

# Lithgow: first learning city in New South Wales



On 12 February 2001 Lithgow City Council declared Lithgow to be the first learning city in New South Wales. This innovative move was designed to re-invigorate a struggling community and to equip people with the skills needed to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

The aim of Lithgow Learning City is to develop partnerships to improve communication and co-operation, and reduce duplication; to promote lifelong learning to assist people to upgrade their skills to maintain employability, provide recreational opportunities, and to create a community that is open to change, is highly skilled, tolerant and adaptable. What makes the learning city concept in Lithgow special is the pivotal role that the local library has played in its establishment. From introducing the concept to residents, to developing specific projects, to promoting and maintaining enthusiasm in the community, library staff have led the way, and the Lithgow community is the richer for it!

## Why did Lithgow become a learning city?

During the 1990s Lithgow struggled with an economic downturn that resulted in the closure of many coal mines and the entire clothing manufacturing industry, and downsizing within ADI (owners of the Small Arms Factory), State Rail, the Road and Traffic Authority and local power stations. The community responded by organising a search conference, skills audit and women's forum, all aimed at analysing the local conditions and planning for a healthier future. The learning city concept was seen as a viable option, based on its success in mining communities in the United Kingdom, and the focus on re-skilling for tradespeople and labourers struggling with unemployment and limited future options.

## What has been achieved?

Our vision statement — *as a learning city Lithgow will be the social, economic and*

*business leader of regional New South Wales* — has articulated our goal, but we are very aware that it is a long-term project. The Learning City project is funded completely by the Lithgow City Council and is powered by the goodwill of the people involved.

## Partnerships

The Lithgow Learning City management committee, a sub-committee of council, brings together influential people from council, business, education, human services and the state government and has achieved some notable results, one of which is the Delta-TAFE training partnership. This partnership has resulted in cost-efficient training provision for Delta, a significant power producer in the region, as well as an assured revenue stream for training providers, the Western Institute of TAFE.

In the early days of the Learning City, there were many unsuccessful attempts to develop cross-sectoral partnerships by organising meetings and providing opportunities to share information. Now the focus is on developing trust, improving communication and building relationships through project work. This method has been successfully employed in projects such as Spread the Word and Books for Babies, and has resulted in better communication between government and private schools as well as increased involvement of the business sector in education and welfare programs.

Spread the Word is a community literacy program which aims to encourage people to talk to, sing to, play with and read to children from birth. It is promoted through local schools, pre-schools and childcare centres, human services groups and the local hospital. Resources to support this program include a kit containing flyers and brochures, reading lists and tips on how to read to children; a CD-ROM showing a humorous presentation of the program; as well as a logo and a costume, made to be worn for community activities, to appeal to the 'child in us all'.

Books for Babies is part of Spread the Word and involves the presentation of a book bag to all babies born at the Lithgow Hospital by maternity staff, who also talk to families about the importance of reading to their new baby. When the child reaches 18 months of age, another book bag is presented by Lithgow Centrelink when parents receive their final

payment for the completion of the immunisation program.

## Lifelong learning

Provision of resources and involvement in promoting lifelong learning within the community have become the focus for the Learning City. The Lithgow Library Learning Centre, located in a renovated supermarket building in the centre of town, houses the public library, technology centre and Learning Shop. This modern well-equipped facility is the physical symbol of the learning city concept.

Involvement in celebrations of learning such as Adult Learners Week, and the opening of the Learning Shop, which provides information on all formal and informal learning opportunities within the region, have resulted in a greater awareness within the community of the importance of lifelong learning and the variety of facilities available.

## Role of the library

The Lithgow library has been the driving force behind the Learning City and, while it has created a lot of extra work, the results have been extremely satisfying. The library had previously struggled to achieve a high profile within council and the community and, as a result, was affected by a lack of resources, poor facilities and little involvement with local organisations. The Learning City created a vehicle to showcase the contribution a library could make to its community.

Involvement in the project has led to participation in education, human services and business programs, and created opportunities to publicise current library services and develop new services and facilities for the community. Not only can the library provide detailed information on learning opportunities, but it is also becoming a site of learning through the provision of formal and informal courses, developing links with universities, and offering excellent facilities for use by the community.

Contact with local businesses and community groups has improved information sharing, created an environment of innovation and change, and firmly placed the library in the forefront of community development.

'Learning is what most adults will do for a living in the 21st century' (Bob Perelman) and the Lithgow Learning City will be well equipped to provide the services and support needed, as a direct result of the leadership provided by Lithgow library staff.

**Debbie Best, Learning City co-ordinator,  
Lithgow Library Learning Centre**



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