Welcome to the second newsletter on the Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004. This newsletter is a joint initiative of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and RMIT University (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology).

A supplement to this newsletter provides information about the project logic used by projects and the Strategy as a whole.

**What’s the national SFCS 2000-2004 evaluation about?**

The national evaluation, conducted between 2002-2005, looks 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 Australian families and communities. It will not evaluate individual projects and information about specific projects will not be used in future funding decisions for individual projects or organisations.

Data is being collected from projects through two questionnaires (when the project begins and when the project ends). Initial questionnaires from 450 projects and Final questionnaires from 336 projects have been collected. Projects finishing between now and the end of February 2005 will be asked to complete a final questionnaire soon. Bearingpoint (part of the evaluation team) will contact projects finishing after February 2005 to ensure information about their achievements and learnings can be incorporated in the final evaluation report on the Strategy.

Other data is being collected through follow-up telephone interviews conducted with a sample of completed projects. Also, we have completed case studies of specific projects (with their agreement), and studies of clusters of projects (using available data).

**What has the SFCS 2000-2004 achieved?**

The Strategy provided funding to more than 600 projects. While these projects varied considerably in size, duration, activities and specific achievements, they were all designed to build the capacity of families and communities at risk of social, economic and/or geographic isolation. They were built on research evidence about ways of strengthening families and communities.

Achievements and learnings for the new Strategy are already evident, even though some projects have not yet finished or provided final reports. The legacy and learnings follow.
Legacy of the Strategy

The legacy of the Strategy is of particular importance – what has been the lasting impact of the projects that received limited term funding under the Strategy?

The legacy of the Strategy includes ongoing outcomes for participants who developed new knowledge and skills. Many projects have reported significant outcomes for families and communities, such as improvements in emotional wellbeing and mental health, material wellbeing, productivity, community involvement and economic participation.

The legacy includes improvements to community organisations. Of the sample of completed projects asked about the effect of the Strategy project on the auspice organisation:

- 71 per cent reported that as a result of the project, their organisation had a better ability to meet the needs of the target population;
- 60 per cent had improved their ability to find and work with partner organisations;
- 31 per cent reported that their organisation’s management, systems and processes had improved; and
- 34 per cent reported improvements in infrastructure and facilities.

The legacy of the Strategy includes the various projects that have continued in some form since funding ended:

- 77 per cent of those projects that have reported to date thought it was likely that the project would continue in some form once Strategy funding ended; and
- many projects, particularly early intervention projects, were expecting to expand the Strategy project to work with new target groups or a new location or community.

The sample of completed projects showed that most had continued in some form.

One project provided a parents’ group and a playgroup for newly arrived migrants in one language group. When Strategy funding ended, the local Council started to fund the project. The project reported: “FaCS funding allowed the organisers to demonstrate a need for the program. Once the program was successfully running and
fulfilling a demonstrated need, the Council were prepared to continue the funding”.

One project worked to support Year 11 and 12 students to make decisions about their future in work or further education. Since funding ended, the project has continued and expanded to other year levels, currently involving nearly 500 students. It has not secured ongoing funding and exists on funding from a mix of short-term sources, the result of the support it has within the school and the wider community.

Another project has received ongoing funding from the local Council, which will also run the program. It also has funding from State government and support from other agencies such as schools and police. This project works with children in an isolated regional centre who are considered to be at risk. It provides a mentoring program and works in conjunction with a youth drop-in centre.

The legacy also includes the resources produced by Strategy projects that are now being used by other families, communities and organisations. These include videos, training guides, manuals, websites and booklets.

A Western Australian project produced three videos, which were broadcast on satellite TV — To Sleep Like A Baby (0-7 months) — And So To Sleep (7 months-2 years) — Now in a Bed (2-5 years).

Another project distributed 20,000 communication comics to 1625 organisations working with young Indigenous people. The comic outlined depression support resources in rural NSW for Indigenous young people.

Another project developed a website for parents of children with hemiplegia (a form of cerebral palsy).

Learnings from the SFCS 2000-2004 overall

The first Strategy showed the importance of:

- building on existing relationships and community trust in auspice organisations;
- creating projects with sufficient critical mass and duration;
- providing support for project planning and implementation, including accessing and using evidence about good practice; and
- flexible and responsive planning and project management to take account of unexpected opportunities or difficulties.

Projects with these characteristics were more able to achieve significant outcomes for families and children through building effective partnerships and networks among local service providers, achieving service integration and coordination, and working at the same time with individuals, families and communities.

The new Strategy has addressed these issues through the Communities for Children initiative, a model that involves providing funding of up to $4 million each over four years to targeted regions of greatest need. An existing agency will be a Facilitating Partner, coordinating local agencies to achieve service integration and coordination in conjunction with a local level evaluator. The new Strategy provides support to organisations to build, access and use the evidence for early intervention strategies in early childhood through the Invest to Grow initiative.
Learnings
for planning and implementing new projects

Based on feedback from projects and from studies of particular projects, the following issues have been identified as important:

1. **Sufficient time is needed for planning, consultation and development of 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.

2. **Using strengths-based approaches**
   Many projects have identified the importance of being able to recognise and nurture the potential in participants.

3. **Characteristics of effective early intervention projects**
   A number of studies have identified similar lists of key characteristics of effective early intervention services for families with young children. Eight characteristics have been identified as important for the effective design and delivery of early intervention projects. These characteristics correspond with the analysis done to date on Strategy projects and reinforce many of the learnings identified in Strategy projects.

   In summary effective early intervention projects have the following characteristics:
   - 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
   - outcome evidence driven approach.

   We need to learn more about how to achieve these in practice, including trade-offs that may occur amongst the characteristics. For example, how do small-scale projects with minimal funding effectively adopt a holistic approach? Does responsiveness to local needs (the third characteristic) tend to push projects more towards
remedial approaches rather than preventive approaches (dilute the first characteristic)?

4. **The benefit of building capacity around a particular issue or service**
   General capacity-building projects, including general planning, have often not been as successful as projects that have focused on a specific issue or need and more effectively engaged the local community. However, this observation may reflect the fact that many communities are at an early stage of building capacity and 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.

5. **The importance of the quality of staff**
   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.

   Lead times, continuity of funding and delays in project approval and commencement can effect whether projects are able to get the right staff and also provide ongoing support to their development, including formal debriefing where appropriate. Recruitment, retention and professional development of staff are human resource management issues that many projects and programs experience in rural and remote regions.

6. **Effective development of networks and partnerships with other agencies**
   Almost all projects saw these as important factors in project success. There is a need to match the appropriate type of partnership or network to the need, including whether or not to have them at all given the context, including available time and pre-existing relationships.

   Despite the terminology of ‘partnership’, differences in power can lead to difficulties and unreasonable expectations and commitments.

7. **Strategies for building the community’s trust in the project and its staff**
   Community trust in a project is another critical component and projects have used a variety of strategies to achieve this. Some projects were seen to be successful because of the existing trust the community had in the auspice organisation or in 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 Strategy 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.

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.

8. Need for effective strategies to ensure inclusive approach
It has been important for projects to use inclusive approaches and not be labelled or exclusive. Some projects that focus on involving only specific community groups have struggled to get the intended number or range of participants, leading to difficulties in succession planning. Others have had difficulties with being seen only for certain groups of children.

9. Need for client control and involvement in projects
Previous research has pointed to the importance of client-focused services. Many projects confirmed the value of client focused services and discussed the need to involve clients in the development and planning of their projects and not treat them as passive recipients of services.

10. Creating a safe space for change (for individuals, families)
Many projects discussed the need to develop trust between the project and the community and different strategies for doing this. Some found that providing neutral and/or comfortable venues can be important for individuals, families and communities in state 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.

11. Developing a realistic strategy for sustainability
It is important for projects to develop a realistic sustainability strategy that includes identifying the type of sustainability that is sought (of outcomes, of services, of organisations) and what will be needed to achieve this. Depending on the type of project, sustainability of services might not be the critical issue in assessing its lasting impact. For example, with projects that aimed to build resources, the issue is more about the maintenance and usage of these resources (such as a playground or a manual). Some early intervention projects sought to link participants into ongoing services so they would continue to get the support they needed after the Strategy-funded project ended. However, in many cases, ongoing funding will be needed and this must be built into the project plan. Few projects were expected to be self-sustaining through income generation or drawing on the resources of participants. Without ongoing funding, the outcomes achieved, particularly the trust developed with the community, is at risk.
**Types of projects funded under the Strategy 2000-2004**

Strategy projects undertook a range of activities, including:

- **Developing and distributing facilities or resources such as playground equipment, newsletters, a website, toolkits and manuals.**

  One project built a challenge ropes course that was then used for a range of supervised activities that encourage self esteem, confidence and promote mutual support, responsibility, trust and collaboration as well as testing participants’ balance, coordination and physical fitness.

- **Providing training for parents, community members, volunteers and service providers in leadership, parenting and other living skills, and service delivery.**

  One project trained a group of volunteers to outreach to parents of young people aged 12 to 15 years, to offer them support, parenting skills, referral to professionals if needed, linkages to social support and activities.

- **Supporting families to develop healthy relationships through supported playgroups, group parenting programs, case management and providing assistance to allow people to participate in other activities, such as providing transport or childcare.**

  One project provided a guided play session to provide early intervention support to families with children aged 0 to 5 years who were not accessing childcare, to help parents establish links with early childhood professionals in the community, and to develop basic parenting skills and knowledge.

- **Mentoring, role modelling.**

  One project linked young people with high profile role models in the community, particularly from local sporting associations, to act as mentors.
- Community consultations and bringing community members together.

One project created a space in the centre of town where people (especially men who were isolated or lonely) could come for creative activities and fellowship.

Another project provided a series of workshops to engage the local community in community building. This in turn led to the development of several other activities out of the proposal.

Another project engaged local Indigenous people in reflections and dialogue on how local people, families and communities can be healed, strengthened and empowered. An ‘appreciative inquiry’ approach was taken involving six broad steps, including individual and group discussions, three collaborative workshops and reporting.

- Developing and enhancing networks and linkages, for example, partnerships between services or organisations, referring or linking clients to other services.

One project linked Chinese-speaking families to appropriate community agencies, and family and children’s services such as pre-schools.

- Initiating or running a significant community or cultural event.

A series of reconciliation events were held in a community, including a Reconciliation Harmony Ball, a Harmony barbecue and a fashion parade. The planning and implementation of these events brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

More information about the evaluation

Further details about the SFCS 2000-2004 evaluation can be found on the web at:


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.

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