through the relationship; this was real expertise as one piece of information could be catalyst for life changing action; information was tailored and confidential – privacy respected. For example, sensitively introducing a person to another family in the same street and also sensitively following up information
- When families are too busy – it is helpful for the LAC to consult with them on the information flow and what they would wish to receive.

6. Values, skills and the fundamental importance of training/annual forums

- LACs needed to be values driven, with the key values being:
 - All people have the right to be heard and included.
 - Participation in the local community is fundamental element of individual and family wellbeing. Communities should be inclusive and accessible
- While LACs were employed largely on the basis of their personal values, they also underwent extensive training to embed the skills and knowledge required to successfully undertake the role.
- LAC positions were so sought after in the early days– alignment with people’s values and inclusive community
- Initially the training (which was affectionately called “Natios”) went for two weeks, and was centred on understanding the experiences of people with disability, their families and carers. First week focused on Social Role Valorization (SRV) and was extremely challenging challenge and then week 2 was more about positive visioning
- The training was not only attended by LACs, but also by people with disability, their families and carers, government and community agencies in order to create a learning exchange and to ensure the training remained relevant and based on lived experiences.
- System investment in learning opportunities (eg Natios or more formally the National Training on Leadership & Development in Human Services, run by Prof Errol Cocks and Dr Bob Jackson) run bi- annually and courses for LACs, people with disabilities/families and key services with an outcome which saw LACs with strong inclusive values.
- Regular Social Role Valorisation courses facilitated by accredited trainers about which LAC actively engaged with potential family leaders to encourage participation. The exposure to great minds and teachings from Michael Kendrick and other highly relevant and potent presenters including Scottish facilitators on person centred planning;
- Very much thinking to Invest at the front end, National Program for Service Development Initiative, training always took place with the participation of people with disabilities and their families,
- Families were invited to attend the training - investment in families to develop leadership skills
- Annual LAC gatherings where families and people with disabilities were included and welcomed
- Families learning in these settings realised high expectations for /of their family member with a disability. This is particularly relevant for envisioning and has been considered by some of the participants as inspirational and life-changing.
- Many families became self-advocates in the system when things weren’t working
- Families didn’t need case management and only reached out for LAC support when they couldn’t remedy issues on their own
- Support groups were facilitated to form, and then have stayed operating based on the needs eg. Dads group meeting in pub in Como; annual fishing trip for dads
- Natios: through LACs, families were invited to participate and many went on to continue engagement, and create new opportunities which have taken families to new levels – envisioning with higher expectations. New pathways were identified for families for example to authentic inclusive education
- Families report attending “Natios” – changes selves/their families and their networks

- Rural Forum (this was the place to be, hottest ticket, very uplifting) – all LACs and several families (own section of the program and then included in everything); equality not them and us, everyone was expected

7. Leadership that was collective, connected and consistent

- Consistency of leadership was critical in maintaining the original intent of LAC.
- Through consistent leadership, the values that underpinned LAC, and the community development role played by LACs, was upheld. It also meant that the program was able to exist in its most innovative and creative form, rather than be systemised, for a long time.
- Local leadership was provided by LAC Supervisors – this role was an enabling role (rather than just an accountability role), which would support the activities of LACs and make things happen.
- Strong leadership at all levels within the formal system and the ‘family movement’ initiated by LAC in first instance through linking, information sharing and recommendation;
- Strong active investment in family leadership by the formal system and participation by families flowing through LAC;
- Strong connectivity i.e. LAC annual forum in metro and rural areas including family representation and contribution;
- Family representation in formal system strategic planning processes (‘nothing about us without us’);
- Education department at all levels was working effectively with LAC on inclusive education
- LAC was face of the Disability Services Commission in the community, families could see allies in LAC right up the ladder

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Participants agreed that these notes could be used as an informal resource through our own networks to support Local Area Coordination development. It is not intended to be a fully representative or complete document – rather the focus is on deep and nuanced reflections that might not have been captured in more formal writings. For example, the reflections on family leadership and training we believe provide some added insight.