

## 1 Introduction

The Stronger Families and Communities (SFCS) is an Australian Government initiative giving families, their children and communities the opportunity to build a better future. The new Strategy focuses on the Government's concerns about the health, well being and capacity of many young Australians. Of particular concern are increases in substantiated cases of child abuse, the numbers and poor outcomes of children in foster care, the rising levels of childhood obesity, the incidence of some chronic illnesses among the general population of Australian children, and the broad spectrum of poor outcomes for Indigenous children.

The Intergenerational Report highlights demographic pressures of an ageing population and shrinking of labour force growth. Doing more to assist people to reach their full potential will both increase their productive contribution to the economy and reduce the extent to which they need to draw upon the community's scarce resources. Compelling evidence supports appropriate intervention during the first five years of a child's life can significantly assist a child to reach their full potential.

Evidence shows that assistance and intervention at critical transition points in the life cycle from before and immediately after birth and through the first five years of life improves outcomes in health, education and employment. In particular, timely intervention reduces the likelihood of later substance misuse, mental illness and suicide, domestic violence, child abuse and crime and increases the likelihood of children continuing education through high school and beyond and being employed as adults.

The Strategy has a focus on improving child outcomes and is a reflection of the Government's commitment to early childhood, with a particular focus on the National Agenda for Early Childhood's four key action areas where evidence suggests the potential for large long-term gains.

The Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) contracted the UNSW Consortium to develop the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) Evaluation Framework. The Consortium comprises the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and research advisers. The SFCS aims to help families and communities build better futures for children; to build family and community capacity; to support relationships between families and the communities they live in; and to improve communities' ability to help themselves. It contains four initiatives: *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.

### 1.1 Evaluation Framework

This document outlines the proposed SFCS National Evaluation Framework. The methodology is designed to evaluate both the SFCS as a whole and each of the three strands (CfC, ItG and LA). However, more detail is presented for CfC given the complexity of evaluating this initiative. In addition, we describe the roles of the local evaluators that have been appointed by CfC sites and ItG projects with SFCS funding. Although local evaluators have been appointed by and are accountable to each site or project, they are also required to contribute to the National Evaluation.

The evaluation framework is designed to address the various elements of the SFCS Outcomes Framework developed by FaCS and aligned with the key priority areas of the National Agenda for Early Childhood. Across the SFCS these are:

- Healthy young families
- Supporting families & parents
- Early learning and care
- Child-friendly communities

And additionally for CfC:

- Family and children's services working effectively as a system

These elements of the Outcomes Framework apply to the Strategy as a whole, but apply differently to each strand.

## **1.2 Aims of the Evaluation**

The overarching aims of the National Evaluation are to:

- Capture the lessons learnt from the SFCS on how to achieve and sustain better outcomes for children 0-5 and their families /communities
- Determine whether early investment is effective in terms of cost and outcomes for children
- Identify which children, families and communities SFCS is most effective
- Establish which aspects of the model are effective
- Gauge how effectively resources have been used
- Ascertain whether SFCS has achieved its objectives overall.

## **1.3 Formative and Summative Evaluation**

The evaluation has two overall purposes – to help policy makers and practitioners refine and develop the process through which the SFCS initiative is implemented (formative evaluation), and to measure the impact of the Strategy (summative evaluation).

The aims of the formative aspect of the evaluation are:

- To influence policy makers, service managers and practitioners to adopt promising practice
- To contribute to the evidence base for early intervention.

The summative component of the evaluation aims:

- To determine the effectiveness and sustainability of the SFCS initiative
- To assess the extent to which the Strategy has achieved the outcomes set out in the SFCS Outcomes Framework.

## **1.4 Core Evaluation Components**

Although the methodologies for evaluating each initiative of SFCS differ, they share some core features. Each component of the evaluation seeks to capture the outcomes as set out in the SFCS Outcomes Framework, and to relate those to the **inputs**

(resource allocation), **processes** (activities) and **outputs** (results of activities). The evaluation also takes into account the **context** in which the initiatives operate. For each initiative of the Strategy we will therefore go beyond the question, *what works?* to consider *why it works, under what circumstances and for whom*.

## 1.5 Evaluation Questions

The National Evaluation of SFCS will seek to answer the following questions:

- Have outcomes for children and families in relation to 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 SFCS achieved its objectives?

These evaluation questions and a summary of the methodologies used to address them are summarised in Table 1.1.

## 1.6 Outline of the Evaluation Framework Document

This document presents the evaluation framework for Communities for Children, Invest to Grow, and Local Answers, before describing each component of the cross-Strategy evaluation. The 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

AEDI

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*

**Table 1.1 Stronger Families and Communities Strategy – Summary of Evaluation Questions and Components**

Evaluation Questions	Components										
	Outcome Indicators Framework	Family Study	Service Users Study	Comp. Community Profile	Service Co-ord Study	Partnership Model Study	Progress Reports Analysis	Themed Case Studies	Promising Practice Profiles	Cost Effectiveness	Synthesis
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 SFCS achieved its objectives?							✓				✓