

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

A National Evaluation Consortium, comprising the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), UNSW, Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and research advisers, has been contracted by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) to develop the evaluation framework for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004-2008.

The SFCS aims to: help families and communities build better futures for children; build family and community capacity; support relationships between families and the communities they live in; and improve communities' ability to help themselves. It contains four strands: *Communities for Children* (CfC), *Invest to Grow* (ItG), *Local Answers* (LA) and *Choice and Flexibility in Child Care*. This Evaluation Framework addresses the evaluation of the first three of these strands.

The framework is designed to evaluate the SFCS in relation to the Outcomes Framework developed by FaCS. The Outcomes Framework aligns with the four priority areas of the National Agenda for Early Childhood: *healthy young families; supporting families and parents; early learning and care; and child-friendly communities*. A fifth priority area specifically relates to the CfC initiative; *family and children's services work effectively as a system*. These priorities apply to the Strategy as a whole, but they apply differently to each strand of the Strategy. In this document we address each of the three strands, as well as the SFCS as a whole.

The National Evaluation (NE) will be both *formative* – contributing to the development and refinement of policy and practice in relation to the Strategy – and *summative* – addressing the effectiveness of the Strategy and its implementation. The key evaluation questions are:

- Have outcomes for children and families in relation to the four key action areas improved as a result of the Strategy?
- Which lessons have been learnt on how to achieve and sustain better outcomes for children 0-5 and their families /communities?
- Is early investment effective in terms of cost and outcomes for children?
- For which children, families or communities is it effective?
- What aspects of the model are effective?
- How effectively have resources been used?
- Has the SFCS achieved its objectives?

The evaluation framework consists of the following interlocking components:

### **Communities for Children**

#### *Outcome Evaluation*

#### Family Study

Service Users Before and After Study

Outcomes Indicators Framework

*Process evaluation*

Comprehensive Community Profile

Demographic profile

Baseline service mapping

Service Coordination Study

Strategic level snapshots

Operational level snapshots

Partnership Model Study

Progress Reports Analysis

*Themed Case Studies*

*Cost effectiveness Evaluation*

*Synthesis Report*

**Invest to Grow Evaluation**

*Before and After Questionnaire for Parents*

*Themed Case Studies*

*Progress Reports Analysis*

*Synthesis Report*

**Local Answers Evaluation**

*Themed Case Studies*

*Progress Reports Analysis*

*Synthesis Report*

**Cross Strategy evaluation**

*Themed studies*

*Promising Practice Profile*

*Synthesis Report*

## Core Evaluation Components

Although the methodologies of the different strands of SFCS vary, they do share features in common. In particular, they all seek to measure the outcomes and relate them to the inputs, processes and outputs. The context in which the initiatives operate is also taken into account, and for each strand of the Strategy the question of *what works?* is expanded by asking, *why it works, under what circumstances and for whom?*

### Communities For Children Initiative (CfC)

The bulk of the National Evaluation will focus on evaluating CfC, and in particular on capturing outcomes for children and families in CfC communities.

The overall evaluation questions for CfC are:

- Have outcomes for children and families in CfC sites improved as a result of the Initiative?
- Do services in CfC sites work more effectively as a system?
- Are CfC communities more child-friendly?
- How successful has the Facilitating Partner model been in bringing about these changes?

The evaluation of CfC comprises an *outcomes, process* and a *cost effectiveness* evaluation. Each is outlined below.

#### *Outcomes Evaluation for CfC.*

The outcomes evaluation has two primary methods: The study of families in the CfC communities (the *Family Study*) and the *Outcomes Framework Indicators*. The National Evaluation is also developing a *Service User Before and After* study. It is intended that the Service Users Questionnaire will be completed by the main carer, either as a self-completed questionnaire or together with a practitioner or local evaluator, depending on the service and the circumstances of the carer.

#### *Family Study*

The Family Study will form the core of the CfC outcome study and will be the primary mechanism for collecting data on children, family and community outcomes in CfC communities. In the first wave, the Family Study will collect data on approximately 1500 families in up to 12 CfC sites and 5 contrast sites. The study will be conducted in three waves to enable a longer-term follow up of children in CfC communities. The first wave is scheduled for February 2006, with subsequent waves planned for February 2007 and February 2008.

#### *Outcome Indicators Framework*

The outcome indicators framework uses secondary administrative data to determine the extent of community level changes in the wellbeing of children, families and communities over the life of the Strategy. As well as assisting in determining the effectiveness of the Strategy, the Outcomes Framework sets out population level information that communities can draw on for their own planning purposes.

### *Service Users Study – Before and After*

For many projects funded by CfC (and also some Invest to Grow and Local Answers projects) it will be important to measure short-term outcomes for families who access services. We have therefore designed questionnaires that can be used by projects, if they choose, for the purposes of measuring short-term outcomes. This will allow consistency across projects.

### *Process Evaluation of CfC*

The logic model of CfC asserts that the Facilitating Partner model will improve services in CfC communities and strengthen communities, ultimately improving outcomes for children and families. The aim of the CfC process evaluation is to determine whether and how services in the communities have improved.

The process evaluation will include a comprehensive community profile of each of the CfC communities, an assessment of how well services for young children in the community work together (strategic and operational snapshots), a study of the effectiveness of the SFCS partnership model and an analysis of progress reports provided by the Facilitating Partner to FaCS.

### *Cost Effectiveness of Communities for Children*

The cost effectiveness analysis will use the quantitative data from the outcomes evaluation and programme financial management to provide information about the value added by the initiative. The aim is to compare the goals of the initiative with its outcomes and costs, thereby assessing the extent to which the costs produced tangible benefits.

### **Invest to Grow (ItG)**

Key National Evaluation questions for ItG are:

- To what extent have ItG projects contributed to improved outcomes for children and families in relation to the four priority outcome areas (*healthy young families, early learning and care, supporting families and parents, and child-friendly communities*)?<sup>1</sup>
- What were the most important factors that facilitated improved outcomes?
- What were the factors that facilitated and inhibited the project logic models being implemented in different contexts?
- Which of the models were implemented in the most effective and efficient manner?
- Which of the models are most suitable for broader implementation?

The National Evaluation will design a range of tools that ItG projects may choose to use in their local evaluations, including a Service User Study. In addition, ItG will be

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Invest to Grow does not include the priority outcome area ‘family and children’s services work effectively as a system’.

included in the Themed Case Studies, and the National Evaluation will analyse the progress reports that projects provide to FaCS. The National Evaluation will also prepare a Synthesis Report summarising the findings from the local evaluations of ItG and discussing which models are most suitable for wider national implementation.

### **Local Answers (LA)**

The LA evaluation will examine the following questions:

- To what extent did funded projects address the LA aims?
- To what extent did funded projects achieve the LA Outcomes?
- Of the projects that appeared to be most successful, what were the success factors?
- What were the unintended project outcomes (positive and negative)?
- How were these consequences addressed?
- Was the LA initiative well managed – both by the Department and project holders?

The emphasis of the National Evaluation of LA will be on reporting project level data, supplied to and managed by FaCS, against the Outcomes Framework. In addition, good practice will be identified through the Promising Practice Profile conducted by the National Evaluation.

Key findings from this component of the evaluation will be included in the Synthesis Report and will identify general principles and themes arising from the implementation of the whole Strategy. LA will also be part of the Themed Studies. Where appropriate, LA projects will be able to use the Service Users Questionnaire and the various process evaluation instruments.

### **Cross Strategy Evaluation**

The Evaluation will analyse findings across the entire SFCS initiative to draw out core themes and lessons learned. This will consist of Themed Studies, Promising Practice Profile and the Synthesis Report.

#### *Themed Case Studies*

The purpose of the Themed Case Studies will be to explore particular topics in depth. These studies will enhance our understanding of ‘what works’ by exploring in more depth ‘why’ and ‘how’ things work. These studies will cross the three SFCS initiatives that are covered in the evaluation – Communities for Children, Invest to Grow and Local Answers. It is intended that the Themed Studies will be undertaken in partnership with the local evaluators and that the themes will be chosen in negotiation with the SFCS Partnership and FaCS.

#### *Promising Practice Profile*

One of the key objectives of this Evaluation is to identify ‘what works’ in early intervention, in order to identify, validate and disseminate promising practice arising from the Strategy. Promising Practice will be identified through a call for submissions from sites and projects and from Local Evaluators. These will be

shortlisted for external validation. After external validation a selection of practices found to be promising against the established criteria are to be identified and disseminated as Promising Practice.

### **Synthesis Report**

The Synthesis Report will combine information from the each of the initiatives of the Strategy and will draw out common themes relating to effective early intervention. This will focus not only on ‘what works’ in terms of outcomes, but also effective implementation issues at the strategic and operational levels. This report will seek to synthesise all the data collected from various sources including the National Evaluation, local evaluations and project data to identify general principles and themes arising from the implementation of the Strategy.