

Developing a Plan for Families: Listening to the Community



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Abstract

The paper presents a report on an extensive consultation with families and children across the nation's largest State to inform cross-sectoral public policy development. The Western Australian Family and Children's Policy Office together with the Family & Children's Advisory Council conducted the consultation, assisted by a number of community facilitators. The views of families and children were seen as central to the development of the State's first Five Year Plan for Families.

Families and children could express their views in a number of ways - through group discussions and/or individual submissions by mail, telephone, fax, email and online. Special groups were held with men, indigenous families, newly emerging migrant communities, children and young people. This would appear to be one of the first times in recent years that young people aged from three to twenty years have been consulted directly on family issues. The views of service providers and peak organisations provided another source of input.

The consultation questions were based on a literature review. These questions covered three areas: (1) strengthening individuals and relationships within the family, (2) strengthening family links with the neighbourhood and the community; and (3) the role of government, community and business organisations in developing work practices and in delivering services that are responsive to families.

The project used a qualitative data analysis approach backed up by qualitative data collection covering key issues identified in the group discussions to ensure that both a richness and diversity of views was obtained as well as an indication of the extent to which these views were held.

An outline of the approach taken and a summary of the key findings will be presented and their implications discussed. The emerging issues span the themes of parenting, relationships, fathers, work and family, community building and urban design, family friendly business and Government services.

Introduction

Academic research doesn't always have a strong or direct influence on public policy development. And those of us working in government recognise how often public consultation forms a final rather than initial step in public policy development, after the policy direction and much of the detail has already been developed.

Since the community is generally the major stakeholder in social policy, this seems a curious state of affairs.

Recent developments in stakeholder theory, as discussed by Burton and Dunn (1996) in relation to businesses and employee volunteering, suggests that companies should define their stakeholders more broadly than simply those individuals and groups who have direct economic or contractual relationships with the firm. Evolving from feminist theory, their concept of stakeholder encompasses a caring relationship, rather than one of mutual obligation. By expanding the concept of stakeholder to include a very wide range of individuals and groups in the corporate sector, members of the wider community become unambiguously the most important stakeholders for government.

Burton and Dunn's (1996) work on caring corporate relationships with all stakeholders also links neatly with the current interest in the development of social capital outside the family through mutually beneficial trust, transmission of norms and networks (Winter, 2000).

It is clear therefore that individuals and their families are stakeholders in family policy making. Families potentially contribute towards social capital at a family, community and national level. The very relationships which make them stakeholders in society help define the ways that human capital and an effective society can be secured.

Government has a responsibility, which it does not always find easy to meet, at a very minimum, to seek input from consumers of government services and from the wider community and to apply the findings to service development. Kate Silburn (2000) in Victoria recently conducted a review of consultation approaches with a wide range of consumer groups previously marginalised from contributing to health service development. She concluded that, in this area, specific strategies targeting particular special needs groups do yield valuable feedback about how to provide services that are accessible and meet the needs of these diverse groups. However, the obstacle seemed to be in ensuring that health care planners use the feedback.

It would seem to me that if government itself is conducting the consumer consultation, there is a greater likelihood of implementation of the findings, than if the consultation is conducted outside government, or even for government.

Another critical factor may be timing. At what stage of the policy development process is consumer input sought? Frequently the public policy consultation phase is used for checking or confirming the general thrust of proposed changes, or even simply to be able to say that consultation has taken place. Unfortunately by this stage the general community may not fully understand the framework in which the policy changes have been formulated. The legislative, administrative or political framework

that has shaped the bureaucrats' policy development may therefore not be available to the wider community. Public views then may appear irrelevant, off-target or generally negative, because they may question basic assumptions.

On the other hand, peak organisations representing groups of stakeholders often *do* understand these legislative and other frameworks, and can ensure that they couch their input within these terms, helping to ensure they are consulted again in future. However, time and other resource constraints may limit the ability of the professional employees of stakeholder organisations to consult widely with their constituents.

Background

Recently in Western Australia, something rather different in the area of family policy development has started. A new Family & Children's Policy Office (FCPO) was established from June 1999 with a brief to develop strategies which improve the quality of life and promote the interests of Western Australian families and children. Its first major initiative is the development of a Five Year Plan based on a State-wide consultation with families and children. The plan was to be cross-sectoral and the direct consultation with families and children was to be central to the policy framework. This was not to be last minute consultation with the community, but basic agenda setting, leading to the development of a community partnership from the start. The Minister wanted families, young people and children to be involved directly in setting the agenda for the newly established office and for her advisory council to be involved in the process of seeking the views of the community. She was also clear that the consultation process needed to engage – or at least connect with – as many households in WA as possible. This meant that outsourcing the policy research by engaging a market research company to conduct a series of focus groups was not a feasible option.

To complement the Five Year Plan, an innovative business strategy was also to be developed to promote a positive response to families by the government, business and community sectors. The *FamilyOne* Business Strategy, which is currently under development, will acknowledge improvement in the family friendliness of workplace policies and practices and of customer services, across business, government, non-government sectors. This strategy also has a research base; it is informed by market research conducted by the Office involving business, government and community 40 organisations.

The Five Year Plan for Families will be Western Australia's first broad family policy. Neither a specific political framework nor a specific definition of family was prescribed. This paper describes the consultation phase, which concluded (for now) in May this year. The report of this consultation was released in May 2000, six months after the consultation phase was launched.

Challenges

The FCPO faced a number of challenges in conducting the consultation as its first major public initiative, shortly after the Office's establishment.

Small staff and budget

Solutions:

- Some related government agencies and community organisations released members of their staff to act as facilitators and scribes in the community forums;
- Do as much hands-on publicity, consultation and data analysis as possible.

Public Profile Issues

The new FCPO was quite unknown to many people, or for others, easily confused with the existing, but separate and much larger, WA Department of Family & Children's Services which has a very different role. Additionally, as in other jurisdictions, the Department's child protection work had attracted a particular public profile.

Solutions:

- Establish the FCPO at a separate location from the Department of Family & Children's Services.
- Develop and publicly launch a distinct corporate image.
- Adopt a framework that emphasises family strengths rather than family deficits.
- Consult very widely, not just with families who are usually the recipients of services from the Department of Family & Children's Services.

Limited timeframe

The consultation, and the Five Year Plan to be based on it, are to be completed by October 2000, only 17 months after the appointment of the first CEO.

Solutions:

- Optimise the use of the small cohesive team supplemented with volunteers and work closely with members of the Family & Children's Advisory Council.
- Work extremely hard!

Role of Theory

On our side was the Ministerial directive that the public consultation was to be central to the Plan. Politics, ideology, and theory were not. This did not mean that family research could not play a part.

Gregory Bateson (1972, 1991) argues that it would be very difficult to approach any form of policy research without a framework at all. Although the grounded theorists may dispute the point, Bateson's work argues that a purely inductive approach is impossible.

However, by taking a qualitative, rather than a quantitative approach, the actual words of families and children can more directly inform policy development. The type of qualitative inquiry used in the policy research reported here more closely resembles the orientational approach described by Patton (1990) than the other varieties of theoretical tradition. The purpose of the policy research was to discover

the views of families and children about ways to strengthen families, rather than to inform theory building about families or to measure family strengths.

The selection of the family strengths model and a literature review which spanned Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Canada and the US, set a broad framework for the consultation. A public consultation paper based on the literature review suggested broad strategies that strengthen families and communities, and illustrated them with a sample of local initiatives from across the State. The consultation paper asked a series of open ended questions about

- what strengthened families,
- what strengthened families' links with their communities, and
- what government and business could do to be more family friendly.

(The questions are provided in an appendix to this paper.) The consultation paper was distributed widely to families, as well as to government and community organisations and can be viewed from the *FamilyOne* website www.familyone.wa.gov.au .

Western Australia – a Profile

Many of you have never been to Western Australia and many Western Australians have never been “over east”. So, a few words about the State with the largest land area which is equivalent to the combined area of NSW and Queensland or about half the land area of Europe! Western Australia occupies 34 per cent of Australia's land area but is inhabited by only 10 per cent of Australia's population.

Nearly three quarters of WA's 1.8 million population live in Perth, reportedly the world's most geographically remote capital. There are 628,000 WA households - 446 000 families, 284 000 of them include children. Three per cent of WA's population and of their families identify themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Most ATSI families comprise a couple with children under 15. And nearly a third of WA's children have at least one parent born overseas.

Only nine Statistical Local Areas outside Perth have populations greater than 10 000 and their distances from Perth range from 74 km (Mandurah) to 2 200 km (Broome). An accessible consultation process would clearly involve much travel!

The Consultation Process

It was expected that many government and peak organisations would want to make submissions to the consultation. However, the consultation was essentially a process to hear **directly** from family members, not to hear their voices filtered through the agencies and organisations with which they have contact. By listening directly we also expected to hear from families from a somewhat wider range of backgrounds.

The first challenge was to engage as many families as possible, both by informing them about the consultation process and at the same time sending a message about the importance of families.

People could hear about the consultation in a range of ways:

- A pamphlet outlining the purpose and processes of the consultation was delivered to almost every household in Western Australia. This pamphlet also served to raise the profile of the family policy agenda.
- Hundreds of government, local government and community organisations received information packages, and many of these were followed up by telephone.
- Posters were displayed in community venues.
- Media releases targeted community newspapers and sometimes led to feature stories.
- Radio advertisements and unpaid publicity interviews were broadcast over local and regional radio stations.

To ensure as inclusive a process as possible many alternative ways of participating were offered.

- General community forums that operated in a similar way to facilitated focus groups, addressing the key questions posed in the consultation paper (See appendix). 28 of these were held in the metropolitan area and 23 in the country.
- Special focus groups were conducted for Aboriginal people, new migrant groups, university students, for children and young people ranging from 3 to 15, including homeless youth in a refuge, for families with a member with a disability or a mental illness. It was expected that the general community forums would attract women particularly so special discussion groups were held for men only.
- Individual responses sent by mail, email, over the website or by phone.
- A group of young people responded to some of the questions over the Kids Helpline (if their call did not require counselling and with their consent)
- A talkback television forum was held for those who could not get to a community forum venue.
- Many organisations made submissions and some peak organisations were interviewed.

Participation

Over 1 000 people took part in one of the general or special community forums which took place in 22 metropolitan and 16 country locations throughout WA. Over 400 individuals and organisations sent submissions. Altogether over 1400 people had their say one way or another, a substantial number really, but comprising less than one per cent of WA's total population.

In March 2000, when our country consultation strategies were in full swing, staff and volunteers traveled 32 000 person-kilometres, by road and air. There was only one major mechanical breakdown. A staff member and the chairperson of the Advisory Council (aged 79 years, the widow of a former Governor of Western Australia) were stranded in a rental vehicle between Broome and Derby in 30 degree C heat with one barley sugar between them!

At all the general community forums structured participant feedback was invited. Satisfaction levels were high though many would have liked more time. The issues were considered relevant and people felt they were listened to. Demographic details collected at the same time suggested that the age of those who took part in the

general community forums were somewhat older than the general population, and, as expected, women were over-represented (74 per cent).

Table 1: Participant feedback at general community forums

Agree	Total	Metro N=202	Country N=178
I am satisfied with the opportunity to voice my views today	95%	97%	94%
The facilitator listened to me	99%	99%	98%
The topics discussed were relevant to the issues facing families and children in WA	93%	94%	92%
My opinions and experiences were valued by the group	80%	80%	79%
Enough time was given to each topic	53%	50%	56%
I had something to say on most of the topics	81%	86%	76%
The facilitator made sure everyone who wanted to, had a chance to share their opinions	96%	98%	93%

Data Collection and Analysis

At an early stage it was decided to take a qualitative approach to data analysis, aided by the computer content analysis tool developed in Melbourne and known as NUD*IST. This approach enabled the best use of the different sources of information provided by the individual responses and the forum discussions. This approach to data analysis required the transcription of 400 individual responses and 105 records taken at the discussion groups – a huge undertaking. Useable quality audio-recording of community forums was not feasible because of poor acoustic quality with up to four concurrent discussion groups taking place in the one venue. In addition the transcription of the tapes posed a further resource burden.

Instead, scribes (who were not taking part in the discussion) were provided for each group by the FCPO. They took down as far as possible verbatim records of the range of views expressed in discussion, as well as any consensual views.

Data analysis using NUD*IST yielded over 170 codes and these were reduced to 25 major themes which have clear policy implications. The use of NUD*IST made the reporting process easier and enabled it to keep close links with what people actually said - a sense of the raw data in all its richness. NUD*IST was invaluable in identifying pertinent direct quotes from families, which could be used liberally in the written report of the consultation to add to or illustrate the broad themes.

Reporting

The summary report of the consultation, entitled, Listening to Families and Children in the New Millennium, can be downloaded from the *FamilyOne* website at (www.familyone.wa.gov.au). Hard copy versions have been distributed to participants and to government agencies and community organisations.

The report was structured around eight areas, each of which flows directly from the open ended questions used in the consultation:

Table 2: The 8 areas of interest

1. Family Relationships	5. Communities: the Physical Environment
2. Fathers and Families	6. Work and Families
3. Children's Learning & Families	7. Services and Families
4. Families, Neighbourhoods and Communities	8. Coordination of Services

For each area three or four of the main suggestions made by families that would strengthen families and their links with communities and improve the family friendliness of services, according to families and children, were identified from the coding. They are listed together in Tables 3a to 3c.

Table 3a: Ways to strengthen individual families, WA families & children, 2000

To strengthen individual families	
▪ Value family relationships	▪ Promote male help-seeking & meet these service needs
▪ Prevent family breakdown	▪ Stimulate early childhood learning in the home
▪ Services to help in a crisis	▪ Develop partnerships between school and family
▪ Value the importance of fathers	▪ Make the most of technology in children's learning
▪ Preparation for fatherhood	

It doesn't matter how you define a family, what matters is good relationships
Northam forum

Table 3b: Ways to strengthen families' links with community, WA families & children, 2000

To strengthen links between family & community	
▪ Be neighbourly	▪ Make it easier to get around
▪ Create lively supportive communities	▪ Address issues of job insecurity
▪ Respond to young people's needs	▪ Make it easier to balance work and family
▪ Safer home environments	▪ Child care at work
▪ Improve community facilities	

Sense of community is a connection of like minded people... Community gives a sense of belonging.

Fremantle forum

Table 3c: Ways to make services more family friendly, WA families & children, 2000

More family friendly services	
▪ Family friendly approach	▪ Better planning
▪ Provide more information about services	▪ Improved communication
▪ Improve access to services	▪ Provide services locally
▪ Adopt a cross government approach	

We feel that a whole-of-government approach is essential if Western Australian families are to feel more secure in their relationships, their work, their homes and their communities.

Mail response, Beechboro

Young people's views were practical, positive and often went to the heart of the issue. For example, 15 year olds in a south west town said:

What strengthens families is commitment, having a family pet, laughter and having fun, watching a sunrise together, having morals and rules to obey but not too strict, gossiping with your parents, teaching them modern day stuff. Kids need to know that they are loved in a family.

Busselton Senior High School students

Though our report comprises the views of Western Australian families, it is likely that they are similar to the opinions of many others in reflecting family aspirations.

Families were also asked what do they see as the most important issues facing families into the new millennium. Although there was a wide diversity of responses to this question, the most commonly raised issues are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Major issues faced by families, WA families & children, 2000

▪ Work	▪ Finance	▪ Education
▪ Safety	▪ Alcohol & drug abuse	▪ Relationship breakdown
▪ Health		

Discussion

The community consultation has achieved a number of our objectives. It has canvassed in a very inclusive way, the views of the wider community about matters on concern to families and children. While expending a lot of our energy over several months, the financial cost of this exercise has not been very great.

Though some of the messages we received from families and children in the consultation may to some seem rather obvious, the significant point is that families themselves, not organisations speaking on their behalf, have expressed these views.

We now have a large database comprising the views of community participants on a wide range of issues and this can be updated. In fact there is perhaps a realistic expectation in the community that their views on family matters will continue to be sought. The process, including the *FamilyOne* web presence, has created an expectation of interactivity in a Government community relationship.

While not strictly representative of the community at large, our participants are probably more representative of the wider community than the usual government consultation strategy when limited to submissions from peak organisations, with the possible extension to an invitation for written submissions through a small newspaper advertisement. The shortcomings of the general community forums were addressed by supplementing these with special forums targeting particular groups likely to be under-represented.

Although Western Australian government policy encourages the use of the internet by the wider community (see www.onlinewa.com.au), it is too early to rely too heavily on internet and web based solutions for community consultation. The views obtained that way are likely to be even less representative until internet use is as common and as accessible as telephones.

To complement the qualitative approach described here a large sample telephone survey was carried out recently to measure family opinions of the family friendliness of workplaces and customer services, as well as to assess indicators of the strength of connection to family and to community. These indicators will form a baseline against which future measures can be compared as family policies are implemented over the scope of the Five Year Plan. The data from this survey has only been available in the last week or so and will be the subject of a future report. However, it is likely that as the focus of the community shifts towards the family friendliness of

customer services and workplaces, the community's expectations of family friendliness may increase.

The Office has begun to develop partnerships with over 40 State government agencies and a number of key community organisations to discuss the findings of the consultation which are of relevance to the organisation and to identify current and planned initiatives, which address these issues. The feedback from the consultation is being used to guide planning so that particular family issues for services and workplaces can be addressed. Through this process the interests of families and children are being promoted in the government and community sectors. (The business sector is being addressed concurrently through the recognition scheme being developed under the *FamilyOne* Business Strategy.) Our planning process will include some careful priority setting for action over the next few years.

The consultation process – the publicity and people's participation – in itself has begun the process of sending a message to the community that families are important and that the government acknowledges this.

Interestingly, we did not see symptoms of the “aorta syndrome” – the government ought ta' do this or do that. In fact, many participants commented on the proper role of government in strengthening and supporting families. Some felt strongly that governments should be actually less involved in family life. Others pointed to the needs of those families that seem to need help. For a range of reasons, many felt more comfortable if those services were actually delivered by the non-government sector. Families don't seem to be insistent that services they need must be delivered by government, rather than by the other sectors. In fact, our recent phone survey suggests that government services are rated as significantly less family friendly than services delivered by either local government, business or the community sector.

Our Office is looking to develop better ways of working together. Government is frequently seen the hands-on solver of problems. We aim to foster partnerships between government, business, the community sector and families themselves, which will contribute to the development of social capital both within families and within communities.

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Appendix: Questions asked in Community Consultation

INDIVIDUAL FAMILIES & CHILDREN

Relationships & families

Key Question

1. What support should be available for families to assist with strengthening relationships?

Prompts

- What factors are most likely to promote happy and stable family relationships?
- What support should be available for family relationships?
- for couples
- before you become a parent
- for parents and young children
- for parents and adolescents
- any other situations.

Fathers & families

Key Questions

- 2a How can fathers be encouraged to play a greater role in families, including more actively parenting their children?
- 2b How can men be encouraged to seek help and support if they are experiencing family problems?

Families & Learning

Key Questions

- 3a. How can parents become more involved in their children's education?

Prompts

- In the home
- Supporting their child's learning in the classroom
- Financially
- Decision making

- 3b. What impact has the Internet and technology in general had on your family?

Prompts

- How children spend their time
- How communication occurs in the family
- Accessing information

Families and health

Key Question

- 4. How can families encourage children and young people to live healthier lifestyles?**

Prompts

- What are the key factors that enable you and your family to maintain good physical and mental health?
- Which family health facilities and services would you like to see in your local community?

Families in Crisis

Key Question

- 5. How can families be supported so that they cope better in a crisis?**

Prompts

- What sort of services do you think help?
- What assistance have you found helpful in overcoming a personal or family crisis?

FAMILIES, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

Families and home

Key Question

- 6. What can be done to assist families to feel safe and secure in their homes?**

Prompts

- Eg. Noise, nuisance in the home
- Eg. Safe parks, being close to shops, schools

Families and neighbourhoods

Key Question

- 7. What facilities are missing from your neighbourhood that would be of benefit to families with children?**

Prompts

- What do you like about the neighbourhood in which you live?
- How would you like to see a sense of neighbourhood developed in your local community?

A sense of community

Key Question

8. What community activities do you know of that can bring people of different ages together?

Prompts

- Eg. Links between generations
- Eg. Events and celebrations

FAMILIES, BUSINESS & GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Families and work

Key Question

9. What changes in your workplace would make it easier for you to manage your family and work responsibilities?

- (If few group members work outside the home adapt question accordingly):
What changes in the workplace would make it easier for you or your partner to manage your family and work responsibilities (Think about your partner's workplace or if you were to go out to work)

Family focused business & customer services

Key Question

10. What could business do to be more family friendly?

Family focused government policies & services

Key Questions

11a. What is an effective way for families to obtain more information about government services?

11b. In what practical ways can government coordinate services to better assist families and children?

Prompts

- Where would you go to find out about services available for your family?

CLOSING QUESTION (10 mins)

12. What do you see as the five most important issues facing West Australian families and children as we move into the new millennium?

