

**Speaking Notes for
Debbie Leisser, Manager Policy & Planning
Housing Tasmania
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(Written by Belinda Fenney-Walch, Housing Tasmania)

Good morning everyone.

A young man was walking along the beach at dawn.

Ahead of him he saw an old man picking up starfish and tossing them into the water.

At last the young man caught up with the old man and asked him, “*Why are you doing that?*”

(PAUSE)

The old man explained that when the sun came up, the starfish abandoned on the sand would die.

(PAUSE)

“*But the beach goes on for thousands of miles and there are millions of starfish on the beach. How can your efforts make any difference, old man?*”

(PAUSE)

The old man looked at the little starfish in his hand as he tossed it into the waves, he replied: “*IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE TO THIS ONE.*”

My name is Debbie Leisser and I am the Manager of Policy and Planning for Housing Tasmania.

My co-presenter is Cris Fitzpatrick who is the Manager of BURP – the Bridgewater-Gagebrook Urban Renewal Program.

Many of you would have been expecting Malcolm Downie to be presenting this session with Cris.

Unfortunately Malcolm was unable to make it today and sends his apologies.

He asked me if I could come in his place.

I have been a keen observer of BURP's progress over the last 4 years and have been impressed at the gradual but strong changes which have been taking place.

If everyone was as committed, creative and practical as the people of BURP, I expect many of the problems that have been discussed here over the last 2 days would be minimal.

In 1997, Bridgewater was described as having Australia's lowest level of well being.

There were high levels of unemployment, especially youth unemployment.

There were low levels of qualifications and skills.

High numbers of sole parent families.

Poor literacy rates.

And incomes were typically 30% lower than the suburbs of Hobart.

It's not surprising that Bridgewater was constantly being put down in the media.

From a housing perspective, the situation was awful.

There were 115 vacant houses in Gagebrook alone, and more than 40 in Bridgewater.

That may not sound like many to those of you who come from big cities.

But in Tassie, that's a fair number of empty houses in 2 small, neighboring suburbs comprising just over 15 hundred households.

We had whole streets that were vacant and not a single person wanting to move into the area.

Instead we had people writing on their housing applications that they would not live in Gagebrook or Bridgewater, no matter how desperate they were for rooves over their heads.

The houses were being vandalised daily – broken windows, trashed fences, graffiti, arson.

We were at our wits' ends, with few ideas other than bulldozing all the vacant properties.

But then we heard some voices saying “*Why don't you ask us what we want? Why don't you ask us what we think will work? Why doesn't anyone ever ask us?*”

The language wasn't quite that polite, but we sure got the message.

We started to listen to the people who knew the problems far better than we did.

The people who lived the problems day and night.

The people who call Bridgewater and Gagebrook home.

The children, the youth with the bad reputation, the gangs, the parents and the elderly.

And the message we heard first and foremost was that people wanted things to get better and they wanted to be involved.

This desire to be involved became the rationale behind one of most successful community development projects in Australia, if not the world.

The Bridgewater/Gagebrook Urban Renewal Program.

Colloquially called BURP.

The rationale was quickly encapsulated in three sentences:

If you tell me, I'll forget.

If you show me, I may remember

If you involve me, I'll understand.

BURP's objective is simple – to make Bridgewater and Gagebrook an even better place to live by improving the economic, social and physical environments of the area once described as having Australia's lowest level of well-being.

I expect a lot of you are wondering why Bridgewater was in such poor shape prior to BURP.

Bridgewater is situated on the Midlands Highway, 21 kilometres from the centre of Hobart.

Gagebrook is just down the road from Bridgewater.

Bridgewater and Gagebrook were built in the 1970's by what was then the Housing Department (and I'll hasten to add that the Housing Department of the 1970's is a very distant relative of today's Housing Tasmania!)

They were originally planned as a town for 25,000 people.

But only about half of the proposed town was built.

Thankfully, people all over the country started asking questions about the effectiveness of developing large public housing estates, commonly called broadacres.

As a result, many planned broadacres were not completed, including Bridgewater and Gagebrook.

Instead, greater focus was placed on incorporating public housing into existing suburbs and reducing the density of public housing.

Of course this was good news.

But it had a down side for Bridgewater and Gagebrook.

With less than half of the planned population, there was a drop in private sector activity, bringing with it fewer local employment opportunities and less investment in the community.

The town had few services, a limited number of shops and was “miles away from anywhere”.

Many residents were unemployed and there was nothing for them to do.

No decent playgrounds for kids, no cinemas, few shops, no parks or sports grounds and it was difficult to get into town.

Residents didn't mix much, and it was quite normal for neighbours to be suspicious of each other.

It's hardly surprising we were having so much trouble convincing people to live in Bridgewater.

That's what Bridgewater was like, only 4 years ago.

Now things have changed.

It's true that Bridgewater is still characterised by high levels of unemployment and low incomes.

But it's been a long time since Hobart's newspaper - The Mercury - published a front page story which would humiliate every resident of Bridgewater or Gagebrook.

Instead, there have been article after article of good news coming out of the area.

BURP has kept a collection since July 1997, and there must be over 60 pages of articles celebrating the area.

The Bridgewater/Gagebrook Urban Renewal Program was established in 1996.

Initial funding came from Housing Tasmania and the Brighton Council through Commonwealth Building Better Cities funding.

This funding was backed up by the energy and initiative of active residents in the community.

In setting up BURP, it was recognised that the program could only be really successful if it had support at a high level from key service providers.

So a Board of Management was created to provide essential resources and skills and to play an important encouraging and enabling role.

Housing Tasmania, Brighton Council, Bridgewater High School, Tasmania Police and local business are all represented on the BURP Board of Management.

This group aids and guides BURP, but does not direct.

Having people on the Board of Management who are in senior positions helps BURP achieve results and makes sure that there is commitment from the top down.

The Board of Management is one reason why BURP has been successful.

The model has allowed development within the community without forcing a process where participants were unskilled and felt they were incapable of the job ahead of them.

The model has provided support and encouragement for BURP, while respecting the community's right and need to develop their own ideas and direct their own activities.

It's the local people who do the work, managing the organisation, consulting residents, planning, coming up with the ideas, providing day to day services and organising functions.

This is another reason for BURP's success.

The strong community ownership and involvement.

From the beginning, BURP has been responsive, creative and action-oriented, with a strong community base.

Local people have been the drivers.

And local people are much better at identifying local problems and local solutions than governments or big businesses.

The solutions which local people come up with are also much more likely to work.

Another key reason for BURP's success is that BURP has a 'Champion of the Cause' – Cris Fitzpatrick – my co-presenter today.

Cris has been the Manager of BURP since its inception.

Bridgewater and Gagebrook are lucky to have her.

She is a person who knows her community well.

She respects her community and includes her community.

She generates enthusiasm and is trusted by the local community.

Importantly Cris is also extremely good at telling people outside Bridgewater and Gagebrook what the community wants and needs.

She usually goes one step further by telling listeners how the young people of Bridgewater are the most enthusiastic, creative and motivated kids in the whole world.

Perhaps the first obvious evidence of the turning tide in Bridgewater and Gagebrook was the Bridgewater-Gagebrook Community Festival in 1998.

The festival was a celebration of achievement and a public display of commitment to the renewal of Bridgewater and Gagebrook.

Approximately **8000** people attended this festival and sixty four local people were paid to work there.

During the festival, residents of all ages participated in the variety of activities designed to get people thinking and talking about what was important to them in their community.

They even got children creating models with food to illustrate what they thought were ideal environments to grow up in.

The festival was undoubtedly a great success but things were a bit tense for a short period during the clean-up time afterwards.

The local gang, a notorious group of 13 to 14 year old youths were hanging around, a bit like the mafia.

These kids could've reaked absolute havoc.

They could've done heaps of damage to the marquees which were waiting to be dismantled, and turned the whole festival sour.

Malcolm Downie, Housing Tasmania's Director, was there with Cris.

He and Cris saw the youths hanging around.

Without a moment's hesitation, Cris walked up to them.

She didn't have a go at them.

She didn't ask them to move on or to behave themselves.

She offered them \$50.00 to clean all the rubbish from the Park.

A few hours later that park was spotless.

And she had the gang on side.

She involved them.

And she demonstrated that she trusted them.

The change was even more visible a little while later when the leader of the gang started going to Bridgewater High School like the prodigal son and talking to the students about why they shouldn't behave in ways that he had!

Kids in most towns have opportunities to be on sports teams.

These opportunities have been pretty limited in Bridgewater and Gagebrook.

A few years ago in Bridgewater there was no basketball team.

There was plenty of talent, but no local team.

And it was too expensive and difficult to travel to town.

So BURP put together a basketball challenge and developed a competition roster, with support for five local teams.

Games were even played with the local police and politicians.

There's nothing like getting arch enemies together by playing a friendly game of sport!.

A winning team soon emerged, so Housing Tasmania purchased some team T-Shirts to enable the team to play in the Southern Men's Basketball tournament.

They went on to win the Southern Men's Basketball Grand Final.

Those kids could play well but they'd never before been given a chance.

It makes me wonder how many other skills and talents these kids have, which they haven't yet been given the chance to use.

The basketball teams brought pride, community involvement and something to do.

And of course with training one evening per week, and games on Friday night, there was a lot less time and energy for trouble making!

BURP didn't stop at the basketball hoops.

They went on to organise netball teams, eight ball teams, volley ball teams, indoor cricket and cricket teams.

And then, of course, they needed somewhere to play all these games, so along came the Sportzcourt – a multi use sports facility.

But still they didn't stop.

Early success fuelled them on, resulting in achievement after achievement.

BURP won Best Community Float in the Hobart Christmas Pageant, not once, not twice, but **three years in a row**.

With support from BURP, the Bridgewater High School came second in the Rock Eisteddfod in 2000 and equal first in 2001.

They facilitated a Fire Safety Expo to help get crucial messages about house fire prevention to the local community.

They've provided computer training for local residents.

Adult literacy classes

A night club for the young people

Learn to surf classes

Tree planting programs.

Mural painting

Women's Self Defence

Craft classes

A needle exchange program

Employment of young people to look after schools during school holidays.

..... Something for everyone.

In 1999, BURP was the Australian winner of the National Awards for Innovation in Local Government.

And in 2000, BURP was the winner of the Best Community Development Project Award by the Tasmanian Local Government Association.

After a couple of years with BURP, 5 members had acquired the confidence to run for local council.

That's a pretty major step for a handful of public housing tenants from a suburb which had been described as having Australia's lowest level of wellbeing.

They weren't successful, probably because local residents spread their votes around the five candidates.

At the last local council election, just one BURP candidate ran for election – Cris Fitzpatrick.

It was no surprise that she was elected.

No-one needs to tell anyone from BURP how much housing affects a person's quality of life, health and wellbeing..

BURP knows this, and they act on it.

We are proud to say that the partnership between Housing Tasmania and BURP is very strong.

Many of the projects BURP has initiated and supported are directly relevant to housing provision.

BURP has supported a home purchase assistance program for tenants

Supported house painting by tenants

Employed a local person to keep the lawns mowed of properties we have for sale

And set up a tenant gardening, landscaping and fence painting program.

They've been able to get many young people on side through projects which involve them and demonstrate a level of trust.

BURP has even set up a program whereby young local people keep watchful eyes over vacant houses during school holidays.

This has reduced vandalism rates considerably.

I could keep going on about the many projects BURP has been involved in, but to mention them all, I would run out of time.

Cris recently provided us with a list of the projects they have undertaken, there are over **80**.

BURP now has a huge range of skills and knowledge and they can teach us all a lot about community development.

We've taken them up on this.

This year, BURP has been providing community development training to key Housing Tasmania staff around the state.

They are also sharing their knowledge and skills with other community groups and public housing tenants, by forming partnerships to help them get the ball rolling.

They are also working on a national database of community projects which will be a valuable resource for groups involved in community development throughout the country.

As a result of BURP's many projects, residents now look out for each other, and are recognised for their achievements.

The projects have resulted in local people acquiring skills, meeting each other, gaining trust in each other and a sense of pride.

BURP has made a real, measurable difference to the lives of people living in Bridgewater and Gagebrook.

Real tangible outcomes are what they're known for.

Bridgewater and Gagebrook now have few houses vacant, and a waiting list of people wanting to move to the area.

Vandalism costs are down by 60%

The crime rate against property is down by 65%

Positive media stories have become the norm.

There's been a huge increase in community pride, awareness and participation.

And there are stronger links between residents and all levels of government.

Unemployment levels are still high and there is still loads of work to be done.

But nearly 800 people have gained casual employment as a result of BURP.

It's a small drop in the ocean, but like the star fish in the poem I read at the beginning, I'm sure it made a big difference to those 800 people and their families.

Supporting local communities is a key activity of Housing Tasmania.

We have community development projects underway in all of our broadacre public housing areas.

The interesting thing which has emerged is that while the problems are similar in each community, the solutions are not always the same.

A solution that works really well in one community may not work so well in another.

This is because local residents need to own the solutions.

Its no good marching in and saying “*This worked well in Bridgewater so it’ll work well here too*”.

It may not.

We need to encourage and help local communities to identify their own priorities and their solutions.

We can and must help.

But we can’t do it for them.

How do we get the ball rolling?

By using the number one rule **involvement**.

By involving people, we give them the message that we’re prepared to listen and, importantly, to trust them.

When we involve people from the start, there’s a pretty good chance they’ll soon jump into the drivers seat and take the controls.

Without involvement, there’s no ownership, limited motivation and limited success – whoever the group is.

I’d now like to hand over to the expert – Cris Fitzpatrick – public housing tenant and Manager of BURP.