

Life Without Barriers

Evidence-informed Strategy

Using evidence to partner with
people and change lives for the
better

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WE

Championing opportunity for all

Introduction

The phrase ‘evidence-based’ is now well-established in the community services sector – you have probably heard it used today. It is widely understood that evidence-informed practices and programs have a significant role to play in providing better outcomes for clients, and both in Australia and abroad governments and other funding agencies increasingly require at least a proportion of the services delivered by an organisation to be based on evidence.

While it is the case that LWB already delivers several evidence-based practices and programs, we do not have a clear and consistent strategy for doing so, and nor do we have an organisation-wide evidence-based approach to practice.

As such, there are areas where we excel, and others where we have significant room for improvement. LWB is an organisation whose core purpose is to partner with people to change lives for the better – with this in mind, we need to be as certain as possible that what we do works for our clients, and that we’re doing it consistently across our entire organisation. A clearly articulated evidence-based strategy will contribute to this.

So what does this mean for LWB? We prepared for this strategy by researching the evidence-based ‘landscape’ – the standards of evidence, the benefits of an evidence-based approach and some of the barriers to getting there – and this evidence-based strategy will be our answer. You can read the research paper [here](#), however, this strategy will focus on three key questions for LWB:

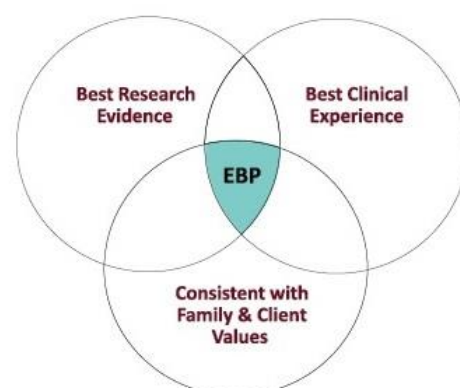
- **Why** should LWB become an evidence-informed organisation?
- **How** are we going to do it?
- **What** are we going to do?

Definitions

As suggested above, ‘evidence-based’ has become a buzzword in the community services sector over the past decade or so. It is generally understood to refer to something good and worthwhile, but as with many buzzwords it means different things to different people (and sometimes nothing at all). To ensure that we avoid this trap, we’ll start with some clear definitions that will be used throughout this strategy.

Evidence-based programs will be used to mean programs that meet a strict set of criteria, including evidence of positive outcomes from multiple peer-reviewed experiments. LWB already delivers several of these programs, such as Children and Residential Experiences (CARE) and Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) – a comprehensive list is provided in Appendix A.

Evidence-informed practice will be used to describe a more holistic approach to evidence-based service delivery that is informed and guided by research evidence but also incorporates client preference and practice wisdom. This is sometimes also referred to as ‘evidence-informed practice’ and is neatly illustrated in the diagram to the right.



EVIDENCE-INFORMED STRATEGY

Why?

At LWB, our clearly stated purpose is to partner with people and changes lives for the better. The way we go about doing this varies, but fundamentally, we want to be as sure as we can that what we do *works* for our clients. One of the best ways of ensuring this is to use the best available evidence to inform the way that we operate.

While significant gaps still exist, there have recently been many developments in the evidence base for community services practice and programs. More and more of these are being tested scientifically, with some meeting the stringent criteria required to be classified as evidence-based.

This is important for LWB as using the evidence base can show us which programs and practices provide the best chance of delivering better outcomes for our clients, changing lives for the better. As the box to the right indicates, this is firmly aligned with our values as an organisation, which alone may provide a compelling enough argument for implementing an evidence-based approach.

As an organisation that lives its values and strives to champion opportunity for all by working with people to change lives for the better, we should at every opportunity be asking ourselves if there are ways we can do things better, more efficiently and more effectively to achieve better outcomes for our clients.

Similarly, an evidence-informed approach is in line with LWB's strategic intent for 2020. Specifically, LWB has identified as a priority achieving positive outcomes for people and communities by delivering outcome-focused, client-centred community services and by inventing new ways of working to create more value in everything we do. This is, in a nutshell, the central theme of an evidence-informed approach.

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Evidence-based practice and LWB Values



Using the best available evidence to inform our practice helps us to be more **RESPONSIVE** to the needs and goals of our clients and ensure that we do things the right way every time



Finding new and better ways to work with people is at the heart of our evidence-based strategy, and we will remain **IMAGINATIVE** and open-minded toward all new ideas and ways of doing things



It is **COURAGEOUS** to question everything we do and to welcome open and transparent review of our work – this is the hallmark of an evidence-based approach



A **RESPECTFUL** relationship with our clients means that should always be doing our very best to provide people with the highest quality services we can find – our clients are worth the extra effort



Our evidence-based strategy will enhance our existing **RELATIONSHIPS** and help us work with people to realise their own goals by ensuring that evidence – including client feedback – underpins our way of working with people

EVIDENCE-INFORMED STRATEGY

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Becoming a more evidence-informed organisation is also in line with our Pillars of Practice. Of course, choosing the model that works and getting better results is the most straightforward example of this – we choose evidence-informed practice and programs precisely because they have been demonstrated to work.



But an evidence-informed approach encompasses much more than this. Better supervision of our staff to help understand *why* we do what we do, what we’re doing well and how we can do things better is key to setting the organisational scene for evidence-informed approaches. Teamwork – particularly the sharing of information, wisdom and knowledge to improve practice – is a vital component of building the kind of ‘learning culture’ that fosters and embraces an evidence-informed approach, which we’ll see as we go on.

Of course, there are also benefits for LWB as an organisation. LWB has worked hard to position itself at the cutting edge of best practice in the community services sector, and it’s increasingly becoming clear that maintaining this position will require an ongoing and committed engagement with the evidence base. An evidence-informed approach also makes LWB more attractive to funders, an advantage that will help us to increase our positive social impact through growth and diversification to reach more communities.

However, the most compelling reason for adopting an evidence-informed approach is the ethical imperative at the core of our organisation – to take every reasonable step to ensure that the services we deliver consistently offer the best possible outcomes for our clients. An evidence-informed approach to service delivery is key among these reasonable steps, and to not take it would be to risk failure at our core objective – **to partner with people and change lives for the better.**

How?

When it comes to an evidence-informed approach, organisational culture, people and processes are often more important than the programs and practices themselves. It is vital to foster and maintain an organisation-wide commitment to a culture of excellence, recruiting and retaining the right people to carry it out, and developing the processes to support it. Without these elements, even the best designed and implemented programs and practices will face significant barriers to success.

Culture

Among other things, the history of community services organisations is one of competing cultural priorities. These priorities have included running a 'successful' business model, keeping 'undesirables' out of view, maintaining the flow of funding and not embarrassing the powers that be. This kind of environment is not one in which an evidence-informed approach is likely to flourish. We need to remain focused on what should be our main priority – partnering with people to change lives for the better.

As part of LWB's evidence-informed approach we will aim to build what is often referred to as a 'learning culture'. This is an organisational culture in which all staff are motivated and supported to continue learning and improving every day. This can be supported by high quality supervision – such as that supported by Leading Practice – and continuous opportunities to share and reflect on the 'why' that underpins the everyday work that we do. One method of achieving the latter could be the expansion of Communities of Practice which have been run with great success in the areas of Out of Home Care, Disability Services and Quality Assurance.

One thing that LWB has consistently excelled at is taking a can-do, hands-on approach to problem solving and overcoming the day-to-day barriers to service delivery. We have an enviable culture of being willing to do the hard thing, working with people in the most challenging circumstances and always striving to help find real world solutions. Our strategy will be to leverage this cultural advantage to confront the barriers to implementing evidence-informed practices and programs.

People

Our people are our culture, and our culture moulds our people. LWB has an excellent record of values-based recruiting and an enviably skilled and competent workforce. We must continue to build on this and ensure that our people are always restless and never satisfied with the status quo and remain curious and open-minded. We should reward innovation and creative thinking and bring as many as we can into the evidence-informed conversation.

Training and other opportunities for capacity-building should also be made available to staff as and when possible. This helps create a climate of continuous improvement as well as building the staffing capabilities and resources within the organisation. Making sure the right people are in the right positions and have opportunities to develop skills, be exposed to best practice and research and to the positive impact that improving practice makes is key to our evidence-informed strategy.

An additional benefit of this is that it makes working at LWB more rewarding for everyone – a shared sense of purpose, career development and opportunities for growth add to the already worthwhile work we all do. Recent research has also indicated that community welfare staff who are supported to increase their capacity and competency and deliver evidence-informed practices suffer less workplace stress and are more likely to stay in their roles. As well as being good for our

people, our evidence-informed approach may help us address the traditionally high workforce turnover in our sector.

Processes

As LWB continues to grow, there is an increasing need for organisation-wide processes to support the adoption of evidence-informed practices and programs, and to avoid duplication of effort. These will include standardised capability assessments to ensure that our services continue to be delivered to the high standards that our clients deserve, and clear decision points to ensure efficiency and support throughout the selection and adoption process. Moreover, we will be in a position to be more agile and responsive in our adoption of evidence-informed practices and programs with a clear supporting process in place and a nationally consistent decision-making rubric.

One area where we have significant room for improvement is learning from the extensive data that we collect through our various systems to improve practice. We must introduce more system and clarity to our interpretation and use of the data that we gather as part of our day-to-day operations. Creating systems and processes that support the use of our data to inform practice decisions, and integrating them into the fabric of daily operations, are key steps to building and maintain a learning practice culture at LWB. The Outcomes Reporting Suite is an example of an imaginative and responsive approach to data use that we have undertaken recently.

What?

As defined earlier, there are two distinct concepts in the evidence-informed landscape – evidence-based programs and evidence-informed practice. LWB is interested in both of these and each will require distinct process and support mechanisms to help us achieve our aim of becoming an evidence-informed organisation.

Evidence-based programs

LWB will commit itself to exploring all options for taking on ‘gold standard’ evidence-based programs, as these have the best scientific basis for success. However, implementing these programs is not always possible – conclusive research evidence in our area is still hard to come by, and we will need to keep an open mind to programs that might not meet the strict criteria but still show promising outcomes. It is better, for example, to take on a program with some evidence of effectiveness than to do nothing at all.

Another issue is that evidence-based programs typically have to be delivered to a very strict set of protocols – often unable to be adapted for local needs – for them to work. It is often remarked that delivering a compromised version of an evidence-based program does not deliver a compromised proportion of the positive effects – rather, it delivers none at all. This presents a challenge for LWB as we are a large and geographically diverse organisation, but we have seen with programs such as CARE that it is not impossible to overcome, provided we accept the difficulties and proceed with patience and rigour.

It needs to be remembered that evidence-based programs require an intensive supporting structure from beginning to end. This includes everything from financial outlay – evidence-based programs are generally patented products sold or licensed at significant cost, and require ongoing training and accreditation processes – to organisational oversight and governance that includes the Executive and the Practice Committee.

Given these complexities, the decision to take on an evidence-based program should always reside at the Executive level. A formal submission to the Executive, via the National Practice and Quality team, must be made before adopting any new evidence-based program.

The Executive will ensure that all programs are assessed against the following criteria:

- 'Fit' with LWB values and current service delivery approaches
- The underlying theoretical basis of the program
- Whether the program has a program logic and explicit theory of change
- Level of research evidence available and/or current research that is being conducted
- Implementation costs and accessibility of training and implementation support

Evidence-informed practice

Examples of evidence-informed practices currently in use at LWB include the Person-Centred Approach and We Put Children First – a more comprehensive list is provided in Appendix B. Remembering the definition at the beginning of this paper, evidence-informed practices are those that are informed by research and other evidence but don't necessarily have a strictly defined set of protocols that need to be observed – rather, the evidence is used in conjunction with practice wisdom, client preferences and other considerations.

As such, evidence-informed practices require less stringent oversight and can often be incorporated into existing models and services. In many cases, this may be preferable for a variety of reasons – for example, we can incorporate the extensive and diverse practice wisdom of LWB staff to complement research evidence rather than overbearingly prescriptive measures being taken. However, it is very important that what counts as good evidence is understood – many people claim their program or practice is based on evidence, but this is not always the case. For more information on this we strongly recommend reading the supporting [research paper](#).

Additionally, oversight and assessment process for evidence-informed practice will still need to be in place. These may take the form of 'self-assessment' processes that ensure certain criteria are being met, or through more formal processes such as site visits from State or National Practice Leaders.

Regardless of the process, documenting, measuring and evaluating what we do at LWB will be critical to our success as an evidence-informed organisation. To allow this, every model, practice and program should at a minimum have a program logic, outcome measures and evaluation processes that work with each other to maintain and bolster our service delivery to achieve better outcomes for clients.

These activities must become fundamental to everything service we deliver as they provide the most efficient and effective way to ensure that we're doing the right thing, the right way, every time. Fundamentally, we need to be as sure as we can that what we do, works, and ongoing evaluation against clear outcome measures and a well-defined program logic is crucial to this.



Research and Evaluation

Due to our national presence and variety of services, practices and programs, LWB is uniquely placed to contribute to the evidence base both in Australia and worldwide. However, we do not have the capacity to undertake experimental research on our own – we will need to work in partnership with professional researchers with the relevant training and expertise.

Additionally, LWB must always undertake any research in partnership with organisations that have established human research ethics committees, such as universities or dedicated research institutions. We must also ensure that any participants have provided written, informed consent, with any barriers to providing informed consent – such as those for children, the developmentally disabled or the mentally ill – taken into account.

In line with both LWB's values and externally accepted guidelines, any proposed research that involves our clients should possess demonstrable benefits to the participants, or at the very least to those in similar circumstances. As examples, we should in principle support research that is designed to evaluate one of our services and improve its design for clients, but not research that serves primarily to obtain statistics for a PhD on an unrelated topic.

With these considerations in mind, we should seize the opportunity to develop the evidence base for community service practice and programs wherever appropriate.

Conclusion

LWB's purpose is to partner with people to transform lives for the better. An evidence-informed strategy will help us make sure that the work we're doing is leaving a lasting, positive impact.

By creating a learning culture that's characterised by a constant desire to improve what we do – and expand what we know – we can all start taking bigger steps towards making this strategy come to life.

We'll provide the development necessary for our people to understand why this new approach is one worth embracing, and why it's worth sticking around for. And by putting the right processes in place, adapting the organisation on a fundamental level will be as seamless as possible.

Introducing evidence-based programs will take time, and effort. But if we put them into place properly, they could lead to some truly positive outcomes – and plenty of useful, in-depth research.

Evidence-informed practices can lead to outcomes and evidence that are just as significant. Because they require less stringent protocols, it's up to us to adopt them as part of how we do things – and make sure we use them properly. And our research and evaluation will require the same attention to detail, so that any work being done has the best interests of our clients in mind.

Adopting an evidence-informed strategy at LWB is a big step forward, and it won't happen overnight. But if we get all of our people on board, and put the right processes in place, we'll be in a better position than ever to benefit our staff, our organisation as a whole – and most importantly, the people who we're partnering with to transform lives for the better.

Appendices

Appendix A: Evidence Based Programs at LWB

Program	Location/s	Evidence Base	Evidence Rating Agencies	Program Logic?
Youth Advocate Program	NSW	Positive outcomes in quasi-experimental studies (pre-post test designs and existing comparison groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AEC: 'Promising Practice' 	Yes
Cognitive Self-Change	TAS	RCTs	None	Yes
Multi-Systemic Therapy	WA	Extensive, including RCTs and Systematic Reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPN: 'Proven' CEBC: 'Well-supported' AEC: 'Model Plus' CEBP: 'Social Program That Works' 	Yes
CARE	NSW	Quasi-experimental studies, RCT underway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AEC: 'Promising Practice' 	Yes, external
Parents Under Pressure	QLD	Quasi-experimental studies, RCTs	None	No
Abecedarian approach	NT (Lajamanu)	RCT and longitudinal study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PPN: 'Proven' CEBP: 'Social Program That Works' 	No
Therapeutic Crisis Intervention	National	RCTs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CEBC: 'Not able to be rated' 	Yes
Reparative Parenting		Quasi-experimental design	None	No
HIPPY	QLD	Quasi-experimental design	None	No

Key:

- AEC = Annie E. Casey Foundation
- PPN = Promising Practices Network
- CEBC = California Evidence Based Clearing House for Child Welfare
- CEBP = Centre for Evidence Based Practice

Appendix B: Evidence Informed Practices at LWB

Program	Location/s	Evidence Base	Program Logic?
Pillars of Practice	National	Draws on research into management and supervision	No
Recovery Model (Mental Health)	National	Draws on extensive research in Psychology	No
We Put Children First	National	Draws on evidence from situational prevention of child abuse research (cf: Stephen Smallbone, 2006)	No
Leading Practice	National	Internal evaluation with rigorous design underway	Yes
Signs of Safety	QLD and WA	Qualitative studies at various sites, ongoing independent research study	Yes
REACH	NSW	Undertaken in partnership with UWS	No
Sing, Learn and Grow	NSW	Research ongoing, promising initial results	Yes
Person-centred Approach	National	Supported by multiple peer-reviewed papers	No
Positive Behaviour Support Plans	National	Well-supported by observational research	No
Risk Framework	National	Based on international best practice in Risk Management	No
Community Engagement Strategy	National	Draws on best-practice guides in community engagement such as IAP2 framework	N/A
Family Finding	NSW	Research ongoing – model developed by leading researcher in field	Yes
Cultural Support Planning	National	Based on research into outcomes for children who maintain connection to culture	No
Outcomes Reporting	National	Based on research into which data indicators correlate with positive outcomes	No