



East Corrimal's Angela Forrest (above) and Kiama's Maryann Conway (left) are members of LETS, or Local Energy Trading System. Pictures: SYLVIA LIBER/HANK van STUIVENBERG

It's smarter to barter TRADING STATIONS

A group that allows people to buy and sell goods and services without having to spend 'real' money is attracting more members in the region, and throughout Australia, says GLEN HUMPHRIES.

IMAGINE BEING ABLE TO GET something you really needed and not have to pay a cent for it - or even being able to make your own money.

In today's troubled economic climate that would surely sound very attractive to many - and might also seem a fantasy.

But it can really be done - you just have to get involved in a Local Energy Trading System (LETS). Part of what has become dubbed as the "freeconomy", LETS members swap goods and services with each other or using that group's currency to "purchase" what they want.

The name of that currency varies from group to group. In Wollongong, which is part of Sydney and Illawarra LETS, the

currency is known as operas. Rather than being physical currency you can hold in your hand, these operas only really exist in a central "bank", which keeps records of all buying and selling. Unlike real money, you can create more any time you need it. If your balance is at zero and you want to buy something from a member for 40 operas, well, you just buy it and notify the bank which then changes your account to -40 operas. What you just did was essentially create your own money.

The concept of LETS started in Canada in 1983. A few years later an Australian social worker went over to see how it all worked. She liked what she saw and came home to set up the first LETS in Australia, at Maleny.

Today there are close to 50 LETS groups Australia wide. Wollongong formed in 1992 and merged with Sydney a few years ago.

"At one stage of the game they were very active here," says acting Illawarra co-ordinator Jim Guerin.

"They started up about 15 years ago and took off quite well apparently. At one stage they had something like 150 members, so the legend goes. By the time I joined, people had dropped out and there was a bit of a downward spiral but things are picking up again now.

"It does sound like a bit of an old-fashioned thing but I think it's coming back now that things are a bit tight money-wise. It has started to go up at the present time and there's no reason to think that it won't continue to go up."

Guerin joined about six years ago at the tail-end of his working career as a washing machine and dryer repairman as a way to keep involved in the community.

"I always said when I retired I wanted to do something in the community. I'm still catching up on the odd jobs at home - another two years I might be caught up with them and able to spend a bit more time getting into the trading," he jokes.

"I like it because it feels like I'm doing something worthwhile in retirement. The people who I work with appreciate what you're doing for them, so that's great."

Meanwhile, the material things Guerin has acquired through trades of purchases is pretty impressive. They include holiday accommodation on the Sunshine Coast, a pushbike, original paintings, motor vehicle service, free-range eggs, books, CDs, clothes, a cordless drill and designer jewellery.

"It depends on how many members you have," he says. "The more members you have the more things that are available. If someone's a good gardener or has got chooks you can buy eggs and vegetables."

"I've been picking up a lot of things for my granddaughter lately. I've had an ad running on the (LETS) website, asking for kids clothes, shoes and toys. I've been getting quite a few replies.

"My kids are all in their 30s so there's no toys and things left around the house. So when the grandchildren come to visit I've got toys for them to play with and, hopefully I save them a few dollars by supplying them with some clothes and shoes."

When making a purchase, the buyer and seller agree on a price much like a garage sale. But there's a different price structure for someone carrying out a service - in that case the going rate is 20 operas an hour, regardless of the activity. The philosophy behind that is simple; it doesn't matter whether you're a rocket scientist or a knitter - everyone's time is of equal value.

But what services can someone offer fellow LETS members?

"Everybody can do something that other people can't do but some things are more marketable than others," Guerin admits.

"The things that work best are the things that happen on a regular basis - like lawnmowing or hairdressing, things like that. Say you've got an ex-hairdresser who had some kids, she'd be pretty well swamped with replies from people who

want her to do their hair. Hopefully, then she could use her Operas to buy clothes, toys, shoes back for the kids."

For Sydney-Illawarra LETS co-chair Eve Lichtnauer, the main benefits of the concept aren't material - they're social and environmental.

"I think it strengthens the community, both in values and relationships," Lichtnauer says. "What I see is people who didn't know each other before but are now developing relationships."

"We're just starting up the M&Ms group which is Mothers and Minders. There are lots of mothers out there who are members of LETS who are quite housebound because of their children."

"I thought, 'Wouldn't it be good if those people could get together and trade things like toys, clothes and books? All those things that have a short lifespan."

"Potentially people could also be giving each other a break. 'You go out and do what you want to do and I'll look after the kids'. That could be really important for someone who is at home with kids all day."

"LETS also promotes self-sufficiency and supports sustainability. If we can prevent things from going to landfill, then that's terrific. At trading days I see things like kids clothes and there's nothing wrong with them. They can go to someone else and they've got a new life."

Lichtnauer found LETS by accident, stumbling across the group while looking online for mah-jong lessons. A member was offering lessons, so she joined up.

Today, online is how the bulk of trading is done in the Sydney and Illawarra group. Members visit the website and look through the online classifieds and see what's available or place an ad for their own goods or services. This has led to the downplaying of the trading days - where people would all bring their goods to a central place, much like a communal members-only garage sale. In Sydney and Wollongong trading days happen quarterly.

But Lichtnauer says the ways LETS is used are more diverse than just a place to buy stuff.

"Centrelink offices in remote parts of Western Australia have encouraged the use of LETS to keep people's skills updated and

current and to keep people confident about what they know," she says.

"Schools have used it to fill canteen rosters. New immigrants needing furniture have used it too. And there's been gangs of gardeners going around cleaning up people's gardens."

"A single mum travelled with her daughter for six weeks through NSW and Victoria. These things have been made possible because people think out of the box, they think, 'this is what I want, what I need, how are we going to do it?'"

In the wake of the financial crisis, the group - which has more than 500 members - has been signing up new people at the rate of five a week. While it can't be said for sure that the crisis is responsible for the rise in memberships, it's probably more likely than not.

"I think the crisis will move people to make change and that change is going to include a whole range of things," Lichtnauer says.

"How can I live differently? How can I use less? How can I use what I've got, move it around and benefit from it?"

"I think you will see people wanting to do things in a different way and I think this is one of those different ways."

"I also think the younger generation are getting the message about things like global warming and are asking 'what can I do to make a difference?'"

East Corrimal's Angela Forrest joined Sydney and Illawarra LETS just over a year ago because, as an artist, she had found work difficult to sell because of the crisis.

"So I was happy to join a cashless group". She's already seen a benefit of LETS, having saved money by buying several items she needed with operas rather than the cash of the real world.

Forrest says she's been offering music tuition, babysitting, ironing and other domestic duties through the LETS site.

She adds that it's not as hard as people might think to come up with something they can do to earn a few operas.

"That's where their website helps you - it's got a great list of prompts," she says.

"It really informs you and gives you lots of ideas. I tried to get my neighbour into it - she said 'oh what can I do?'. She's got a lot of time on her hands but she's not necessarily skills-based. I told her, 'well, you could do anything'. She already does dog-sitting, so she could do that. She could pick up children or walk them home from

school. There are just so many things you can do. It's just a matter of looking outside what your nine-to-five life is."

Maryann Conway has been part of various LETS groups - first Kiama, which merged with Illawarra and now the Sydney group after the more recent merger. She joined because she was on a pension and saw it as a way to supplement her income.

The range of goods and services she's sold through LETS includes handmade designer one-off bags, earrings, cards, cushions, baby sheet sets, children's clothes and cakes and pastries.

And on the debit side? "I've bought antique furniture, paintings that were worth \$200-300, scarves, hats and lots of other things I couldn't have afforded to buy with cash," she says. "I've also had arts and craft lessons, because I'm an artist, so I've had my skills updated by learning other skills to help me with my art."

A great believer in the power of LETS, Conway sees ways the system can help in the wake of the financial crisis.

"It helps create a sense of self-worth," she says. "People think because they haven't got a job or because they're too old that they're useless. But everyone can contribute in LETS."

"The self-worth is really the main asset with LETS. Your worth as a person is the same regardless of how many degrees or qualifications you have, it's really about what you can provide for another person."

"It will really help people who may have lost their jobs, have bills mounting up and they realise they can't afford certain things anymore. In LETS there's a wide range of things they can buy, and they don't have to pay in cash."

For more information on Sydney and Illawarra LETS, visit www.auslets.org/sydney.

LETS also promotes self-sufficiency and supports sustainability.



Eve Lichtnauer gets some tools in a trade with James Hardie at a trading day in Sydney.