

Regional Family Support Councils

Right Initiative: Wrong Vehicle?

The National Council for the International Year of the Family, appointed as an independent advisory body to the Minister for Family Services, was asked to make recommendations for the development of a 'sustainable and long-term framework of family policies'. In preparing its recommendations, the Council drew on the results of a series of consultations which it conducted around Australia during the Year. *Creating the Links*, the December 1994 report to the Federal Government, was the outcome of the work of the Council (see also the article by Ilene Wolcott, in this issue).

The *Creating the Links* report notes that 'many participants [of the consultations] expressed the view that an infrastructure of locally available, family-centred resources should be developed and available to all who seek them, as part of the normal expectations of community life, rather than being centred on family crisis and breakdown' (National Council 1994, p.14).

During the last three years, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has also been looking at the issue of local functioning of services in its Australian Living Standards Study. During this study 1000 service providers in four States and the Northern Territory were interviewed about service provision to their own local areas. One of the continuing messages coming from providers was that their areas did not need a host of new services, but rather better resourcing of existing services and better coordination of program design at the funding source.

In recognition of the need for a local focus to service provision and coordination, the *Creating the Links* report, under the heading 'Recognising regional diversity' (National Council 1994, p.24), proposed that:

'... a Commonwealth funded pilot program be established, to set up locally

In late 1994 the National Council for the International Year of the Family produced a report for the Federal Government called *Creating the Links: Families and Social Responsibility*. The report contains some 20 priority recommendations for further action. Here, **CHRISTINE KILMARTIN discusses the recommendation relating to the establishment of Regional Family Support Councils.**

constituted Regional Family Support Councils, two such programs in each State/Territory, in an urban and rural area, as considered appropriate. The focus of the Councils would be on support and prevention, rather than on crisis intervention. The functions of the councils would . . .

- monitor the families' profile of each area;
- identify the priority needs of families in that region;
- identify the resources that already exist (both people resources, physical resources and facilities) which could be built upon to improve family support within a region;
- advise on the funding of programs that would enhance and strengthen all families and act as a resource for all families in their education and caring tasks; and
- monitor and evaluate the achievement of their objectives.'

This is an interesting initiative which raises the status of planning for families somewhat closer to that recently given to regional economic planning through the Kelty Report, the McKinsey Report and Working Nation. It is something which has been recognised as needed for some time and it is encouraging to see that it has been picked up so positively by the Council. In particular, those service providers interviewed in the Australian Living Standards Study would endorse the emphasis on support and prevention, although under particular circumstances, as one of them said so expressively in the study (Kilmartin with Kolar 1994): 'Most of the human service areas would offer improved outcomes from a shift to early intervention – if they had the staff to both drain the swamp and deal with the alligators.'

And that, no doubt, expresses a major concern of a host of providers, namely, that they do not believe that they currently have sufficient resources to come anywhere near dealing with issues in a satisfactory way. Any proposed Regional Council, therefore, would need to be seen not to be drawing from already scarce resources for its operations.

Apart from this, there are five other points of possible concern about the IYF proposal as it stands. These are: (i) the overlap of functions between the proposed Councils and the already established Family Resource Centres; (ii) the limited number per state and hence the minimal coverage which would be achieved, and the establishment of priorities needed to decide upon two only per state; (iii) the pilot status of the proposals and previous experience with converting pilot to full-scale programs; (iv) the lack of links with economic planning

and with the established regional development bodies, and the duplication of regional planning and monitoring bodies; and (v) the need to address cross-departmental funding gaps and overlaps in existing regional services to families.

i **Overlap with Family Resource Centres**

This recommendation arouses memories of the establishment of Family Resource Centres in the early 1990s. Originally, 15 pilot sites were planned, of which 11 were eventually established (see below). Each centre covers something more than one local government area, but their catchments are limited for the most part (with the particular exceptions of Cairns and Alice Springs) to a confined surrounding region. And the grounds on which these sites were chosen, although linked with concepts of social justice, are somewhat unclear and possibly relate to the need to find relatively quickly those sites which would be able to act upon the initiatives proposed. However, while the Family Resource Centres also had a function of coordination of local service provision, their original aims and their current *modi operandi* reflect quite closely

almost all of the functions outlined above for the Regional Family Support Councils.

For instance, a 1991 document identifies the expected outcomes of the establishment of Family Resource Centres as: improved information and data on the needs of families in the area, the range of family related services operating in the area and the social, physical and personal barriers to accessing existing services; improved overall coordination of existing family related services; better dissemination of information and data to services operating in the area and to Government; improved access by families to services; and enhanced quality of services for families. A program of self-evaluation was also built into their design and a subsequent evaluation has been conducted.

The Family Resource Centres did not specifically have the key advisory role being suggested for the Regional Family Support Councils but it is clear from a recent description of the Centres (McBain 1994) that under particular circumstances, they have stepped in to fill such a role: 'In Far North Queensland, the Cairns-based service has been working . . . on human services policy principles for the integrated regional planning exercise FNQ [Far North Queensland] 2010 . . . Ipswich is also resourcing an active

community consultative committee which is developing input into the working party processes of the SEQ [South East Queensland] 2001 regional planning exercise . . . In both processes the Family Resource Centres are reporting significant gains in the understanding by planners of community needs and social impacts.'

It is unclear whether, in the current recommendation for Regional Family Support Councils, that advisory role is directly to the community, to funding bodies, to the federal government or to a variety of agents. And it is arguable that some of that advice might better be coordinated elsewhere than at a series of local interfaces, to ensure that the considerable expertise required in the generation of such advice can be accessed.

Overall, then, there are a great number of similarities between the functions of the currently operating Family Resource Centres and those of the proposed Regional Family Support Councils, even though the Family Resource Centres are themselves responsible in the first instance to a community committee of management. There is potential for some confusion in the establishment of a number of pilot Regional Family Support Councils, particularly if any geographic over-

lap occurs between these and the already functioning Family Resource Centres.

ii Limited Number Per State

With only two pilots proposed for each state, it is obvious that scope will either be limited geographically or diffused across a vast area. The somewhat uneven distribution of Family Resource Centres (none in Western Australia or Tasmania) might need to be taken into account when looking at priorities, should the recommendation be implemented. While this may be seen to be satisfactory for a pilot, the issue taken up below raises some concern about such an uneven distribution.

Establishing only two per state means establishing a very clear set of criteria for the choice of regions to be covered. It also means being clear beforehand about what will be expected in the evaluative stage and what might realistically be achieved in such an evaluation. The Institute's Australian Living Standards Study, which collected data on a small number of selected regions in three states and the Northern Territory, had to take into account different policies at both state and local levels when considering issues of service provision. These extra

layers complicate any cross-regional comparison and evaluation.

One of the features of the Family Resource Centres which McBain (1994) has identified as most important is the flexibility which has come from a certain level of removal from direct identification with government.

iii Pilot Status of Proposals

The longest-established of the Family Resource Centre 'pilots' have now been operating for more than two years, but no further expansion to other geographic areas appears to be on offer. All eleven are currently in a four-year 'pilot' period. It is therefore a concern that any recommended pilot establishment of Regional Family Support Councils would suffer the same fate and that global coverage, or at least appropriate coverage according to locational justice criteria, would not be achieved.

Will the pilots, even if not expanded, spin off interesting initiatives in other areas which will compensate for any lack of expansion of the pilot programs? In a few places, either a State or Local Government has introduced its own Family Resource Centres, not necessarily with the a common

core of functions – although in some cases, existing federally-funded Centres have been able to advise on the establishment of these State or local bodies. But, again, coverage is patchy and confined to more innovative areas. (The development of services in 'innovative' areas is often a criterion of the planning process in establishing pilot programs. For example, the guidelines for a Multi Purpose Service, described later in this article, state that an appropriate community for this approach should have 'broad community support for a change in service delivery'.) There is little evidence of 'trickle down socio-nomics' in operation from the establishment of pilot schemes, unless specific purpose funding is also made available, which is not the case with pilots.

iv Lack of Links with Regional Economic Development Bodies and Duplication of Regional Planning and Monitoring Bodies

A further complication is that many regional coordinating bodies for economic development already exist, as the Kelty Report outlined, or are being encouraged by the initiatives within the Department of Housing and Regional Development. In addition,

under the Working Nation proposals being implemented by the department, some 40 regions are to be established throughout Australia to look at issues of regional economic development. Two have already been established, one which crosses state boundaries and links south western Victoria with south eastern South Australia in an economic planning area named the 'Green Triangle'.

Providers of services are conscious of the end effects of separation of planning for families from planning for economic development. The recent World Social Summit in Copenhagen was a major step forward in the recognition that there can be no separation between economic and social planning, or between economic planning and social consequences. It may, therefore, be more appropriate to look at linking the proposed functions of the Regional Family Support Councils into the wider economic and social sphere by ensuring that some at least of the functions outlined above are devolved to the established bodies. Not only would that ensure some linkage in the planning phase, it would enable coverage of all regions rather than the more patchy coverage which would ensue from the establishment of only two specific councils per state.

Apart from the regional economic bodies, there is also a plethora of regional planning bodies in the human services sector, involving state, local, community and private sector providers. The proposal for Regional Family Support Councils will cut across some of the functions of these existing bodies.

v Need to Address Gaps and Overlaps in Existing Regional Services to Families

Because of the functional structure of government departments, and of the requirement that each of them initiate service delivery to cover particular cross-departmental issues, services on the ground are likely to have both gaps and overlaps, although the service providers in the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study saw very little duplication of their services and accepted that most of that duplication which did exist was there for a purpose and was almost inevitable since it offered some degree of choice.

And often the providers felt that the gaps were not ones which required more services. Rather it was felt that: 'If all levels of government would stop surveying us and give funding to local agencies to employ

better, more appropriate/suitable staff in greater numbers – we don't need more services; we need more people to staff services already in existence.'

The Federal Government already has under evaluation another pilot study designed to facilitate service delivery in rural areas. The Multi Purpose Services Program, operating in the health sphere, has two important elements which might also be considered for regional areas generally. These elements are: the establishment of local committees responsible for recognising and prioritising needs within their own region; and the pooling of funds which would have gone to the area under existing federal and state health programs.

While the proposed functions for the Regional Family Support Councils include needs recognition, theirs would be an advisory role only. The ability then to decide upon appropriate allocation of funds would not be linked to the needs recognition process. This latter decision-making function would remain in the hands of those more removed from the local area. Providers in the Australian Living Standards Study were emphatic that convincing bureaucrats and service planners beyond the organisation and beyond the area was

the most difficult aspect of trying to address needs which they had identified in their own local areas.

Overall, then, the general functions proposed for the Regional Family Support Councils are recognised as important in addressing the needs of families. However, there are concerns about the establishment of a pilot program with limited coverage and no guarantees of expansion, lack of links with existing regional economic development bodies, and the duplication of regional planning bodies and existing Family Resource Centres. This article suggests that if the functions of existing regional economic coordination bodies were augmented, some of the pitfalls of intruding even more planning layers into the practice of service provision might be avoided.

This proposal involves a challenge. Many of those currently serving on economic development bodies will have limited experience of and interest in expanding their charter to include the more general needs of families in the area. However, the pilot Multi Purpose Services program, currently being evaluated, might provide some critical leads to the smooth achievement of such a linkage.

References

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Eleven pilot Family Resource Centres have been established in Cairns (north Queensland); Logan (outer Brisbane); Ipswich (south-east Queensland – and Ipswich is now the site for the first Freenet in Australia, as well); Wyong (north of Sydney); Penrith (west of Sydney); Fairfield (inner western Sydney); Whittlesea (outer northern Melbourne); Moe (LaTrobe Valley, eastern Victoria); Narre Warren (outer south-eastern Melbourne); Elizabeth (outer northern Adelaide); and Alice Springs (central Northern Territory).