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**T**he Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a Federal Government initiative that 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.



# Stronger Families *and*

There has been a shift in thinking over the last two decades about what government's role in communities should be and this, in some instances, has turned traditional government processes and responses upside down.

There is a growing recognition that government should have a lighter touch in family and community life, that many communities themselves know best what their needs are, that there will be different solutions in each community, and that governments should aim to foster communities' self-reliance rather than their dependence.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a new way for the Government to work with communities. Traditional approaches to delivering services and support to Australian families and communities such as regional development programs, major capital works projects and national submission based grants programs that are competition based have not always allowed communities to take action in the ways they most want, and have not encouraged collaboration and resource sharing to the extent possible.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy moves away from the traditional government approach of developing and implementing services for communities. It is focused at families and communities rather than at organisational structures, fosters partnerships and builds on communities' strengths and capacities to deal



with their issues over time rather than aiming to “solve” their problems using a one-size-fits-all approach. The Strategy takes account of communities' uniqueness and aims to build self-reliance. It recognises Government's role as a broker and facilitator rather than just a service purchaser or provider, and acknowledges that effective support for communities requires “bottom-up” development and delivery.

The Strategy includes communities from the beginning and throughout the development process as it seeks to engage with community projects that develop or demonstrate strong community support. It is a dynamic, policy-program approach that is open to continuous improvement as it is developed and modified by communities and governments in partnership. The Strategy encourages innovation and cooperation, and recognises in many cases, the *process* for helping communities to build capacity is as important, and in some cases more important, than the resulting products.

What this means in practice is that the Strategy takes a prevention and early intervention approach to helping families and communities build resilience and capacity to deal with problems before they develop. It recognises that the context in which people live includes their family, their community and the broader social and economic environment. It acknowledges the importance of community to the wellbeing 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 2000-2001 Budget, it committed \$240 million over four years to the Strategy. In support of accountability for this funding, within an innovative partnering arrangement, the Department of Family and Community Services has worked with central agencies to develop new governance mechanisms, including performance monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

The Strategy recognises the need to help strengthen communities and aims to do this by assisting communities to increase their capacity to meet the challenges of economic and social change so that they can better manage the pressures of life that so often lead to family and social breakdown.





# Communities Strategy

## Strategy initiatives

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is working at both the family and community level through the implementation of various initiatives. The initiatives form the basis for community driven projects and approaches which represent much of the new approach to doing business under the Strategy.

The Strategy differs from the usual rules-based approach implicit in government-funded programs in that it is underpinned by a set of principles that test in practice what makes a difference for families and communities. These principles are:

- working together in partnerships;
- encouraging a preventative and early intervention approach;
- supporting people through life transitions;
- developing better integrated and coordinated services;
- developing local solutions to local problems;
- building capacity;
- using the evidence and looking to the future; and
- making the investment count.

Funding is available under a range of complementary and interacting initiatives that reflect these principles.

*The Stronger Families Fund* encourages coordination and integration of local services to help communities to find new ways to strengthen family functioning, with a focus on early childhood development and effective parenting. Family functioning refers to what families do for their members by focusing on the functions that they carry out. These "functions" include: providing intimacy, support and care; caring for and nurturing children; acquiring and sharing income and material assets; buying and producing domestic goods and services; imparting a sense of identity through kinship and links with the wider community; transmitting culture, including social values and language; and helping children and young adults prepare to be active members of our communities.

*Early Intervention Parenting and Family Relationship Support* encourages communities to provide innovative services and activities in parenting support and playgroups, marriage and relationship education and family counselling.

*Potential Leaders in Local Communities* develops skills, opportunities and support for potential community leaders.

*Local Solutions to Local Problems* helps communities develop their own responses to local issues and in the process increase their capacity to deal with similar or other issues in the future.

*"Can Do" Community* showcases real life examples where people have worked together to revitalise their communities.

*National Skills Development for Volunteers* helps volunteers develop the skills they need to really make a difference in their communities.

## A new way of working – governance

Underlying the Strategy's approach is a belief that governments alone cannot build capacity or trust. That is, governments 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, it can also waste opportunities through lack of coordination, duplication and the rigid application of program guidelines.

Real gains in social capital and community capacity building require genuine collaboration and partnership between all tiers of government, community leaders, individuals, and the business community. The Strategy recognises 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 "bottom-up", community-led development and delivery.

This has implications for Government with its obligations for ensuring funds are used for their



legislated purposes, and for sound financial and performance management. The bottom-up approach of the Strategy has challenged the Department of Family and Community Services to explore new ways of working with communities and to find new ways of ensuring that accountability is maintained for funding allocated to projects. Among other things, the challenge of the Strategy has led to the development of a new approach to program management and project identification, new contracts, performance indicators and evaluation frameworks. It has also led to new governance arrangements.

Governance is about setting and maintaining direction. The nature of the Strategy has called for innovative governance arrangements which ensure the involvement of the "social coalition". Basically, this is represented by a two-tiered advisory structure made up of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy National Partnership and the State and Territory Advisory groups.

#### ■ *The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy Partnership*

The Partnership is a national body which provides advice to the Minister for Family and Community Services on the broad parameters of the implementation of the Strategy including advice on: targeting frameworks; funding envelopes for States and Territories; the development of nationally-based projects; and performance management and evaluation. The partnership is chaired by the Chief Executive of the Smith Family, Ms Eileen Henry.

#### ■ *State and Territory Advisory Groups (STAGs)*

The STAGs include local level experts. Their role is to consider implementation issues specific to their particular State or Territory. They are responsible for: providing advice on specific proposals; making recommendations regarding funding; identifying communities which require assistance to build capacity so that they can develop local initiatives to strengthen their community; promoting opportunities for collaboration with business and government; 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 is working directly, through its State and Territory network, with local communities to develop ideas and local projects that meet the needs of individual communities and the families that live in them.

There are three ways to identify and develop projects:

- *Self-identified projects* where communities have reasonably well-developed ideas or proposals, that are able to show good community support and community involvement as well as meet the Strategy criteria for funding.
- *Targeted community projects* which will be identified through State and Territory targeting plans. Targeting plans have been developed in each State and Territory which 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 as opposed to urban communities and between program elements.
- *Partnership projects* where the Department encourages and supports 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. At the Prime Minister's request an *Indigenous Community Capacity Building Roundtable* was convened on 24 October 2000 to develop principles for working with indigenous communities and families.

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. 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 Strategy as a national action learning project

While it is a practical example of community support, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is forward looking in its approach. It has been built around the philosophy of action learning which is a means of evaluating an activity during its lifetime and looking for ways to improve processes to achieve outcomes as they develop, rather than at the end of the activity when the process is finished.

Many projects have action research built into their methodology. Stronger Families Fund projects have action research requirements that are 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 linking them to the existing evidence base. Experience gained from projects is being compiled in the clearinghouse to inform project designs and to spark innovative thinking about responses appropriate for particular communities. (See elsewhere in this Bulletin for more about the Stronger Families Learning Exchange Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.)

Research into developing indicators of family and community strength is also contributing to the future development of the Strategy and policy approaches generally. This research gives an insight into the complexity of attributes that affect and shape families and communities and provides a fundamental basis for Government to understand the complexities involved so that future policy development is informed by a sound research base.

### How the Strategy is working and achievements so far

Funding for community projects became available in January 2001. While it is early days yet, as at March 2002, 294 projects with a value of more than \$39.4 million had been approved across all initiatives and a wide range of locations and target groups.

More project ideas are emerging in a number of ways: some are emerging from work already happening on the ground; some need to be seeded and intensively supported; many projects are in communities with large numbers of families with young children, or in communities facing challenges and in rural and regional areas.

The community development work required in the early stages of the Strategy means that funding commitment will increase as the

Strategy progresses. The amount of money available for projects in the first year increases ten-fold by the fourth year.

### Early learnings from the Strategy

Despite its infancy, trends and themes are already emerging from the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy that will inform its ongoing implementation and further policy development. These learnings are becoming apparent both from the types of projects that are being developed and funded, and from the issues that are arising in the action research environment as the implementation of the Strategy evolves.

A major learning to this point has been in the confirmation of the continuum of capacity that exists in Australian communities and the varying levels of interaction required to help

communities though, another issue is emerging. There is often a lack of infrastructure and core services in these areas and projects often need long term funding and intensive and long-term community development.

As discussed earlier, the Strategy focuses on a grass-roots approach to community projects. In particular this means supporting local individuals and small community groups that often have not had the resources or skills (for example, in developing proposals, or in demonstrating substantial networks, or in targeting a large number of people) to be competitive against large, structured organisations in traditional funding rounds. Early results from the Strategy indicate that while some peak bodies are receiving funding for projects, a considerable portion of funding is being directed to the grass-roots level. A challenge

information for communities and individuals (see below).

Expressions of interest for funding are logged on to a central database. This database tracks project information from when project ideas are received as expressions of interest through to when they are recommended to the Minister for funding approval, through to the development of funding agreements. The database, while developed and updated centrally, is managed on a day to day basis by the Department's state and territory office network.

### Conclusion

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



## **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.**

communities use opportunities to their advantage. Some communities demonstrate "strong" characteristics and require limited assistance to turn this strength into capacity. They may already have strong leadership resources and have identified the local issue that they aim to resolve. In these cases little outside intervention and a small injection of funds may be all that is required to kickstart a local response. The project officer's role in such communities focuses more on helping them to generate community support, or putting community leaders in contact with possible partners or helping them to understand the aims and principles of the Strategy in order that they can develop an appropriate project proposal.

However, for every community that is "ready to go" there are many communities that have, for various reasons, neither the skills, knowledge, resources nor commitment to use opportunities. These communities have most to benefit from the Strategy and are particularly targeted for assistance both in terms of capacity building and funding. Up to 70 per cent of funding in each year is targeted to disadvantaged communities which are identified on the basis of indicators including the Australian Bureau of Statistics social and economic indicators for areas as well as demographic indicators. In targeting these

is to ensure that smaller organisations continue to have opportunities under the Strategy.

Another emerging issue is the need to ensure a coordinated and cooperative approach to working with State and Territory government agencies to avoid duplication in activities. The Department's State and Territory Offices, who manage the Strategy at the local level, have put considerable effort into developing and supporting cross-government relations, and mechanisms are already in place to facilitate complementarity between the Strategy and State initiatives. However, these mechanisms need to be rigorously monitored and maintained.

### Process for project implementation

Management of the linked initiatives under the Strategy has been devolved to the Department's State and Territory office network to ensure that the Strategy is responsive to local needs.

To assist this process, a Community Guide to the Strategy has been released. It outlines how to find out more about the Strategy and how to access funds, including an expression of interest form for funding. About 20,000 copies of the Guide have been distributed nationally to organisations. A central contact number has also been put in place to provide ease of access to Strategy

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.

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

For families, the Strategy uses an early intervention, strengths-based approach to focus 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.

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For more information on the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, call the information line on free call 1800 300 125.

