Welcome to the newsletter on the Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004. This newsletter, a joint initiative of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), will keep you informed about the national evaluation of the Australian Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004.

What’s the national evaluation about?

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy provided funding for prevention and early intervention programs for families and communities, particularly those at risk of social, economic and geographic isolation.


This first newsletter is being sent to all projects receiving funding under the 2000-2004 and the new Strategy, and to other interested people and organisations. The next issue will include summaries of findings from progress reports.

The national evaluation is looking at how the various parts of the 2000-2004 Strategy have worked (what has worked well and what might be improved) and what this has meant for families and communities.

What projects is the national evaluation looking at?

The national evaluation is being conducted from 2002-2005. It will not evaluate individual projects and information about specific projects will not be used in decisions about future funding for individual projects or organisations.

The evaluation is looking particularly at projects funded under these initiatives:

- The Stronger Families Fund;
- Early Childhood;
- Potential Leaders in Local Communities;
- Local Solutions to Local Problems; and
- Early Intervention, Parenting and Family Relationship Support.

We will be collecting data from all projects funded under these initiatives and doing some case studies of particular projects (with the agreement of projects), and studies of clusters of projects (using available data). The evaluation will also
look at the overall implementation of the Strategy, and outcomes from the other initiatives:

- Longitudinal Study of Australian Children;
- International Year of the Volunteer;
- National Skills Development for Volunteers Program; and
- Can Do Community.

**Who is doing this evaluation?**

CIRCLE (the Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation) at RMIT University (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) is leading the evaluation team.

The evaluation team also involves two other universities – Curtin University and the University of Technology Sydney – and two consulting firms, Bearing Point and Performance Improvement, together with specialist researchers.

Some of the people working on the evaluation are:

**CIRCLE, RMIT University**
- Dr Patricia Rogers (Project Director)
- Assoc. Professor Gerald Elsworth
- Ms Sue Kimberley
- Mrs Roslyn Humble
- Professor Gay Edgecombe
- Ms Zena Helman
- Dr Riki Savaya
- Mr Darrell Myers

**Bearing Point**
- Mr Peter Tyler
- Mr John Pilla,
- Ms Jenni Leigh

**Performance Improvement**
- Ms Sue Funnell

**Curtin University**
- Mr John Scougall

**University of Technology Sydney**
- Professor Lesley Barclay

**What does this mean for projects?**

We will be collecting data from each funded project through two questionnaires.

The first questionnaire covers the initial period from the idea for the project, through its development, the proposal for Strategy funding and the signing of the contract. It will take between 20 and 30 minutes to complete. The first questionnaire asks about the project and the organisation.

We are interested in responses to questions like:

- How did you find out about the Strategy?
- How much community involvement has there been?
- What helped and hindered the development and setting up of the project?

The second questionnaire will be sent to projects when the final report is due, so we can learn about the implementation and conduct of the project.

This questionnaire asks about the project and the organisation.

We are interested in responses to questions like:

- What sort of activities did you do during the project?
- Did you get involved in partnerships with other groups and organisations?
What changes happened as a result of the project?
What do you think will happen next?

**What’s in it for projects?**

Completion of the initial and final evaluation questionnaires can serve many purposes for projects.

Projects may find some of the questions and answers from these questionnaires useful for reflecting on their work or to help with their own project evaluation.

The questionnaires provide projects with a structured opportunity to:

- reflect on and recognise achievements;
- learn from experience and share learning with others;
- think about future developments;
- celebrate achievements within the participants, staff, etc; and
- announce achievements to those outside the project.

Participation by projects in the national evaluation is also a condition of funding.

**Projects funded under the Strategy**

Future issues of the newsletter will provide more information about the types of projects that are being funded, and the findings emerging from the evaluation.


**Some advice from complete projects**

Completed projects have provided useful advice to other projects through the national evaluation questionnaires. Many projects have advised others to pay attention to community consultation and commitment to the project.

- Ensure you have the commitment of all stakeholders.
Gain formal and specific commitment.

Have full support from your community and its Council.

Once the community is engaged – don’t let that contact slip.

Ensure that this is truly what community groups want, as this requires lots of work and participation.

Others have pointed to the importance of adequate planning.

Build on previous projects.

Read up on Action Research literature before designing the project.

Thorough project planning. Plan your strategy.

Provide a Draft submission for review.

Research what you want and what you need.

Do your research to make sure there is a need.

More detail about the national evaluation

Details of the national evaluation can be found on the web at:


Further reading and resources on project evaluation

Books

There are many books on evaluation. Some of the ones that projects often find most helpful are:


Discusses ways of building evaluation into service delivery and regular review processes, and two necessary types of evaluation: Audit review – did it achieve its objectives? Did it follow the specified procedures? Open inquiry – what else happened? What other issues emerged?


Lengthy book covering many issues in evaluation, including combining qualitative data (words and pictures) and quantitative data (numbers), focusing evaluation on meeting the information needs of the intended audience, and options for reporting.

Websites


The Stronger Families Learning Exchange has an extensive list of online resources in the area of action research.

www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm

Basic Guide to Program Evaluation by Carter McNamara. Discusses advantages and disadvantages of various data collection and analysis methods, and has links to other useful sites.

www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf

The Kellogg Foundation (USA) has an 116 page online evaluation guide that can be downloaded for free.

Contact us

For feedback about this newsletter, or to suggest some material to include in the next issue (or an example of a project evaluation that you would be willing to share), please contact the national evaluation Project Director, Patricia Rogers, at Patricia.Rogers@rmit.edu.au or phone 03 9925 2854.

To be added to, or removed from the newsletter mailing list, please contact Julie Elliott at julie.c.elliott@facs.gov.au or phone 02 6212 9450.