

The Federal Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was launched in April 2000. With its emphasis on prevention and early intervention strategies in family policy, the Strategy is a major shift from more traditional social policy. The author, from the Department of Family and Community Services, describes the context and underlying philosophy of the Strategy, and how these are translated into a new approach to funding community projects and building the evidence base in Australia.

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The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a significant initiative of the Commonwealth Government. The Strategy takes a prevention and early intervention approach to helping families and communities build resilience and a capacity to deal with problems before they develop. It recognises that the context in which people live includes their community and the broader social and economic environment. It acknowledges the importance of community to the well being of its citizens, the special protective role strong communities have for the very young, and the importance of supporting families in caring for their members.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy represents a substantial investment by the Commonwealth government in this area. In the last Budget, it committed \$240 million over four years to the Strategy.

Key themes of particular importance to families picked up by the Strategy are: early childhood and the needs of families with young children; strengthening marriage and relationships; and balancing work and family. These are reflected in initiatives under the Strategy including community based early intervention projects, flexible child care and the longitudinal study of Australian children.

The Strategy also recognises the need to help strengthen communities and assist the development of social capital. It recognises that strong communities have strong leadership, skills and knowledge, partnerships between public and private sectors, and a solid core of committed volunteers

The Strategy aims to strengthen these characteristics in communities. In doing so it will assist communities to increase their capacity to meet the challenges of economic and social change and to cope with the pressures that can lead to family and social breakdown.

This paper outlines: what the Strategy looks like and the principles which underlie it; how the Strategy draws from

and will add to the evidence base on early intervention and prevention, and support for families and communities; and the implications for government and communities of new ways of implementing funding for community based projects under the Strategy.

The outcomes sought under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy line up with a considerable body of



Stronger Families and



Communities Strategy

work being undertaken at Commonwealth, State and local levels, and across many different areas – from urban renewal and the revitalisation of country towns to early childhood development, fighting youth crime, illicit drug taking, suicide and other social problems. The Strategy will have a positive impact on very many people and communities, including professional groups and practitioners.

Principles

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is underpinned by a set of eight principles (FaCS 2001):

Working together in partnerships. There are many players who can make a real difference to Australian families and to the strength of communities. By working in partnerships, rather than independently, communities, government and business can support Australian community and family life in more sustainable and successful ways.

Encouraging a preventative and early intervention approach. Prevention and early intervention is about helping and supporting families and communities early on, before problems become entrenched. Over recent years the Federal Government has spent significant amounts on prevention and early intervention initiatives including relationship education, preventing domestic violence and child abuse, youth suicides and homelessness.

Supporting people through life transitions. Transitions are times of major change in people's lives and include events such as finding a job, entering a committed adult relationship, having a baby, approaching retirement and coping with grief. It is recognised that people often need extra support or access to information and advice during these times and are often very receptive to new ideas.

Developing better integrated and coordinated services. There is a large network of services right across Australia provided by Governments, businesses, community organisations and volunteers. Yet families and individuals sometimes find it difficult to access the help and information they need when they need it. Integrated and coordinated services are about linking up services and information at a local level.

Developing local solutions to local problems. Australia is a diverse place and what works well in a big city often makes little sense in regional and country areas. From town to town, suburb to suburb, services, infrastructure, local networks and services vary. One size clearly will not fit all. Local communities are usually the best at identifying and responding to local problems. Lasting solutions are more likely to emerge if governments work in partnership with communities to find them.

Building capacity. Capacity building is about increasing the personal and collective resources of individuals and communities; to help them develop the skills and capacities they need to respond to challenges and to seize opportunities that come their way. Solutions that come from the ground up, not only produce results that are owned and used by the families and communities that need them, but tend also to generate further skills and capacity in the process.

Using the evidence and looking to the future. This is premised on a strong base of existing evidence about what does and doesn't work in helping families and communities prosper. It draws on Australian data that shows that prevention and early intervention programs are effective long-term responses to many social problems. It also flags the Commonwealth's commitment to add to the evidence base under this Strategy.

Making the investment count. Making the investment count is about ensuring that government investments are based on a robust and objective framework that draws upon a range of data including benchmarking and key

performance indicators. While we are interested in trying to work 'outside the box' of standard government programs where this is called for and perhaps contributing to new models of public administration, our primary objective is to achieve results and to make a lasting difference.

These principles provide a reference point for translating the strategy into practice.

Initiatives

Simply put, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a package of nine inter-related initiatives, amounting to \$240 million over four years, aimed at supporting Australian families through effective early intervention and prevention responses and community strengthening strategies.

The initiatives are as follows:

Stronger Families Fund (\$40m) – to encourage communities to find new ways to strengthen families, with a focus on early childhood development and effective parenting.

Early Intervention, Parenting and Family Relationship Support (\$47.3m) – to encourage communities to provide innovative services and activities like parenting support and play groups, marriage and relationship education and family counselling.

Greater Flexibility and Choice of Childcare (\$65.5m) – a major element being the provision of flexible in-home care for families where mainstream arrangements are not accessible – eg families in rural and remote locations, parents working shiftwork or non-standard hours or families where the parent or child has an illness or disability.

A Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (\$6.1m) – a comprehensive study of Australian children and their families, to support policy on child-related issues in the broad areas of child care, early childhood education and schooling, health and wellbeing, and family functioning, with a special focus on highlighting opportunities for early intervention or prevention.

Potential Leaders in Local Communities (\$37.1m) – to offer skills, develop opportunities and support for potential community leaders.

National Skills Development Program for Volunteers and International Year of Volunteers (\$15.8m) – combines celebration of the International Year with practical training and skills development to meet needs identified at a local level to strengthen volunteer capacity in the community.

Local Solutions to Local Problems (\$15.4m) – to help communities to develop solutions to their own local problems and in the process build up their capacity.

Can Do Community (\$5.2m) – to showcase 'real life' examples where people have worked together to revitalise and strengthen their communities.

Communication Strategy (\$8m) – communicating key messages reflecting and promoting the themes of the Strategy.

While the package contains a number of initiatives targeting families, and others targeting community capacity building, what is perhaps most significant is the complementary and interacting nature of the elements. It is intended to respond to the reality of families in the contexts of their communities and the broader social, economic, political and physical environments.

Five linked initiatives

There are five linked initiatives which form the basis for community driven projects under the Strategy. It is these projects and initiatives which represent much of the new approach to doing business under the Strategy.

The Strategy's prevention and early intervention approach will help families and communities build resilience and capacity and aims to support families and communities *before* serious problems develop. In the long-term, this prevention and early intervention approach will mean stronger families and communities who have less need for crisis services and welfare support.

The Strategy encourages local communities, businesses, community organisations and the other levels of government to work in partnership to develop practical and innovative projects from the ground up. Community based projects can be built up from the five linked initiatives:

- *Stronger Families Fund*
- *Early Intervention, Parenting and Family Relationship Support*
- *Potential Leaders in Local Communities*
- *Local Solutions to Local Problems*
- *'Can Do' Community* initiative

Projects can also link with celebrations of the International Year of Volunteers and the National Skills Development Program for Volunteers.

The approach seeks to put into practice the principles of the Strategy and gives particular emphasis to notions of partnership, the importance of locally driven responses, better integration and coordination. It is about helping communities build capacity and develop opportunities. As a result projects will not follow a particular model but will need to satisfy broad criteria around benefiting families and the communities, demonstrating community support, and meeting the aims, principles and priorities of the Strategy.

A new way of working

Underlying the Strategy's approach is a basic belief that governments alone cannot build capacity or trust ie they cannot create social capital. The Strategy also recognises that while a traditional model can support a large number of services and help to do some important work, equally it can waste opportunities through lack of coordination, duplication and rigidities.

Real gains in social capital require genuine collaboration and partnership between all tiers of government, community leaders, individual members of the community, and the business community. If we want to build family and community strength, we must presume that families and communities will be partners in the enterprise along with government, service providers and so on. We need to change how we think and behave, and what we ask of others.

We recognise that pre-packaged program responses are often inappropriate to meet the diverse range of family and community needs. Effective initiatives need a strong element of community engagement and require a 'bottom up' community led development and delivery.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy will require us to become facilitators – rather than national 'experts'. A key aspect of that facilitation is to support families and communities to bring forward initiatives which will best meet their local needs.

This approach lends itself to a 'strengths' perspective in the tailoring of solutions to fit the resources and needs of local communities, instead of the frequently employed deficit model, which focuses on problems. It acknowledges that a body of ideas can develop outside government, making room for fresh ideas and different ways of doing things that meet local circumstances. The process itself engages community members and can help build and reinforce local networks and enhance social capital.

However, we still have obligations to Parliament for ensuring appropriations are used for their legislated purposes, and for sound financial and performance management. Bringing all these objectives into alignment is the uncharted territory we are exploring and, while we are making solid progress, we have not yet tested all the innovative ways the Strategy will work.

Among other things, this challenge has led us to develop a new approach to program management, project identification, developing new contracts, performance indicators and evaluation frameworks.

The Strategy will allow for the flexible application of the funds allocated within its various initiatives and for partnerships, for example where particular projects may involve multiple sources of funding – this could come from other Commonwealth sources, from other tiers of government, as well as from corporate and charitable sources. Careful attention to identifying performance measures of 'outcome' (or what we are trying to achieve) rather than placing sole reliance on 'output' (or the specific things to be done or provided) will assist and is a conscious shift from more familiar concentration on specifying inputs. There is also a recognition that in many cases the process is as important, and in some cases more important, than the products – we are still working to achieve simple yet effective accountability and performance measurement in this area.

Advisory groups

In implementing the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy we have the challenge of modelling at every level the principle of 'working together in partnerships'. We are doing this in a number of ways: at the level of national policy (for example, around guidelines, targeting, evaluation); at the level of State and Territory implementation processes; at the local level in our relations with community partners; and in the process of project development.

The Federal Government sees an important role for experts from outside government – experts from family services and community development fields along with the business sector – to advise government on the implementation of the Strategy. The engagement of the 'social coalition' in this way brings different viewpoints and expertise to the implementation of the Strategy and will enhance its effectiveness. A two tiered advisory structure has been developed to assist.

A national advisory group, the Stronger Families and Communities Partnership, met for the first time on 6–7 November 2000 to provide advice to the Minister for Family and Community Services on the broad parameters of the implementation of the five linked initiatives in the Strategy including advice on: a set of user friendly guidelines; a targeting framework; funding envelopes for states and territories; the development of nationally-based projects; and performance management and evaluation.

This group will also provide advice on opportunities for establishing links with other initiatives, promoting the underlying themes of the Strategy and identifying emerging needs and opportunities.

State advisory groups, which include local experts, will consider implementation issues specific to their particular State or Territory. They are responsible for: providing advice on specific proposals and recommendations on funding; identifying communities which require assistance to build capacity to develop local initiatives to strengthen their community; promoting opportunities for collaboration with business, and state and local government stakeholders; and

providing advice to the Stronger Families and Communities Partnership on performance and emerging areas of need.

Project identification

The government is committed to giving communities themselves a significant say in what projects should be supported and how the funding should be spent. This means the Department of Family and Community Services will be working directly with local communities to develop ideas and local projects that meet the needs of individual communities and the families that live in them. The Department's State and Territory Office network will work with local communities to develop their project ideas.

Projects may emerge from a variety of different places; some will emerge from work already happening on the ground or that may have been started within other processes; some may need to be seeded and intensively supported to develop. Projects will need to develop and demonstrate their partnership character, inclusiveness and community support. Many projects will be in communities with high concentrations of families with very young children, communities facing challenges (for example, because of distance and remoteness, or low levels of involvement in community life) and in rural, regional and remote areas. Projects supporting indigenous families and communities have an important part in the Strategy.

There are essentially three ways to identify and develop projects.

First there are self-identified projects where communities have reasonably well-developed ideas or



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proposals, that are able to show good community support and community involvement as well as meet the Strategy's criteria for funding.

Second are targeted community projects which will be identified through State and Territory targeting plans. Targeting plans are being developed in each State and Territory and balance the following three dimensions: striking an appropriate balance between meeting need and maximising opportunities; maintaining and giving effect to the key principles of flexibility and local solutions which underpin the Strategy; and ensuring a balance between the various target groups, for example rural and regional communities vis-a-vis urban communities and between program elements.

From these plans, communities will be identified that might benefit from certain types of projects. Some of these could be communities that have a tradition of self help such as well-organised community groups and willing volunteer workers. This could apply particularly to rural communities and to many indigenous communities.

On the other hand, there might be communities which have not yet come together to think about ideas and what could make a difference. In cases like this, the Department will help these communities come together to begin to talk about the problems they are facing and possible solutions; funds would be available once proposals are well developed.

Third, are partnership projects where the Department will encourage and support joint project proposals. For example, this could involve helping communities to set up 'partnerships' between the different levels of government and with businesses. The partnerships would be expected to have local support and to bring benefits to families and local communities.

Indigenous projects

The Prime Minister announced that a minimum \$20 million under the Strategy is to be earmarked for indigenous specific projects. This allocation will remain integrated and delivered within the Strategy as has been previously described.

At the Prime Minister's request, Senators Newman and Herron jointly convened the Indigenous Community Capacity Building Roundtable on 24 October 2000 to develop principles for working with indigenous communities and families. The Roundtable reached agreement on a set of principles governing the design and implementation of programs for Indigenous communities. It also nominated a small working group to pursue its work and to provide ongoing advice to the government including in relation to the use of funds under the Strategy and in the development of national approaches.

The Roundtable agreed that governments and indigenous people should work in partnership in the design and implementation of programs aimed at supporting

families and communities (FaCS 2001). They also emphasised that projects should:

- build on the existing strengths, assets and capacities of indigenous families and communities, and reflect the value of positive role models and successful approaches;
- aim to empower indigenous people in leadership and managerial competence;
- give urgent attention to initiatives which target the needs of children and young people, particularly in the areas of leadership training, self esteem building, awareness of one's culture and family, and anti-violence training;
- contribute to practical reconciliation by empowering indigenous people to take responsibility within their families and communities for developing solutions to problems;
- give priority to initiatives that encourage self-reliance, sustainable economic and social development; and
- be inclusive of indigenous history, cultures and spirituality, where communities recognise their relevance.

The Roundtable will reconvene in six months time to review progress.

Common themes and a shared agenda

An important element of the partnership approach on which the Strategy is based relates to the common themes and the agenda we share with State and Territory governments. The work of the Strategy must also recognise the significant interest, and indeed responsibility, of State and Territory governments to strengthen families and communities.

There is substantial agreement about the value of prevention and early intervention, capacity building and resilience (for individuals, families and communities), and of enriching the social capital of communities. Prevention and early intervention is infinitely preferable to having families in crisis – the problem is in the high cost of crisis response and the practical difficulty in shifting investment from the imperatives of such critical need to the preventative end. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy investment aims to help shift the balance.

Another common theme emerging is the value of social capital, sometimes referred to as the 'glue' which holds a community together. It means shared values, trust and looking out for one another – cooperating for mutual benefit. It builds up through a combination of trust, time and goodwill and thrives on relationships and networks. A stated goal of many governments and government departments is to help communities build social capital. Communities rich in social capital are better placed to support individuals and families and



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better able to grasp opportunities as they arise. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is about providing practical support to enhance elements that contribute to the development of social capital – supporting locally controlled projects, leadership and volunteering, networking and best practice.

These themes characterise the shared agenda across many different portfolios and jurisdictions. Our goal is to provide leadership in some key areas and to complement but not compete with the endeavours of other agencies. Our success here will depend on effective inter-government and cross-portfolio relations which reflect the particular circumstance of each State and Territory. The Department of Family and Community Services is utilising its State/Territory network of offices to link with these interests (which vary considerably in number and approach from State to State) in practical ways.

Evidence base

One last important theme is the evidence base for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The Strategy was designed on evidence from Australia and overseas on what makes a difference for families and communities. For example, on the effectiveness of early interventions, the compelling evidence about the importance of the early years, the convincing case made in Pathways for Prevention (1999) for the need for ongoing support, especially at key transition points in a young person's life, and the case studies of communities which have turned around downward spirals, dealt with adversity and gone on to thrive.

An important part of this Strategy is its commitment to add to the evidence base on prevention and early intervention and social capital – to help us explore the practical ways to strengthen families and communities and to gauge the effects of various interventions.

The funds associated with the Strategy have been deliberately phased so that they start small and build on early learnings, and so that new projects can be 'mentored' or otherwise draw on the experience of others.

Many of the projects will have action research built into their methodology. For projects funded under the Stronger Families Fund (which is about innovative local solutions which will help strengthen families), action research will be specifically supported by community and academic experts as well as by a funded clearinghouse and information exchange. The clearinghouse will give communities access to the most up to date information and research on successful projects as well as link them to the existing evidence base. In addition, recent and valuable experience already gained will be gathered in the clearinghouse to inform project designs and to spark innovative thinking about responses appropriate for particular communities. For example, we propose to link our project-based knowledge with what we already know from the evaluation of the Department's youth homeless pilots and other evaluations, and with population data derived from a number of sources.

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, one of the nine initiatives of the Strategy, is a landmark contribution to the Australian evidence about the factors that impact on our children. Existing international research indicates how important the early years are to a child's life and life chances. This study will help us understand what factors and interventions make an impact in the

Australian context. The Federal government has committed over \$20 million over nine years to produce a comprehensive study of Australian children and their families, based on a nationally representative sample who will be tracked over time. The Study is being designed in consultation with academics, practitioners, state governments and others who may wish to make use of it for a range of special purposes. We also hope to link the systems of data collection already within government, so that we do not need to wait for years of data collection to occur before we can draw conclusions for policy. This investment aspect of the Strategy is as significant as what we may be able to achieve for families and communities on the ground in the next few years.

The Department of Family and Community Services has commissioned research on indicators of community capacity to test which set of indicators might give the best measure of community strengths and weaknesses and potentially help us measure the impact of our programs. The results should be available soon and they will help inform how we should be asking individual projects to monitor their effectiveness as well as the evaluation of programs.

The 'Can Do community' initiative will, among other things, identify and promote best practice examples of local solutions to local problems through a wide range of accessible media. It will develop a project ideas bank and help network community builders to help promote and exchange good ideas.

Conclusion

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy takes a different approach to supporting families and communities, especially in times of transition and change.

The Strategy recognises that helping to build stronger family and community relationships can go a long way to preventing difficult and expensive social problems happening in the first place. It also recognises that often it is people working on-the-ground who can find the most practical solutions to local problems.

For families, the Strategy focuses on the importance of early childhood development, the needs of families with young children, improving marriage and family relationships, balancing work and family responsibilities and helping young people in positive ways.

To help communities, the Strategy includes new initiatives to encourage potential community leaders, to build up the skills of volunteer workers, to help communities develop their own solutions to problems and promote a 'can do' community spirit.

From January 2001, we can expect to see many exciting, innovative, community designed projects being delivered.

Reference

FaCS (2001), www.facs.gov.au Press link button to 'Stronger Families and Community Strategy'.

National Crime Prevention (1999), *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*, National Crime Prevention, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.

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More information about the Strategy can be found at www.facs.gov.au or by ringing 1800 300 125.