Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000–2004

This newsletter is a joint initiative of the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University.


This issue presents a summary of the key findings and learnings from the evaluation, drawn from the Final Report and other reports produced during the evaluation.

**Thank You!**

First of all, a big thank you to Strategy projects for their time and effort in responding to the initial and final evaluation questionnaires, and to Department Officers for their assistance. By the end of data collection in May 2005, 451 of the 635 projects had provided Initial Questionnaires (71%) and 429 projects Final Questionnaires (68%).

These questionnaires were important sources of both quantitative and qualitative information. They were used together with project reports (final and progress reports), the FaCSIA Strategy database, site visits for case studies, and research and policy literature to prepare the Final Report and other evaluation reports.
Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000–2004

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000–2004 ("the Strategy") was an Australian Government initiative to help build family and community capacity to deal with challenges and take advantage of opportunities, with a special focus on those at risk of social, economic and geographic isolation. The Strategy was developed and managed by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (then the Department of Family and Community Services).

The overall budget allocation for the Strategy 2000–2004 was $225 million. Nearly $80 million was allocated to 635 projects funded under the seven community-based initiatives. The Strategy 2000–2004 formally ended in 2004, although a number of projects funded under the Strategy were not expected to finish until 2005 or 2006.

Components of the Strategy

The Strategy consisted of seven community-based linked initiatives, that provided funding and support for projects in the community, and six broader initiatives.

Four community based linked initiatives focused on strengthening communities:
- Potential Leaders in Local Communities
- Local Solutions to Local Problems
- National Skills Development for Volunteers
- Can Do Community.

Three community based linked initiatives focused on strengthening families:
- Early Intervention
- Stronger Families Fund
- Early Childhood – Strategy.

The six broader initiatives of the Strategy were:
- The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
- National Skills Development of Volunteers (non-linked project component including International Year of Volunteers activities in 2001)
- Greater Flexibility and Choice of Childcare
- National Early Childhood Agenda Initiatives
- Can Do community – (non-linked project component) including web page and awards
- Volunteer Small Equipment Grants.

The evaluation of the Strategy 2000–2004

The evaluation focused on the 635 projects funded through the seven community-based linked initiatives. It was designed to investigate the overall achievements of the Strategy in strengthening families and communities (including any negative impacts and other costs incurred), the factors that contributed to these impacts, and the main learnings for future policy and practice.

A diverse range of quantitative and qualitative evidence about the implementation and outcomes of projects and the overall Strategy was used, including project progress reports, final reports, evaluation reports, standardised questionnaires from projects, project documentation and case studies of some projects using field visits and interviews. These were analysed using a range of methods ranging from content analysis to multiple regression.

Reports produced as part of the evaluation can be accessed at:
Achievements of Strategy projects

This evaluation has shown that the overall model adopted for the Strategy 2000–2004 can work. There was evidence that it could achieve short-term to medium-term outcomes for individuals and families that participate in projects, provided the projects are able to effectively implement the principles of the Strategy and are well supported by their auspice and others.

Almost all projects made some visible contribution during the funding period that increased the capacity of families and communities to overcome difficulties and make the most of opportunities. Projects built human, social, economic and institutional capital.

The legacy of the Strategy is the potential for longer-term impacts for participants and the broader community, as further activities build on the foundation established by the Strategy.

The Strategy and the Department placed trust in communities and took risks in doing so. The Department took action to reduce the risks by providing support to funded organisations in various ways. On the whole, taking risks and supporting communities have reaped rewards. We have learnt that this is a model for working with communities that can be effective.

A common outcomes framework

While the projects funded under the Strategy were very diverse, they all aimed to contribute to stronger families and/or stronger communities. The way in which Strategy projects contributed to creating stronger families and communities can be understood in terms of a causal pathway from immediate outcomes through a series of intermediate outcomes to long-term outcomes.

This common causal pathway is referred to as an ‘outcomes hierarchy’ – because there is a causal sequence from lower levels to higher levels.

An outcomes hierarchy was developed in the early stages of the Strategy, and subsequently used to develop performance indicators for all projects, and to provide a common framework for the evaluation.

This outcomes hierarchy consisted of seven levels of outcomes, from initial participation (level 1) to stronger families and communities (level 7).

The diagram of the outcomes hierarchy, shown on the following page, shows the 7 levels from this outcomes hierarchy.

Initial participation and the development of trust (level 1) contributes to increased awareness (level 2), and then to development of skills (level 3), and to the application of these skills (level 4), which in turn contributes to increased family and community trust, resilience and adaptability (level 5), and an environment of sustained self-determination (level 6).

This chain of outcomes, repeated several times as families and communities work together to make the most of opportunities and to address challenges, contributes to maintaining and improving individual and collective well-being and stronger families and communities (level 7). This is the end result of strengthening families and communities.

The diagram emphasises the iterative nature of the processes involved in strengthening families and communities. The outcomes hierarchy is not a linear process of moving simply from level 1 through the various levels to level 7, but one with feedback loops where early successes lead to increased engagement and opportunities. Increasing capacity has the potential to amplify benefits over time by continuing to improve wellbeing, and continuing to develop the different forms of capital, which in turn improve wellbeing and so on, creating a positive feedback loop.
Figure one: A common framework for outcomes from Strategy projects

There are also ways in which achievements of the lower levels in the outcomes hierarchy can directly contribute to improved well-being (the white arrows) – for example where participation in project activities involves better nutrition or health screening, which leads to improved physical wellbeing.

The diagram also expands the original 7 levels of outcomes to show the importance of both building capacity, and opportunities to apply this capacity – an issue that became evident during the evaluation.

In terms of the common framework, most projects had evidence of achievements at the initial levels of outcomes – participation and enhanced trust, greater awareness, and greater choice, skills, understanding and capacity for initiative. About half the projects demonstrated application of this increased capacity and the development of increased resilience and an environment of sustained self-determination.

Some projects made a visible contribution to improved wellbeing (the final level) during the life of the project – for example, increasing physical or mental health, reducing violence, or increasing wellbeing for at least some participants.
Twenty per cent of projects described ways in which they had directly contributed to improvements in the various domains of strong families and communities during the life of the project. This does not mean that 80 per cent of projects were unsuccessful – in many cases there is a long lead-time before these outcomes are achieved, and before they are evident at the population level. It does mean that the overall impact of the Strategy 2000–2004 will only be evident over time.

Example one: Achievements of a community leadership project described in terms of the common outcomes framework

This project aimed to develop young future community leaders and to stem the drain of youth from the regions. It involved active engagement in real life project-based work within a business or organisation, receiving on-the-job training, working as part of a management team, working as part of or observing a Board of Management, working to timelines and contributing to learning about the community. This project established the program in key regional centres.

1. Participation and enhanced trust: The project reported high rates of participation by youths and community organisations and increasing diversity amongst participants over the life of the project.

2. Greater awareness: Partnerships were developed with a diverse range of community organisations with which youths could work on their projects. Several different types of partnerships were established and the project reported on what the various partners ‘brought to the table’ i.e. the roles they played and how they contributed, sponsorship etc.

3. Greater choice, understanding, skills, capacity for initiative: Youths developed skills on the job e.g. for the production of a youth radio program, radio managers trained youths in the use of equipment, how to conduct interviews, how to do an advertisement and plan a music program. Businesses gave positive feedback about the leadership skills of youths. Youths themselves gave positive feedback about their acquisition of confidence, organisational and time management skills.

4. Demonstrate/apply greater understanding, skills, capacity: Youths applied their skills in an action learning context on such projects as running a fashion show, a local bands concert and youth radio program. There were some examples of how the project has encouraged youth to stay in the community through clarifying their career path choices.

5. Family and community trust/resilience/adaptability: The newspaper that youths produced enabled them to present themselves positively and their writing was helping to break down barriers with the older generation. Some specific examples were provided of breaking down generational, socio-economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural barriers. There was some evidence of adults being more prepared to have youth involved in decision-making.

6. Environment where communities participate in and drive their own solutions: Youths directed and ran all aspects of a Youth Summit that led to multiple outcomes e.g. a project to do a feasibility study on a youth concession card, the formation of a National Youth Advisory Board; one site ran a National Film Festival; each site agreed to run a youth summit in their respective area, to collate results and present at a combined summit to community / business leaders and politicians.

7. Stronger families and communities – improved wellbeing: Some examples were provided of youth receiving payments for the work they were doing on projects. The fact that some youth had elected to stay in the areas as a result of their experience may strengthen these communities in the future or help to arrest their decline.
Example two: Achievements of a capacity building project described in terms of the outcomes hierarchy

This project mapped existing community assets and strengths, conducted community visioning and planning sessions and developed strategies for mobilising these assets and strengths to achieve the community’s vision to be stronger. The project used (and trialled) a methodology that drew on research from the USA, which had not been used in Australia before.

1. Participation and enhanced trust: Attendance rates at steering committee meetings were consistently good. Diversity of membership of the steering committee enabled the project to tap into many networks to distribute information and encourage participation.

2. Greater awareness, partnership development: Greater awareness resulted from the asset identification process (social and institutional, human, economic and physical assets). Informal and formal collaborative working relationships were developed between agencies, businesses and community members.

3. Greater choice, understanding, skills, capacity for initiative: Greater choice had arisen through the documentation of community assets as a ‘people bank’ which became available as a community resource. There was some evidence of skills development through the project e.g. people who spoke very little at initial meetings due to their comfort levels began to undertake presentations on behalf of the project to complete strangers.

4. Demonstrate/apply greater understanding, skills, capacity: Asset information was used to identify ‘asset mobilisation projects’. The information was also used to provide useful assistance and advice to the community. For example the project had improved relationships with the main shopping centre and provided it with information about people’s ideas about how it should be developed. The Centre had acted on some of these ideas.

5. Family and community trust/resilience/adaptability: Improved civic pride was developed through a range of strategies. These included working with local media to encourage positive reporting, profiling residents that were doing great things, developing a hall of fame of successful people that grew up in the area, bumper stickers and promoting the project outside the area.

6. Environment where communities participate in and drive their own solutions: The community mobilised assets that had been identified to achieve the vision and identified funding sources for asset mobilisation. Examples of asset mobilisation projects include: community forums, school holiday pass, a community calendar, Community Spring Clean, Parks and Recreational facilities improvement projects, busking and other community events. These projects were either planned, underway or completed during the life of the project. A marketing strategy for the community was also developed.

7. Stronger families and communities – improved wellbeing: The project did not report evidence of this during the lifetime of the project. This was expected to occur through the asset mobilisation projects and continuing identification of further assets and strengthening of networks and partnerships to serve the community.
Examples of outcomes achieved by different projects

**Examples of outcomes at Level 1**

- **Participation and enhanced trust**
  
The community were engaged and involved in identifying core historical themes and images for presentation in the mural. Community project team participated in the planning and implementation of the project.
  
  There has been an increased level of interaction between communities.

  Families participated in the planning of the project at each stage and assisted in identifying activities that would attract the engagement of other families.

  Attendance grows every week with a need to establish a 2nd group to meet demand, over 80 people attending two groups.

**Examples of outcomes at Level 2**

- **Greater awareness**
  
The younger people now have a greater appreciation of their culture and what it means to be a custodian for those regions.

  Many community members vocalised that they were unaware of many of the existing services until [the project] brought them together, establishing a local database of services and organisations for community access.

  Schools have become more aware of community services in the area and also contact staff from the project to gain better insight to problem solving and other services that may assist a family within a school.

  The men were more conscious of the need to support the women in their efforts to improve social and health outcomes in their communities. Also of the need to be better role models for the boys.

**Examples of outcomes at level 3**

- **Greater choice, understanding, skills and capacity**
  
The community had a willingness to acknowledge that there was a problem in the community and systematically sought out an agency they thought could help them overcome the suicides within the community.

  Higher self-esteem and leadership skills have led to greater confidence in group/community situations.

  Learned to value the importance of play for children, choosing age appropriate toys, accessing playgroups and learning effective parenting skills.

  Local early learning centres hold events and parenting sessions for fathers – workers trained by the project.

**Examples of outcomes at level 4**

- **Utilising greater understanding, skills and capacity**
  
  Families linked together, identified issues and planned ways to address them, eg hospital visiting rosters to support children in hospital.

  It [participation] was increased through a young parents’ steering group ...this group enabled young parents to learn skills and participate in the decision making processes within the project.

  Community came together around different areas of interest and worked together to achieve concrete outcomes for the town (eg establishment of farmer's markets), people who previously did not know each other were working together and establishing friendships and networks.

  I have begun looking at what I call ‘stressful’ situations with my kids in a whole new light (perspective) because having the tools and alternatives in dealing with ‘behaviour’ has decreased the frequency and severity of these ‘stressful’ situations.
Examples of outcomes at levels 5 and 6
– Family and community trust/resilience/adaptability and an environment where communities participate in and drive their own solutions

Families are more self-reliant, some furthering their studies, some finding employment, and some volunteering in the community. There is a greatly reduced reliance on emergency funds, food hampers etc. the families stated that they had more hope for their futures.

Parents are at the point where they look out for each other, swap baby clothing and equipment, ideas and referrals to other services and basically care about each other. They have become a very welcoming group to new mums.

The centre is being incorporated and community members will participate in management of the association, the services will be expanded with more community agencies involved.

All groups describe increases in their determination and resourcefulness to continue to ‘make their own difference and not wait for others to do it for us’.

Community based agencies and the Council became resources to the community – the community members drove the ideas and sought assistance as required – increased trust in the organisations available to families and the community.

Community members, particularly parents of children now envisage greater community involvement in children’s lives and recognise greater potential for the children.

The parents I’ve seen in the group have become more community minded whereas probably when they started in the group it was something that they could gain for themselves and their own parenting skills but they’re now looking at the broader picture in the community and how they fit within the community and how the community can fit in their lives.

The network meetings provided opportunities to share experiences with other communities that had similar issues. This not only provided them with the opportunity to learn from each other but when similar needs were identified, the communities have been able to develop a partnership in order to more effectively influence Council and other agencies.

Examples of outcomes at level 7
– Stronger families and communities and improved wellbeing

The quality of the home environment increased for all families. A statistically significant reduction in the reported frequency of child disruptive behaviour was reported.

Because of the networking and mentoring we encourage between members, many men are now back on track and looking towards a positive future.

Dramatic improvement in self-confidence of all advocates. High percentage of community advocates found employment.

Parents have reflected that ‘we are coping better now’ and ‘we don’t feel like we’re struggling anymore’. Several parents have reflected that their relationships with their children and other family members have benefited. Parents have also reported feeling more relaxed and confident in their parenting.

The self confidence, parenting skills and relationship building skills will continue to enhance the participants’ lives long after their contact with the project.

Three [women] left violent relationships and are functioning well on their own – the children are safe.

A participant commented that: ‘I was always arguing with my children but now I actually enjoy my children and laugh with them.’
Unintended project outcomes

In addition to the intended outcomes from projects the evaluation considered both positive and negative unintended outcomes resulting from projects. Unintended outcomes can significantly add to, or detract from, the intended impacts of a project.

**Positive unintended project outcomes**

Unintended (or at least unanticipated) positive outcomes included greater than expected number and diversity of people participating and higher than anticipated levels of interest and commitment to the project. Some projects that expected outcomes at the level of individuals during the project also achieved a legacy at the level of a community that had not been explicitly expected.

Positive unanticipated outcomes for participants included developing new networks, support groups, friendships and taking action that continued outside the project.

*A project participant said:*

“It’s the adult and social interaction that’s a big thing, we’re all friends, and we’ve all been meeting in the park on a regular basis, when the group wasn’t being held”

Agencies also reported positive impacts for staff and volunteers that they had not expected that included taking on leadership roles; improvements in motivation and job satisfaction; developing skills and confidence and taking on further education or employment.

Agencies also reported enhanced organisational capacity, the establishment of new services or activities as needs became apparent through the project, and the development of productive and satisfying partnerships that took on new challenges as unintended positive outcomes.

**Negative unintended project outcomes**

Managing projects to reduce the risk of negative outcomes was important in the implementation of projects and the Strategy as a whole. It is helpful to be able to anticipate negative outcomes as far as possible and put in place effective risk management strategies to prevent them from occurring and/or to address them swiftly and effectively when they do occur.

*A project said:*

*Not so much negative but certainly once word gets out there is an increasing demand for service. This somewhat unplanned growth can impact on workers capacity to provide quality service provision. We have had to consistently work to manage this risk.*

Negative outcomes reported by some projects included loss of goodwill and trust; unsustainable workloads for staff and volunteers; difficulties created by higher than expected levels of demand; tension within the community because the project was unable to service all segments of the community; the potentially de-motivating impact of increased concern about community needs and gaps in services; and tension with partner agencies or others competing for funds.

*A project said:*

*The period of funding for innovative projects is usually determined solely by the amount of funding available and is usually short-term, i.e. 1-2 years. In communities of entrenched disadvantage, short-term funding can have a damaging effect on the trust and expectations of the community.*
Sustainability and legacy of the Strategy

The legacy of the Strategy includes:

- the continuation of project activities after funding ended
- increased organisational capacity
- resources produced that could be used by other projects
- the sustainability of outcomes for participants
- contributions to evidence-based policy and practice.

Continuation of project activities

The evaluation assessed the sustainability of projects by following up a sample of 113 completed projects. The focus of the follow up with projects was on the sustainability of project activities and the sustainability of enhanced capacity, particularly organisational capacity.

Most projects (84%) in follow-up interviews were continuing activities in some form after Strategy funding had ended. (32% of these were operating on an expanded scale; 30% were about the same; and 39% were operating on a more restricted scale).

A quantitative analysis identified four factors as strong predictors of projects that sustained or expanded activities after Strategy funding ended:

- diverse funding sources
- diverse activities to engage community support during project development
- effective support from the auspice organisation during project development
- the effectiveness of the project.

Increased organisational capacity

Sixty six projects completed an earlier, longer version of the Final Evaluation Questionnaire, which asked specifically about impacts on the auspice agency.

Many projects pointed to ways in which involvement in the Strategy project had increased the capacity of their organisation. Many of them reported a legacy from the project in terms of building institutional capital:

- better ability to respond to the target group or project participants (71%)
- better ability to find and work with partners (61%)
- better infrastructure and facilities (34%)
- better management, systems and processes (33%).

Many organisations, particularly those providing direct services and crisis response services, increased their capacity to adopt preventative and early intervention approaches. The support provided to apply action research also created a legacy in terms of an increased organisational capacity to undertake action research.
Resources produced

The Department database and responses to evaluation questionnaires showed that 240 projects had produced tangible resources that could be used by other projects, such as booklets, videos, CDs and DVDs, websites and training manuals.

Sustainability of outcomes for participants

It is likely that there will be positive longer term outcomes for participants, based on the research evidence in early intervention and community capacity building and the successes achieved during the life of the Strategy, bearing in mind that early intervention is not usually a once off intervention, and long term outcomes are dependent on some further support as needed. Further follow-up of participants is needed to identify longer term outcomes for participants.

Projects said:

All groups have identified on-going plans to continue their work strengthening their community after the [project] funding is complete.

Many of those involved in the project did go on to do future projects and created community groups of their own.

Contributions to evidence based policy and practice

The Strategy has contributed to evidence based policy and practice by:

- promoting the existing evidence base, for example, on early intervention and strengths based approaches during the promotion of the Strategy and the development of proposals
- supporting projects to add to the evidence base through action research and/or project level evaluations
- funding projects to develop, trial and evaluate innovative models or to trial, and sometimes adapt existing programs that are new to the area or Australia
- funding the Australian Institute of Family Studies to draw together and disseminate emerging evidence from Strategy projects about what works to strengthen Australian families and communities.
What were the features of the Strategy that made a difference?

Three features of the Strategy made a difference to the success of projects:

- the targeting framework
- the additional support provided to community organisations during proposal development and implementation
- the explicit focus on the eight principles underpinning the Strategy.

Targeting framework

The targeting framework identified areas of particular disadvantage and additional activities were undertaken in these areas to generate and support the development and implementation of projects. Proposals could also come from self-identified communities, providing they addressed target group priorities. The portfolio of investment across the Strategy had a range of projects; some were short-term projects building on existing capacity, others were longer-term projects aimed at building capacity.

Support to community organisations

Additional support provided to communities by the Department added value in terms of both developing proposals and supporting projects during implementation. Two-thirds of projects (67%) were from targeted communities. Active support during implementation meant that in most cases difficulties emerging during projects could be resolved.

A sample of projects rated how helpful this additional support from the Department had been during implementation. All of these projects that had achieved outstanding outcomes rated the additional support as having been either very helpful (73%) or helpful – a much higher rate than projects with only mixed success. Only 25 per cent of projects with mixed success rated this support as very helpful, and 25 per cent saw it as having been not significant.

Under the new Strategy, this type of support will be provided by Communities for Children (CfC) Facilitating Partners. In addition through CfC and Invest to Grow (ItG) the department has funded Local Evaluators to assist with project design, action research and evaluation.

All three streams of the new Strategy are provided with support through the Communities and Families Clearinghouse House (CAFCA) and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

Strategy principles

The Strategy was underpinned by eight principles:

- working together in partnerships
- encouraging a preventative and early intervention approach
- supporting people through life’s transitions
- developing better integrated and co-ordinated services
- developing local solutions to local problems
- building capacity
- using the evidence and looking to the future
- making the investment count.
Enacting the eight principles underpinning the Strategy also made a difference. The detailed study of the Early Intervention and Early Childhood initiatives has shown that projects that successfully enacted these principles were more likely to achieve outstanding results.

The issues papers prepared as part of the national evaluation addressed most of these principles in the context of the Strategy. A full list of the issues papers with a brief description of each paper is on page 26 of this newsletter.

What worked best for whom, why and when?

In various issues papers and case studies the evaluation looked in some detail about what types of activities work with whom and under what circumstances in the context of Indigenous families and communities, remote and rural families and communities and families and communities from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds.

Indigenous families and communities

While most Indigenous projects expressed satisfaction with what they had achieved through the Strategy, there were differences between the reported outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous projects funded under the Strategy.

Indigenous projects were less likely to report that they had achieved all or most of what they wanted and they were more likely to report having experienced unexpected negative outcomes.

Many Indigenous projects operated in difficult social environments that were not conducive to smooth project implementation. The experience of some projects has highlighted the degree to which ill health and security anxieties relating to personal safety restrict the capacity to participate and the life choices of many Indigenous families and communities.

In some communities, projects have been inhibited by a lack of basic infrastructure, such as appropriate venues for project activities, suitable office accommodation and vehicles. These and other factors contribute to recurring high staff turnover, feelings of ‘burnout’ and other human resource management issues common to projects in Indigenous contexts. The recruitment and retention of quality staff is a critical issue for Indigenous projects, especially in rural and remote areas.

The main factors identified by projects as inhibiting the success of Indigenous projects were funding delays, divisions within the community, a lack of participation and engagement in the project, lack of trust in government, poverty and poor health, a lack of confidence, a lack of infrastructure and difficulties accessing information about what works in similar projects elsewhere.

The main factors identified by projects as contributing to the success of Indigenous projects were community support, support provided through the Strategy in addition to funding, support provided by the auspice organization, partnership arrangements and the people associated with projects.

Engaging project participants by working through activities in which they are already meaningfully involved has been effective. Projects needed the support of competent and committed staff members who had close relationships with the local community, cultural competence and relevant expertise. In most cases this has meant a team comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous project staff with complementary capacities.
Projects have also benefited from the support of an auspice with demonstrated strengths in the areas of administrative capacity, relevant previous project experience and established links with Indigenous people. Where the auspice was a non-Indigenous body without pre-existing relationships with the Indigenous community, difficulties were likely to be experienced in developing relationships within the limited lifespan of the project. Such organisations needed to invest heavily in building trust with participants. There appear to be efficiencies of scale and other advantages where the auspice is a regional organisation. Small scale and fledgling community organisations sometimes struggled to adequately fulfill the role.

Projects valued the provision of external assistance in project planning, preparing funding applications and budgets and being linked up with the right project partners. Some projects also needed intensive support during the implementation phase. In most cases such external assistance came from the departmental officers, but in some instances it came from other project partners.

Many projects benefited from their engagement in action learning processes involving critical reflection and self-evaluation. The practice of action research has the potential to contribute to our understanding of what works, under what conditions and why in Indigenous contexts.

Rural and remote communities
Two particular challenges facing projects based in rural and remote areas were identified; inadequacies in the local skills base and difficulty in attracting and maintaining staff from outside the area and the limited service options to which to refer families.

A project said:
Local conditions can be a hindrance because of distances and remoteness of locations. This impacts on costs and time. However generally those in rural and remote locations are very responsive to services because of the distance and remoteness.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities
Only limited information was available about the cultural and linguistic diversity of project participants however there is some evidence to suggest that projects targeting specific cultural or linguistic groups were either the most, or least successful early intervention projects. These projects were most often directed towards recent immigrants and refugees.

CALD projects that achieved the most during the life of the project were those that were largely transition projects assisting with bridging between Australian mainstream culture and the cultural backgrounds of the groups in question. These projects tended to use a combination of group activities and individual assistance provided in the course of participating in a group. However, there were some communities for which group processes were not acceptable because of historical tensions and distrust. Individual and home-based activities could be more appealing to those groups.

CALD projects with less evidence of successful outcomes during the life of the project appear to have been those that were working with a particular community around a range of family and community issues. However, a lack of clear specific objectives may have contributed to difficulties in identifying just how successful they were, as well as the longer timeframe needed to achieve broader goals.
How did the Strategy work in conjunction with other initiatives, programs or services to achieve outcomes?

Other initiatives, programs and services were important influences on both individual projects and the overall Strategy. Some programs had occurred beforehand and had laid the foundation for the Strategy project. Some programs occurred concurrently and helped to achieve the outcomes during the lifetime of the Strategy project. Some programs occurred after the Strategy project and built on its achievements.

Some Strategy projects were also jointly funded by, and therefore also part of, another government or non-government funding initiative. In many cases, the other activities of the auspice agency contributed to the achievements of the Strategy project.

The contribution of a previous or concurrent project has important implications when comparing the outcomes of similar Strategy projects and is particularly important if planning to replicate a project. Strategy funding may have provided only a proportion of the overall resources that contributed to project outcomes.
**What** else helped or hindered the Strategy to achieve its objectives and outcomes?

Projects that achieved the most during the life of the projects were more likely to:

- have a range of funding sources
- have a range of partnerships
- rate the value of these partnerships highly
- to have had the original idea for the project come from outside the auspice organisation.

These projects identified support from the auspice organisation before and during the project as particularly important in achieving outcomes.

Other factors identified by projects in their responses to evaluation questionnaires as being very helpful were the people involved, local partnerships and networks and community support.

**Projects said:**

‘... the key factor has been strong supportive relationships.’

*Professional skills of facilitators – especially knowledge of the impact of abuse, flexibility and HUMOUR (being NON judgmental and listening). Mutual respect between facilitators and participants – very important. As facilitators, allowing ourselves to be human when listening to such heart wrenching stories about the participants’ childhood abuse.*

*The volunteers provided an invaluable contribution to the outcomes.*

‘... the experience of key staff, the existence of credibility and community acceptance lead to high levels of community support. The established protocols, policies and training resources was also a bonus.’

‘... the main factor that can impede projects is time. Time to plan adequately, time to develop the skills of staff in order ensure good management practices.’

The ability to successfully reach and engage members of the community was essential for projects and both characteristics of individuals and factors associated with projects influenced the level of engagement of individuals.

It was important that projects had active recruitment strategies and allowed sufficient lead time to engage socially isolated people. Providing transport, childcare, a suitable venue and organising activities at suitable times were also identified as important.

Projects that targeted people with specific needs had the potential to stigmatise participants and this factor, along with any interpersonal difficulties that arose amongst participants, needed careful management.

Some projects reported that unless the immediate needs of families in crisis were addressed they had little success in engaging these families in early intervention or preventative activities.
What were the costs and benefits of the Strategy?

A qualitative analysis of the benefits and costs of the Strategy identified benefits and costs that occurred in the short-term, and potential longer-term costs and benefits without quantifying them.

Benefits included positive outcomes achieved and negative outcomes avoided. Costs included resources expended and negative outcomes that did occur.

Benefits and costs were considered from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders including project participants, auspice agencies, other agencies, the broader society and economy and governments. Twelve risks associated with identifying benefits and costs were identified and discussed.

The achievements of the Strategy show that there has been a broad range of benefits for families and communities as a result of participating in Strategy projects. The increased capacity developed by individuals, families, communities and the agencies that work with them has the potential to achieve broad and far-reaching benefits in the long term in terms of both positive outcomes achieved and negative outcomes avoided.

The interactive processes and involvement of the Department in developing projects, along with the degree of flexibility demonstrated by the Department in its management of projects have been particularly important in realising the vision of working in new ways to strengthen families and communities.

On the other hand, some communities where expectations had been raised through encouragement and support to develop proposals were disappointed when they were not approved for funding. The delay in approving funding and consequent reductions in the duration of many projects resulted in additional costs for the Department, the auspice agencies and communities.

There have been complex trade-offs (for projects and for the Strategy overall) in implementing the Strategy in accordance with its underlying principles. For example, the principles of working in partnership and developing local solutions were complementary. However, the time needed to develop partnerships and effectively engage community members in the development and implementation of a project needed to be balanced with the need to achieve outcomes during the relatively short-term available funding – a balance that was more difficult in communities where there was a need to build human, social, organisational and physical capital.
Learnings about managing a funding program or clusters of projects

Project selection

Funding initiatives such as the Strategy need to develop appropriate ways to contribute to long-term outcomes within the constraints of short-term funding. The following issues related to the short-term nature of project funding have been identified as important factors to consider in selecting projects:

- funding decisions need a longer-term planning focus
- a realistic strategy for sustainability is needed for each project
- a staged approach can be appropriate;
- short-term funding may be effective for projects with a focus on transition followed by links to ongoing support
- many projects will need to secure ongoing funding after Strategy funding ends
- funding agencies need to recognise and address any barriers to self-funding and ongoing funding
- funding agencies need to recognise and address differences in access to alternative sources of income.

Competing imperatives to be considered when selecting projects for funding are:

- targeting funding to areas of greatest need – or focusing on funding projects with the greatest chance of success
- distributing funding to as many communities as possible – or concentrating funding to achieve a critical mass
- getting the most effect by funding approaches that are known to be effective – or learning more about what works by funding innovative approaches.

Learnings about balancing these imperatives are:

- taking a balanced investment approach
- projects with a multifaceted approach, not a single focus, are more likely to be effective
- projects with effective support from auspices (during both project development and implementation) are more likely to be successful.

Effective early intervention projects are likely to demonstrate eight characteristics. These are focus on strengths, focus on early intervention, transition points and long-term orientation, responsiveness to local needs, holistic approaches, accessibility/inclusiveness, coordination and inter-sectoral collaboration, skilled workforce, and adopting an outcome evidence driven approach.

These characteristics can be used as a selection guide for funding, as a guide for proposal development, and as a checklist for implementation, management and evaluation.

Clear and well-understood processes for project selection are important to avoid negative outcomes. There is a need to balance flexibility/responsiveness and certainty/transparency in processes. Delays in approval processes can have significant negative consequences. Funding cycles and timelines need to balance adequate planning and consultation time with annual expenditure allocations.
Support for organisations implementing projects

Support from the Department to the projects has played a role in contributing to the success of the Strategy.

Processes to ensure both quality and continuity need to be factored into Strategy design, budgets, and selection of suitable staff.

Organisations may require support to develop and implement projects when they lack this capacity.

Projects need to recognise that sustainability can come through wider community impacts and these wider impacts need to be actively fostered by projects and the Strategy alike.

Support is needed for projects to be able to learn from each other.

Under the new Strategy, this type of support will be provided by Communities for Children Facilitating Partners. All three streams will also be provided with support through the Communities and Families Clearinghouse House and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

Project monitoring and management

Flexible contractual arrangements can help projects be more responsive and effective.

Stated objectives of projects need to be realistic and performance indicators need to be meaningful for individual projects and when aggregated.

Monitoring and evaluation needs good information on the size and history of projects and evaluation needs to include some long-term follow-up of outcomes beyond the funding period.

Understanding the impact (opportunities and challenges) of other interventions that are co-occurring is important.

Support for evidence based policy and practice

Projects clearly varied in the extent to which they adopted evidence based approaches. Many projects need support to foster an evidence based approach to project design and evaluation. There is a need to ensure that Australian based evidence that can be useful to projects is available. Several projects undertook literature reviews in the relevant area in their project planning stage. Other projects had literature reviews prepared as part of an external evaluation. Literature reviews could be valuable assets for other projects in future if there was support to make them more accessible.

Department support to use action research was welcomed but some projects had only a very basic idea of what was involved in action research and did not therefore use it to its full potential. Many projects also appeared to need assistance with using a project logic framework that involves:

- adopting outcomes based thinking that considers the links between short, medium and longer term outcomes
- considering what can be done to effect those outcomes
- identifying what other factors they need to take into consideration when planning, monitoring and evaluating their projects.

Under the new Strategy the Department has funded local evaluators to assist with project design, action research, and evaluation.
Learnings about managing and implementing projects

Resources

Resources – funding, staffing, time, facilities – are a key factor in project success, and require attention at the planning stage and during implementation to obtain and maintain them.

Projects said:

The work ... is complex and important. It therefore requires staff with appropriate qualifications and experience and corresponding remuneration. This project was also an autonomous position that required project management skills and some evaluation skills. The essential skills and qualifications of the person needed to be appropriate to meet the job specifications and consequently meet the project outcomes. Similar projects need to consider this in their design of project budgets and job descriptions.

The quality of staff is a priority

Many projects have pointed to the importance of getting the right people to work on projects (both paid staff, volunteers, and supporting agencies). These people’s skills, personal qualities and existing relationships with the community and other organisations are vital to the success of projects. Having a critical mass of staff and/or volunteers is also important for supportive relationships, diverse contributions of skills and attributes and for sustainability.

As always, the ‘people’ factor is critical to success of projects but can be difficult to detect at a distance for purposes of making funding decisions. Key attributes included enthusiasm, proactivity and opportunism, belief in what they were doing and in the capacity of project participants as well as project specific skills of project leaders, staff and volunteers. Local credibility and existing networks were also important. Good project management skills are essential and projects may need support in communities with little experience in project management.

There are implications in this for reviewing project applications, lead times and continuity of funding as these special people are a very finite resource.

The recruitment, retention and professional development of staff in rural and remote areas is, of course, not just an issue for Strategy projects. These are human resource management issues that many projects and programs experience in rural and remote regions.

Staff and volunteers need ongoing support

Make sure that staff and volunteers are well supported, that they have access to peer support (e.g. for debriefing) and to professional support, supervision and formal debriefing as needed.

Create a positive and fun environment for staff and volunteers as well as for clients.

Make sure that staff and any presenters have appropriate approaches (e.g. non judgemental, strengths based) to participants. Staff members need to have the respect and trust of the communities they work in as well as the necessary skills.

Support staff to work as a team – all bringing their particular strengths.
Projects said:

[Auspice agency] staff provided a very supportive, flexible and friendly environment thus enhanced the project workers high level of performance.

... volunteers are a rich resource and need to be supported, skilled and listened to.

Sufficient time is needed for planning, consulting and developing relationships and trust between agencies and with community

Many projects pointed to the time needed for adequate planning and consultation at the beginning of a project (which needs to be included in the project design).

Projects said:

It is important to allow time to establish the very important relationships on which the success of the project depended – if relationships are not already established then expect a long lead time to develop trust and gain momentum.

Considerable time is needed for the practical aspects of the project including establishment of policies and procedures, recruitment and training of staff and volunteers, development of teamwork.

Projects need to plan and commit resources to ensure that activities are accessible to intended participants

The success of many of the projects funded under the Early Intervention initiative depended on their capacity to make the services accessible to at-risk populations and in particular to provide transportation and childcare. The capacity to ensure accessibility is something that future assessment of funding proposals should consider. Many projects underestimated the time and budget required to support access by the target group. Sometimes this impacted significantly on participation levels.

Projects need resources to enable access to expertise when needed

Access to expertise (e.g. professional services when not available in-house) is very important when dealing with at-risk populations. Crises and needs can arise at very short notice and need immediate attention.

The project may be the main point of contact with the community for the individual. Projects need to be able to recognise when they can address an issue themselves and when and how they should refer on to others. Simply giving referral information may not be enough, project staff may need to provide advocacy, make contact with the service, and facilitate access.

It is important to ensure that projects understand and are well prepared to take on this role. Lack of preparedness and capacity to refer on can not only result in lost opportunities for the participants but it can also lead to a sense of powerlessness among project staff and volunteers.

Projects need to develop and maintain effective networks and partnerships with other agencies

Almost all projects saw these as important factors in project success.

We have also learnt that the emphasis that the Strategy placed on the importance of local responsiveness, community involvement, partnerships and networks was well placed. The ways in which projects used these various approaches (e.g. how partnerships operated, how they were responsive to their communities and not just whether they used them), impacted upon their success in addressing the needs of at-risk individuals, families, groups and communities with which they worked.
Most projects recognise partnerships as important but not all have been in a position to forge effective partnerships. ‘Partnerships for partnerships sake’ can be counter-productive – they can consume effort, create tensions and achieve little. Partnerships need to operate on a practical level with appropriate and realistic roles, responsibilities and expectations. Proximity of partners seems to be an important factor in making them work. The appropriate type of partnership or network needs to be matched to the need – including whether or not to have them at all, and if so, which type, given context, including available time and pre-existing relationships. Opportunities for inter-sectoral coordination and collaboration often provide a better context for projects (large or small) to achieve results. However, these opportunities do not exist in many communities. Funding decisions that required projects to function in such a context could further disadvantage already disadvantaged communities. Co-location or close location can help but is not always possible. A few projects considered that a collaborative, intergovernmental and cross-sector approach was important to their particular project but for many the more informal networks were seen as critical. Many projects stressed the importance of effective networks.

Despite the terminology of ‘partnership’, differences in power can, and have, led to difficulties and unreasonable expectations and commitments. Projects commented on the importance of having well managed partnerships (and reference groups as appropriate) with clearly defined, realistic and accepted roles, responsibilities and structures.

Projects also recognised the importance of using and nurturing their networks. Be prepared to invest time and effort in networks and partnerships. Joint activities can strengthen the links.

Projects said:

Working in partnership with communities and other service providers is invaluable in spreading the dollar further, providing more holistic services and providing relevant information, advice and support to families.

The members involved in the partnerships need to have a clear understanding of the purpose of their involvement. Partners are involved based on their specific relevance to the project, and the support they can provide. Roles and responsibilities of partnership members need to be clear.

Processes and strategies

It is often useful to build capacity around a particular issue or service

General capacity-building projects, including general planning, do not seem to have been as successful as projects that have focused on a specific issue or need. Based on the currently available evidence, these have engaged a community more than general capacity-building projects, for example, one project with its flagship Meals on Wheels service. Communities at an early stage of building capacity need some tangible achievements to engage their initial and continuing interest. These early specific issues-based achievements need to become a springboard for wider development of community capacity.

Dealing with the urgent before addressing the important

When dealing with at-risk populations, many of the individuals, families and even whole communities will be facing
crises that need to be addressed before they have enough ‘mental space’, time and interest to focus on what they may perceive to be less pressing issues such as better parenting. Projects will find that they need to be able to assist participants to deal with the everyday priorities such as getting a job, housing, welfare and so on before they can address other issues and in order to establish trust and a reason for engagement.

**Projects need to have strategies for managing excess demand or inappropriate demand**

Managing excess demand or inappropriate demand given the nature of the project can pose other challenges for projects. Contingency plans, processes for prioritisation, provision of services at different levels of intensity and partnerships with others that can help can contribute to better management.

Avoidance of staff and volunteer burnout is a must but can be difficult to ensure when other options in the community (e.g. for referrals) are lacking. Inability to service demand can also lead to disappointment and breakdown of trust.

Projects learnt that it is important not to over stretch – don’t target too many communities or clients at once and make sure they are well targeted.

**Projects need to have strategies for addressing emerging needs**

In the course of running projects, other community needs often become apparent. Often these needs cannot be met by the project alone or even by the project working in concert with partners. There needs to be processes for dealing with these emerging needs. Moreover there is great potential for projects such as these to be a planned window onto the nature of the needs that arise. There may be opportunities to encourage such projects to be the eyes and ears of a community, identifying needs and ideas about solutions with formal channels for feeding back information to government and others. A lack of strategies to deal with emerging needs can have a de-motivating effect for all concerned.

**Strengths-based approaches are an important component**

Many projects have identified the importance of being able to recognise and nurture the potential in participants. Strengths-based approaches are also an important characteristic of effective early intervention projects.

Early intervention projects advised that it is important to recognise that families have skills that are a real asset to the project, to draw on these, and see if you can rely less on professionals but make sure that you have access to professionals and services when needed (e.g. in emergencies).

There are many different approaches to working from a strengths base and it can be beneficial for projects to develop a better understanding of strengths based approaches including recognised models. It is also important when using external personnel such as expert speakers to ensure that they also adopt strengths based approaches. Failure to do so can have damaging effects on participants.

It is important to avoid stigmatisation and labelling. For example, instead of making parents feel inadequate by suggesting they need parenting skills, it is more useful to focus on skills for families and relationships.

**Action research and evaluation can make a significant contribution to projects**

Among the lessons that projects learned were the value of action research and the importance of planning for and conducting evaluation. Action research was mentioned by many projects as having been critical.
to their success. For many the action research approach seems to have been a new and enlightening one. Several wished they had allocated more time (and budget) to reflect and adapt. Others wished they had been more systematic, forward thinking and outcomes focused about their evaluation processes.

Projects said:
Action research is very useful for developing and changing projects but needs to be supported by the funding body. There needs to be the flexibility to make reasonable changes if needed to improve a project, with consultation with the funding body.
The level of learning and having evaluation funded meant that we were able to adapt and that the project will continue to be sustained.

More generally projects reinforced the importance of being open to change and being adaptive and flexible when new needs are identified or circumstances change.

Processes for engaging the community and participants

Strategies to encourage and effectively support client involvement in, and control of, projects are needed.

Previous research has pointed to the importance of client-focused services. Many projects discussed the need to involve clients in projects, and not treat them as passive recipients of services.

Involvement of the intended participants in the design of the project is one important strategy.

A project said:
By far the most successful [model] was spending lots of time up-front in engaging the community in the design and content of the program rather than being the object of it.

However by itself, this is no guarantee of success. Various projects presented evidence of having considerable involvement of the target group in the development of the project only to find that it was difficult to get members of the target group to participate once the project was up and running.

Projects commented on the importance of continuing with genuine community/participant involvement and ownership throughout the project and not just at the planning stage.

Projects need to be aware of and responsive to the specific needs of particular populations

Continuing adaptation of the project as it progressed and the involvement of participants in determining details of the project that had not been established at the outset helped to tailor projects to the specific needs of particular populations.

In addition, some of the more successful projects in the Strategy put significant effort into developing inclusive and participatory decision making processes that included project participants. Strategies are needed for building the community’s trust in the project and its staff.

Community trust in a project is another critical component, and different strategies have been used to develop this. Some projects were seen to be successful because of the existing trust the community had in the auspice organisation or other organisations involved in the project, or in the individuals working on a project. In other cases the project needed considerable time to develop the necessary trust. For this reason, many successful projects were those that either built on a previous project which had laid the groundwork, or had a staff member with existing good relationships with the community.
Explicit strategies are needed to overcome distrust, create interest and engage participants

This was a key task of projects that for many proved to be more difficult than expected. It can take considerable time and effort to develop the trust of people from at-risk populations especially where they see themselves as having been let down in the past. Different approaches to service delivery such as choice of venue, provision of a place and environment where participants felt safe (psychologically and physically), adoption of strengths-based and non-judgmental approaches, personal approaches to engage potential participants, can affect trust and can impact upon whether people participate. Establishing links and credibility with referral agencies can also take considerable time and can have a significant effect on participation.

Trust can be eroded when project teams develop a momentum within the community that is lost because of delays in receiving funding or funding being received at a time when it cannot be used with other funds. This has implications for Strategy funding processes.

A project said:

Trust was a major issue that the group struggled with.

The trust that has been developed over the life of a project can also be very quickly eroded in the face of loss of services at the end of a funding period. Sustainability of support, by one means or another, needs to be well planned. Once again, links to ongoing support beyond the funding period are critical.

Building trust also has a cultural dimension. Some projects in remote areas, for example, have found that project workers need to be people who possess cultural authority. Without this, both participation and engagement are problematic.

Effective strategies are needed to ensure an inclusive approach

It has been important for the projects to not be labelled or exclusive. For example, one of the evaluation case studies showed the value of the independence of the non-Indigenous coordinator in making it clear that people of all clans were welcome at the community facility.

Projects learned the importance of continuing to be culturally sensitive throughout the project – to recognise differences among individuals and groups.

Other projects struggled to get the intended number or range of participants. For example, one project found it became informally labelled as being only for children identified as having difficulties and as a consequence had difficulty attracting participants.

It is important to create a safe space for change (for individuals and families)

Many projects discussed the need to develop trust between the project and the community, and different strategies for doing this, such as the employment of local people to work on the project (which also has economic participation benefits). Neutral and/or comfortable venues can also be important for individuals, families and communities in states of conflict or tension.

The issue of a ‘safe space’ is especially pertinent where the most marginalised people are the target group. Comments from some Indigenous projects highlight the fact that some Indigenous communities are very divided. Bringing people together in these circumstances is more likely to fuel conflict than it is to generate a shared vision. As a matter of strategy it is often necessary to work with all sides separately for a very considerable period of time before attempting any reconciliation of values and interests.
Other reports produced in the evaluation

Issue papers produced during the evaluation

Issues papers were designed to set out key issues and findings from the literature, together with illustrations from Strategy projects. These were used in the evaluation to develop the framework for the overall evaluation, and to guide planning of further projects. Seven issues papers were produced:

Networks and partnerships

This paper discusses four different types of networks and partnerships between organisations, which each have different purposes, structures, processes and levels of resourcing. It discusses factors that influence the development and maintenance of effective networks and partnerships between organisations.

Community capacity building

This paper examines the process of building community capacity in order to strengthen communities. It discusses community capacity in terms of the interplay between human capital (levels of skills, knowledge and health status), social and institutional capital (leadership, motivation, networks) and economic capital (local services, infrastructure and resources).

Improving integration and co-ordination of services

Improved service integration can occur through developing a single access point, joint planning, service co-ordination (either by helping people to navigate the service system or co-ordinating the delivery of services by providers), service co-location, service outreach, or brokerage. These differ in terms of the focus for change, the impetus for change, the level of the service system, the range of organisations involved, and the degree of connectivity sought. Key lessons from the research are outlined.
Early intervention, especially in early childhood

This paper sets out four different ways in which the term ‘early intervention’ is used: prevention, early remediation, intervening at critical transition points, and intervening in early childhood. It reviews the discussion on universal vs targeted early intervention services and discusses ways that short-term funding can contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes.

Economic and social participation

This paper discusses different types of economic and social participation, and how these are related to each other and to strengthening families and communities. It provides examples of Strategy projects that contributed to these different types of economic and social participation.

Sustainability and legacy

This study expands the term ‘sustainability’ to ‘sustainability and legacy’ to clearly include all of the lasting impacts of the Strategy projects: changes to capacity, lasting outcomes for participants and the continuation of service models, as well as the continuation of services.

Evidence-based policy and practice

This paper sets out some key ideas in evidence-based policy and practice and how these have been enacted in the Strategy. It sets out a cycle of six activities and different approaches to these. The paper ends by discussing the need to appropriately draw on the full range of approaches to evidence-based policy and practice and the need to develop capacity in each of the stages, especially processes whereby current policy and practice can contribute further to the evidence-base.

Case studies produced during the evaluation

Case studies explored a project, an initiative, a particular location or a specific issue. Case study reports of particular projects were made available at the discretion of the participating projects. Case studies produced by the evaluation are:

Case study of the Gilles Plains Community Garden

This case study focused on a community garden in Gilles Plains, a suburb of Adelaide, funded under the Local Solutions to Local Problems initiative. The study described how the project was developed and implemented, its short-term outcomes, the potential for further outcomes through further use of the capacity developed through the project and analyses the factors contributing to its success, including the funding and support provided by the Strategy. The case study developed a better understanding of capacity building processes.

Case study of the Mandurah targeted region

This case study investigated the contribution of the Strategy to the process of strengthening families and communities in and around the rapidly growing City of Mandurah in the Peel region of Western Australia. This was one of the Targeted Regions in Western Australia identified by the Western Australian State and Territory Advisory Group where the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs made particular efforts to assist the development of proposals for funding, and to support the coordination of funded projects.
**Case study of the Hervey Bay Indigenous Community Leadership project**

This case study focused on a relatively small project initiated by the local Indigenous community because leadership was identified as an area of critical need. Too few leaders were carrying too heavy a load. Funding was primarily directed towards the delivery of two workshops. Lessons for future projects seeking to develop Indigenous leadership capacity were identified.

**Case study of an Indigenous capacity building project**

This case study examined the operation of an Indigenous capacity building project in a remote area. It documented ways that the project had addressed challenges such as staff turnover, community engagement and ongoing funding needs.

**Case study of an Indigenous integrated family strengthening project**

This study examined a large Indigenous project located in a remote region, which focused on parents and pre-school children. The case study documented the project’s achievements, while recognising that some desired outcomes could only be expected to be demonstrated in the longer term. The study identified a range of factors that had either helped or hindered the achievements of the project, and the need for continued support and funding to continue the project given the lack of alternative funding sources or local infrastructure.

**Lessons Learnt about Strengthening Indigenous Families and Communities: What’s Working and What’s Not?**

This report summarises the lessons about how to strengthen Indigenous families and communities and the implications for future interventions. Evidence was drawn from multiple sources including research and policy literature, the in-depth case studies of three Indigenous projects, site visits to eight projects, documentation review for a further sixteen projects, and all available project questionnaires from Indigenous projects. It was found that the Strategy had made a significant contribution to strengthening Indigenous families and communities. However, this report concludes that the attainment of strong Indigenous families and communities are outcomes that can only be attained through a process of sustained long-term intervention.
Early Intervention and Early Childhood Initiatives

This paper reports on 195 projects funded under the Early Intervention and Early Childhood funding initiatives of the Strategy. The study developed a common framework that was used to classify outcomes achieved, assess the quality of evidence of these outcomes, and rate the overall success of each project. A statistical analysis then identified the common characteristics of successful early intervention projects.

Stronger Families Fund Initiative

Stronger Families Fund (SFF) projects were generally complex projects consisting of multiple strategies, of a longer duration and were funded at a higher level than projects funded under other initiatives. SFF projects were concerned with improving the coordination of services and the capacity of agencies to work in partnership with other organisations, the community and businesses as well as building the skills and capacity of individuals and families participating in projects. A unique feature of the SFF initiative was the support provided to projects to apply action research approaches during the implementation of projects.

Sustainability and legacy of projects

This study provided an empirical analysis of the sustainability and legacy of a sample of completed projects that were funded under the Strategy – particularly in terms of the sustainability of project activities after funding ended, and the production of resources with potential for ongoing use. It drew on a range of information sources including questionnaires completed at the end of projects, which included information on project characteristics and their plans for sustainability, and follow-up telephone interviews with a random sample of 113 completed projects about what had happened since funding ended. As well as summarising the data from projects, the report presented a quantitative synthesis using multiple regression to identify factors associated with continuation of activities.
Potential Leaders in Local Communities Initiative

This study describes projects funded under the Potential Leaders in Local Communities initiative of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000–2004 and recorded their achievements. It finds that there is much impetus for leadership development in Australia at the present time driven by a strategic recognition that there is a leadership skills shortage, that leadership development can help regional areas to proactively respond to change, and that leadership can enable disadvantaged social groups to become more self-reliant. The Department was identified as a key player through the Potential Leaders in Local Communities initiative and other initiatives.

Qualitative cost-benefit analysis of the Strategy

This study undertook a qualitative analysis of the costs and benefits of the Strategy that identified costs and benefits without quantifying them. Short and longer-term costs (resources expended and negative outcomes achieved) and benefits (positive outcomes achieved as well as the avoidance of negative outcomes) were identified. Trade-offs between costs and benefits at project level and in the implementation of the Strategy were discussed.

Implementation of the Strategy

This study was a background document prepared to inform the Final Report. The study described the processes for implementing the Strategy. The implementation of the community-based initiatives involved the development of a targeting framework for each State and Territory, early announcement projects started at the launch of the Strategy to serve as exemplars for other organisations, a communications strategy to provide information about the Strategy to potential applicants in a variety of ways, development and submission of proposals, proposal review and selection, post-selection work with both successful and unsuccessful applicants, and project implementation.

Other publications from the evaluation

Evaluation Framework

Newsletters 1, 2 and 3, including a supplement to Issue 2 on program logic

Publications from the evaluation are available at:
Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–2009

On 7 April 2004, the Prime Minister announced the renewal of the Strategy, guided by the latest research and consultation feedback from the National Agenda for Early Childhood. The renewed Strategy has a specific early childhood focus and has been aligned with the following four key action areas identified in the developing National Agenda for Early Childhood:

- healthy young families
- early learning and care
- support for families and parenting
- child-friendly communities.

Total funding of $490 million has been committed for 2004–2009. There are four streams to the new Strategy:

**Communities for Children** ($142 million over 5 years)
Targets 45 communities or sites across Australia providing funding for a whole of community approach to early childhood development where organisations engaged as facilitating partners work with local stakeholders to deliver programs and services to achieve better outcomes for children aged 0–5 and their families.

**Early Childhood – Invest to Grow** ($70 million over 4 years)
This stream funds national early childhood programs that focus on early intervention and supports the development of new models of early childhood programs. It aims to build the Australian evidence base about successful strategies in prevention and early intervention and develops resources or tools for parents, community groups and professionals working in the area of early childhood.

**Local Answers and Volunteer Small Equipment Grants** ($151 million over 5 years)
This funding supports local, small-scale, time limited initiatives that are developed by local organisations. Funding helps communities to help themselves by supporting locally developed and implemented projects and a diverse range of programs including parenting and relationship skills, community strengthening, participation for young parents, volunteering, mentoring and leadership may be funded.

$3 million will be available each year over four years for Volunteer Small Equipment Grants of up to $3,000 to encourage and support volunteers by enabling local community organisations to purchase small equipment items.

**Choice and Flexibility in Child Care** ($125 million over 4 years)
This stream continues to fund flexible and innovative child care solutions including the In Home Care program for families without other formal child care options and long day care centers in 23 areas of high need. Funding is continued for the roll-out of quality assurance for family day care and outside schools hours care and to investigate the viability of quality assurance for other child care service types including, Indigenous and In Home Care.
The evaluation of the Strategy 2000–2004 was undertaken by a consortium led by the Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation (CIRCLE) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) including Bearing Point (Australia), Performance Improvement and John Scougall.

**More information**

Further information about the **Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–2009**, including a Strategy Kit is available at:


Further information about the evaluation of the **Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000–2004** including separate reports is available at:


**Contact us**

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