

ELLEN FISH provides an overview of the way the Stronger Families Fund projects have been progressing

This article discusses the progress of Stronger Families Fund projects as expressed through their regular reporting in the Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletins. The information presented here is drawn from Bulletins 1, 2, 3, and this edition – Bulletin No. 5.

The projects answered four rounds of questions as they progressed from their early days until now (see accompanying box on page 23 for the complete list of questions). In the first round of questions, projects gave their own interpretation of their aims. The second round of questions produced a further update on the projects' development as well as how their community had responded to them. Action research incorporated into the work of their project was the core issue of a third round of questions. The fourth round of questions explored projects' perceived changes to their community and sustainability.

The majority of the 50 current Stronger Families Fund projects have answered at least one round of questions. Many of the projects are still new (a year or less old), and have completed only the first round of questions. Some projects have not responded at all to these questions. There is more variety in the themes below than is possible to consider in this short overview.

However, several common themes clearly emerged from projects' responses. The focus here is on responses from two key questions from each round. By examining these themes, and also by looking at what projects have been doing over time, it is possible to follow the projects' journeys.

Introductory reports

In the first round of questions projects considered their aims and how they were achieving these. Broadly categorised, these aims are:

- building upon and improving parenting skills;
- improvement of health and nutrition for children and families;

Journeys of community involvement *and development*

- educational attainment for children and the acquisition of general life skills for children and adults;
- the reduction of isolation and increasing connectedness; and
- building relationships, service networks and collaboration between services with the aim of meeting the needs of children, families and communities in a local area.

Projects are working to achieve their aims in many ways. Several are providing a place where parents can gather, talk, share stories, connect, consult, children can play together, and skills can be developed. Through this process a sense of community is being fostered and built upon. Education and information is being provided through family support and information centres. In some projects, parenting courses are helping to improve parenting skills and self-confidence; in others, education is being provided on a variety of issues which range from health, parent and child nutrition, parenting norms and laws. Through their activities, many of the Stronger Families Fund projects are actively building relationships, partnerships and collaboration between agencies in a local area.



New Arrivals Playgroup, CAFE Enfield, SA.

Other projects are working towards their aims through simple but highly practical measures. For example, the outcome of one project's advocacy role is the facilitation of a highway action group, which has been able to obtain a commitment to the building of a walkway across a bridge. This has meant that there is now provision of pram access for parents and children living on one side to cross to the other, and wheelchair access for people with disabilities.

Community responses

In a further progress report, projects described what they had been doing since their first report. Some of the activities and events that projects mentioned were family fun and community days, bush picnics, establishment of parent education courses, playgroups, and community advisory groups.

Projects were also asked how the community they were working with had thus far responded to the project. Many projects said that their communities were responding positively. Projects spoke of increased awareness and growing participation and involvement in their activities. For example, families from a housing estate project continued to access a Homework Club that has increased its numbers over time. One project worker reported that: "The Aboriginal Elders now regularly attend the Resource Centre for meetings and just for a cuppa and a chat. People are starting to drop in and treat the place as home" (Donald 2003: 21). More recently these people were giving back to the centre by hiring rooms and acting as an informal advisory group.

There is also evidence of increased participant involvement in the program's direction, such as a group of young mothers volunteering their time and setting up a Community Advisory group. Community and business organisations are also showing increased support of, involvement in and sponsorship of some of the Stronger Families Fund projects.

QUESTIONS ASKED OF THE STRONGER FAMILIES FUND PROJECTS

Round 1 questions

Please describe your project setting.

Why is the project needed?

What are you trying to do in this project? How are you going about it?

Round 2 questions

What has the project been doing since the last report in SFLEX Bulletin?

Who is working on the project? What are your roles?

What have you (project and staff) learned in the last six months that may be of interest and value to other projects?

How has the community responded to the project?

Round 3 questions

What has the project been doing in the last six months?

How has the project incorporated Action Research into its work?

How is the project recording its processes and learning (including but not only action research)?

What has been learned in the last six months that may be of interest and value to other projects?

Round 4 questions

What has the project been doing in the last six months?

How has the project changed your community? How do you know?

How do you /the project plan to maintain and build on the work you are doing into the future?

“The Aboriginal Elders now regularly attend the Resource Centre for meetings and just for a cuppa and a chat. People are starting to drop in and treat the place as home.”

Using action research

In their further updated reports, some projects commented on how they were integrating action research into their work including their methods of documentation.

For most projects action research was being used a planning and evaluation tool. Some examples of the use of action research in projects have been:

- using information from previous programs to plan for future programs;
- consultation with communities through surveys and local meetings;
- conducting evaluations through customer exit questionnaires or interviews;
- reference groups that meet bi-yearly;
- remodelling and streamlining of the service due to demand and customer feedback and as a result the development of new groups; and
- one project worker described action research as the closest to an Indigenous way of working (See article on the Bowraville Growing Community project on pp. 50-51).

Action research is also influencing how people document their work. Projects draw on diverse information gathering processes including visual presentations with photographs and videos, use of reflective journals and scrapbooks, storytelling, questionnaires and surveys, and focus groups to document the processes carried out in doing their work as well as what they have learned.

How one project incorporates action research into their work

“Young Families Support Service is constantly changing service delivery due to demand, customer feedback, current trends or issues. This has been evident in the remodelling and streamlining of our service as well as the development of new groups such as anxiety and parenting toddlers groups. Data is also collected about participants and the community agencies accessed.” (See p. 49 in this edition of the Bulletin).

Changes to the community and sustainability

Changes to the community

Three of the longest running projects, *Ashmont Community Resource Centre*, *Beenleigh Families NOW*, and *Creating Capable Communities – Southern Family Life*, were asked how they perceived the community had changed because of the project.

Projects spoke of improved and regular attendance at their activities and families finding “a pathway out of the crises” (see p. 52 of this Bulletin) that brought them there. Two of the projects were experiencing families self-referring to the service before problems occurred. Families attending have become sources of support and encouragement for other community members attending the service. Furthermore, residents in one program played an integral part in the planning and running of programs and residents already connected have been informing others of the activities and opportunities available, and encouraging them to participate.

Sustainability

A final question on the subject of sustainability drew the following responses from these projects. *Beenleigh Families NOW* reported on possible future sustainability options being Centrelink, recurrent funding and business sponsorship.

Ashmont Community Resource Centre reported that:

“We as workers make sure that we keep in close contact with our community. We are always available and try to be aware of what is happening in the community. Our role is to help the community develop and maintain a vision for Ashmont and, through the operation of the centre and the community’s involvement in the centre, to have more control and input into what happens in Ashmont. What happens here is community driven.” (See p. 52 of this Bulletin.)

Residents and workers at *Creating Capable Communities – Southern Family Life* want the work to continue.

“Indeed, the consistency and momentum needs to be maintained for longer-term and sustainable success. Residents have indicated they still need our support with this and we will endeavour to provide it.” (See p. 55 of this Bulletin.)

Sustainable outcomes were also seen throughout some projects’ responses to earlier questions. For example, at the FACET project in Inala the Festival Committee reported that in the set-up phase it had worker and financial support from the project. The initial festival event was so successful that further festivals were held. After three events the community was able to achieve planning and financial independence and it no longer requires support from the Stronger Families Fund project for future festivals.

Conclusion

The projects have common threads in the work they are doing in their communities. Many projects offer a friendly, secure and inclusive place for families to visit, seek help and attend education or support programs, and many agencies were working in collaboration and consultation with other agencies.

Communities have responded positively as evidenced by an increase in numbers attending events, groups and community and business support. Action research has been incorporated effectively into many of the projects’ planning and evaluation processes and have helped projects work be documented in a variety of ways.

Finally, there are some examples from some of the longest running Stronger Families Fund projects that their work has assisted in making some positive changes to their communities, and many are beginning to show some evidence of outcomes that are potentially sustainable.

For more detail on the Stronger Families Fund projects that the Stronger Families Learning Exchange has worked with, read the following section entitled “Project Profiles”, as well the “Project Profiles” section in SFLEX Bulletins 1, 2 and 3. The Stronger Families Learning Exchange website (<http://www.aifs.gov.au/sf/>) also contains information on the Stronger families fund projects.

References

- Donald, Rob (2003), *Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin* No. 2, Spring/Summer, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin* No. 1, Autumn, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin* No. 3, Winter, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

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