



Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004

1



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.

Further information on the 2000-2004 Strategy is available on the FaCS website at www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-sfcs2000-2004.htm

Information on the new Strategy (2004-2008) is available at: www.facs.gov.au/sfcs

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, BearingPoint 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:

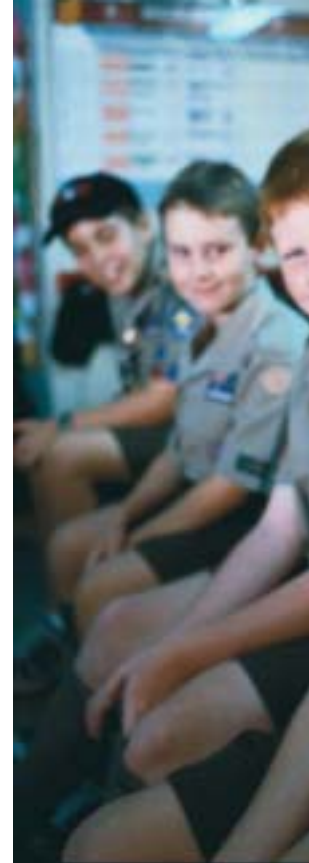
- ▶ How did you find out about the Strategy?
- ▶ How much community involvement has there been?
- ▶ What helped and hindered the development and setting up of the project?

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 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.

How does this relate to project evaluations and performance indicators?

Many projects, especially large projects, are being evaluated in their own right and separately from the national evaluation.

The national evaluation will make use of the findings from these evaluations to add to the evidence base, to identify specific issues that should be investigated in the national evaluation, and to inform the development of data collection and analysis for evaluating the Strategy as a whole.

Some of these evaluations have considerable resourcing and have

already developed a locally appropriate design. Projects funded under the Stronger Families Fund are receiving support from the Action Research Training and Support Team from the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Other project evaluations have smaller evaluation budgets and will largely focus on data collection and analysis.

The national evaluation provides a framework that projects may choose to use to guide this data collection and analysis. This framework, based on a method called program theory, will be discussed in the next newsletter.

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.

A list of projects funded under the 2000-2004 Strategy can be found at: www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-projects.htm

Some case studies of projects can be found at:

www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-casestudies.htm

Information about Stronger Families Fund projects can be found at:

www.aifs.gov.au/sf/index.html

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:

www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-evaluation.htm

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:

Wadsworth, Y. (1997) **Everyday Evaluation on the Run** (2nd edition) Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

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?

Patton, M (1999) **Utilization-Focused Evaluation** (3rd edition) Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

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

www.aifs.gov.au/sf/actionresearch.html
The Stronger Families Learning Exchange has an extensive list of online resources in the area of action research.

www.mapnp.org/library/evaluation/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.

