



Main Street/Small Towns Program

Kurri Kurri – success story

Challenges and opportunities

Kurri Kurri is an old mining town located 145 kilometres from Sydney and 11 kilometres from the regional centre of Cessnock. Coal was discovered in the area in the 1850's and the town was laid out on Crown land at the beginning of the 1900's so that miners and their families could set up a community. There was a lot of work nearby, and within a few years Kurri Kurri had become one of the largest towns in New South Wales.

The town's fortunes changed about fifty years ago when the mines began to close. Most of the jobs in the area disappeared, although an aluminium smelter which began in the 1970's still provides local employment.

Kurri Kurri had an air of decline and little cultural life. Young people began to drift away when they could not find employment. A major challenge was to create a reason for people to stop in the area – even if they only stayed a couple of hours. Tourists often passed through on their way to the famed vineyards of the Hunter Valley, but few stopped and few spent any money.

A program for change

Kurri Kurri and the six villages around it – Abermain, Heddon Greta, Neath, Pelaw Main, Stanford Merthyr, and Weston – have a combined population of just over 14,000.

Some years ago, the Kurri Kurri Chamber of Commerce decided something had to be done to revitalise the town and its surrounding area. As part of the Main Street Small Towns Program, a 'Towns with Heart' Committee was formed for Kurri Kurri, a strategic plan was put in place, and a coordinator employed in early 2001.

Right from the start of the program there were many successes which helped pave the way for a new sense of identity in the area. A community survey was undertaken, Heritage Festivals and a Centenary Festival were held, a visitor guide was published, and a local events calendar developed.

A Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) survey was conducted for a second time in 2003, to assess the first stage of the program. It was clear that this was just the beginning, and by 2005, Stage Two of the Program was launched.

Goals

The 'Towns with Heart' program has identified three goals for Kurri Kurri:

- § bring more people into the town, even if only for a short time
- § diversify employment opportunities, particularly for people who might otherwise have difficulty finding a job
- § make sure that any events held in Kurri Kurri are special – so special that they might even attract people from interstate.

Projects

In 2002, the 'Towns with Heart' Committee decided to undertake a Mural Project as a way to showcase the area's heritage and to encourage people to visit the town. The murals would show the many and varied aspects of today's community and portray scenes from Kurri Kurri's rich history.

Initial plans were for just five murals to be painted, but these proved to be so successful that 38 murals were completed in three and a half years. There are murals not only in Kurri Kurri, but also in the surrounding villages of Abermain, Heddon Greta, Pelaw Main and Weston. A 'Mural Walking Trail Guide' has been published and volunteers trained as guides.

The Mural Project has been successful in bringing people to the area. There are now two to three Mural bus tours a week, each bringing about 50 visitors. Lunch and refreshments are part of these tours, which spread income opportunities to other businesses in the town.

The new 'Ask me I'm a Local' project builds on Kurri Kurri's successes by providing additional services for tourists. This project trains local volunteers and business people to assist visitors, and to provide information about the murals. Two visitor information centres were established in local businesses and twelve volunteers were trained to act as Mural Guides.

The need to bolster employment opportunities has always been high on the agenda for the 'Towns with Heart' Committee. Some years ago, a Call Centre was set up in the Kurri Kurri High School to train local children so that school leavers would have the equivalent of a TAFE Call Centre qualification.

The school needed funds to update the Call Centre's equipment and overall technology, and the students did not use the Call Centre facilities around the clock – they were empty after school hours and during school holidays. Commercialisation of the Call Centre would generate funds and ensure that the technology could be kept up to date. There was also a strong feeling that the Call Centre should offer some benefit to the wider community.

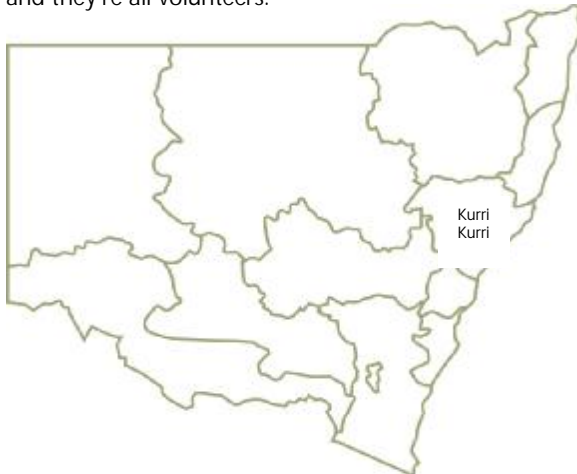
A program was put in place and the result has been outstanding by any standards. A call centre coordinator was employed by 'Towns with Heart' to spend two days a week on the project. The coordinator worked with local employment agencies to target mature-aged workers returning to the workforce, people with disabilities, and the long term unemployed for training. In just eighteen months, 97 people trained in the Call Centre have been placed in employment throughout the Hunter Valley – an astounding 87% success rate. Aptly named The Call Centre of Excellence, this project aims to continue to build on its success by training 50 to 70 people and placing them into employment each year.

How the Main Street Small Towns Program has helped

Kurri Kurri has been provided with over \$95,000 in support under the Main Street Small Towns Program and the NSW Premier's Department Community Renewal Scheme since 1999. This assistance has been toward planning activities including BRE surveys, retail rejuvenation projects, employing a coordinator, community events and promotion of the murals.

Ongoing activities

The Kurri Kurri community has thrown its support behind these activities. 'Towns with Heart' co-ordinator Wendy Franklin says that results from these programs have come quite quickly. "The support we have had has been wonderful. We have a strong sense of community here in Kurri Kurri now. Back in 2003 there were only twelve people on the committee. Now we have twenty-three. There's real strength in numbers – and they're all volunteers."



Future plans are to have a bus of tourists coming into the town every day of the week, and to be able to place 50-70 people in employment from the Call Centre per year.

It is expected that, over time, increased tourism will translate into growth in business activity around Kurri Kurri and the creation of new retail jobs.

The town has a new sense of identity, and is moving forward.

Contacts

Wendy Franklin
Kurri Kurri 'Towns with Heart' Inc.
Post Office Box 284
KURRI KURRI NSW 2327
Tel: 4936 1909
Mob: 0418 492 516
Email: wendy@kurrikurri.com

Susan Rowe
Community Economic Development Manager
Hunter and Central Coast Regions
NSW Department of State and Regional Development
Level 3
251 Wharf Road
NEWCASTLE NSW 2300
Tel: 02 4908 7341
Fax: 02 4929 7096
Mob: 0438 728 315
Email: susan.rowe@business.nsw.gov.au

Community name:	Kurri Kurri
LGA:	Cessnock
Region:	Hunter
Population:	14,000
Main industries:	Aluminium smelting, call centre service, tourism