A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES TO FAMILIES: THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES STRATEGY

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Paper presented at the Conference
Reducing Criminality: Partnerships and Best Practice
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology, in association with the WA Ministry of Justice, Department of Local Government, Western Australian Police Service and Safer WA
and held in Perth 31 July and 1 August 2000
Introduction

This paper provides information on a major initiative in New Zealand to support families: the intersectoral collaborative initiative known locally as *Strengthening Families*.

The paper covers: a description of the strategy, the policy rationale which underpins it, the local collaboration initiative, preventive initiatives in priority regions, current programmes, new developments, and management structures.

Section A: Description

Strengthening Families has at its heart, improving life outcomes for children in families at risk, that is, in families where social and family circumstances might make the outcomes for children less than they would otherwise have been. It is concerned with outcomes such as better health status, improved educational attainment, the ability to form positive relationships and prevention of persistent offending.

Research tells us that there are risk factors associated with poor outcomes, including such things as: persistent low income; poor parental health; poor maternal educational attainment; parenting skills, attitudes and preferences; and family disruption and dysfunctional relationships. A significant number of children in New Zealand live in situations where some of these risk factors are present – and an accumulation of risk factors increases the likelihood of poor outcomes. Across NZ, somewhere between 1 in 10 and 1 in 20 families are at high risk; somewhere between 4 in 10 and 5 in 10 families are at some risk.

Strengthening Families is an evolving set of initiatives about how health, education, income support, social services, housing, justice and other social sectors of government will work with each other to mitigate the impact of risk factors and to work with local government and community based organisations to provide a seamless service to families at risk. The strategy is founded on two basic assumptions, both based on research about children, families and service provision:

*first* that what goes on in families has a profound impact on outcomes for children.

*second* that a collaborative approach across sectors – involving families and agencies together in support systems – is more effective than unilateral, separate interventions.

The initiative operates at the levels of policy development, programme development, funding and purchasing, and service provision. At a policy level it includes:

- intersectoral policy work on ways to improve outcomes for children in families at risk
- joint reporting to Ministers on an integrated work programme.

At a *programme development and implementation* level it means:

- joint development, implementation, and management of programme initiatives such as Family Start
- some joint purchasing
- joint commissioning of evaluation.
At a service delivery level it means:

- local cooperation in service provision to individual families, incorporating most of government’s social agencies in health, education, income support, social services, housing, justice and immigration, and using case management protocols; and at a more strategic and management level:
  - local preventative initiatives amongst government agencies
  - community-based initiatives.

The initiative led to more flexible responses at policy, programme and case work levels to social issues affecting families. A feature is the strong linkages between policy, programme development, purchasing and service provision, as a way to improve the effectiveness of policy development and implementation and to improve the quality of government services.

Key themes in the Strengthening Families approach are:

- a partnership approach amongst government agencies, local government leaders, non-government organisations and communities
- a focus on how policy is implemented, encouraging local solutions to local problems
- improving the quality of government services through collaboration, adaptation and innovation
- a focus on proactive preventive approaches
- starting with the family and its networks rather than provider structures.

Section B: The Policy Underpinnings

The development of the Strengthening Families initiative has been driven by local and national concerns. There has been concern at a policy level about families experiencing intergenerational cycles of disadvantage in which children appear to be unable to fully utilise, or gain access to, opportunities to improve their long term or life circumstance (witnessed by intergenerational disadvantage in such areas as education and the labour market). Health, education and social service policy and operational practitioners have become increasingly aware that they are often dealing with common clients in common areas of the country, and that outcomes for high need/high risk families were generally poor. At a community level there are concerns about the fragmentation of social service delivery between agencies, with resultant gaps and overlaps in provision.

Strengthening Families has used a risk based approach though this is now being complemented by a focus on family and community strengths. While it has long been apparent that a small minority of families in New Zealand face an uphill struggle raising healthy, well-educated, socially secure children, recent research has highlighted the scope of the concern and informed new practices to assist these families. New Zealand research such as the Christchurch and Dunedin longitudinal health and development studies suggest that families in New Zealand have different levels of risk of poor outcomes for their children.

Research studies suggest that approximately 5% of children grow up in families that are caught in an entrenched cycle of disadvantage. These families tend to exhibit multiple long-term indicators of risk, such as:

- poor parental educational attainment
- mental health problems
• poor housing in poor neighbourhoods
• persistent low income
• criminality
• dysfunctional family relationships (including family violence)
• long term unemployment
• high residential mobility

It is the compounding effect of multiple persistent risk factors that disrupts a family’s ability to function well. Children in such families are likely to suffer a range of poor outcomes across many aspects of their lives. As these children mature and have families of their own, intergenerational cycles of disadvantage can be perpetuated.

Successful strategies to address poor long-term outcomes for children are found to be those that:
• are capable of identifying at risk and high risk families
• both ameliorate risk factors and build resilient capacity in the child and their family (taking an ecological, or whole of family, approach)
• are responsive and flexible in their delivery (responding to the family priorities not agency or sector boundaries)
• are provided as early as possible in the developmental pathway of the child or presenting problem (acting before problems become too entrenched or significant harm occurs).

The benefits of an intersectoral approach are well established in the literature. Strengthening Families uses a collaborative approach rather than structural integration. The emphasis is on local coordination, and freeing up local managers to deliver services in ways which better meet families’ needs.

**Section C: The Strengthening Families Intersectoral Collaboration Initiative**

The goal of the Strengthening Families local collaboration initiative is to improve services to at risk families through collaboration across local service providers and purchasers. The goal is achieved through:
• interagency case management
• identifying gaps and overlaps in services and providing advice on how these can be addressed
• local preventative initiatives
• community strengthening initiatives.

This initiative commenced within the health, education, income support and social service sectors in early 1997. However, it now involves 20 government agencies, schools, hospitals, local government and many non-government organisations.

At the heart of the initiative are the Strengthening Families Local Management Groups (LMG), comprising service delivery and purchasing managers. There are now 69 groups covering all of the country. Often the LMG boundary is that of the territorial local authority. The group comprise representatives from government agencies which have involvement with families at risk, and representation from local government, iwi, not for profit social sector organisations and Safer Community Councils.
The local groups are responsible for:

- developing a protocol for interagency case management
- managing interagency case management processes
- providing an ongoing forum for managers from the government sector and community to network (monthly or two monthly)
- facilitating free exchange of information between agencies and between levels within agencies (frontline workers, local managers, national management)
- overseeing, monitoring and evaluating interagency co-operation
- gathering information on interface issues, gaps in services and outcomes
- advocacy in relation to policy and practice changes seen as necessary
- identifying priorities for funding
- dispute resolution
- identifying and developing local preventative initiatives (discussed below), and community initiatives where appropriate (also discussed below).

A feature of the Strengthening Families local collaboration initiative has been local government involvement. Local government has been involved in the Strengthening Families Strategy from its inception, following on from the engagement of mayors in Welfare to Well-being. Waitakere City Council promoted and contributed to the development of the first inter-agency case management prototypes. In many areas, Councils are active members of local management groups. Mayors are also involved in the launch of priority region initiatives.

Local Management Groups have the potential, being realised in some rural areas, to influence the delivery of services to a community, and to contribute to greater responsiveness and effectiveness in government services. In urban areas the significant developments are “specialist” local groups on refugee/immigration issues and families (Auckland), on Pacific peoples families (Auckland), and on strengthening Maori families (Auckland and Hamilton).

**Interagency Case Coordination**

Key features are:

- networks are established between local social service managers and frontline workers (building an environment supportive of collaboration)
- protocols are established to define how interagency cases will work
- case conferences are held which include relevant agencies and the family (empowering families and ensuring clear communication)
- a jointly agreed action plan is produced (setting clear goals and ensuring everyone signs up to their actions)
- a lead agency (and nominated individual worker) is agreed, and becomes the first point of contact with the family and acts as the service broker to ensure the plan is achieved (ensuring clarity of role and responsibility and providing a simple way for the family to relate to service providers).

This approach, originally developed and trialled in Waitakere now applies across the country. In the calendar year to 31 December (a start up period for some areas) 660 case meetings were recorded, involving 1,360 children. In the first half of 2000 an average of 90 new cases,
involving 160 children, per month were handled. Lead agency responsibilities were shared by
Child, Youth and Family, community groups, the education and health sectors. There are 22
coordinators in place servicing about half of the management groups.

Community Initiatives

Strengthening Families local collaboration groups have been found to work most effectively
when the parties are familiar with each other and the local service environment.
Strengthening Families community initiatives are particularly targeted towards rural areas
where a paucity of government services exists. Some rural communities now find that few
government agencies maintain a direct operational presence, and when agency managers do
arrive they are unfamiliar with the local personalities, providers and issues.

The Strengthening Families community initiative aims to address this through local solutions
such as organising regular days when relevant government agency managers all come to talk
to local communities representatives, building networks and enhancing the capacity for
collaborative action. Alternatively communities may wish to explore joint office
arrangements to maintain some type of permanent government presence.

Section D: Preventative Programmes in Priority Regions

Now that the local collaborative initiative has been introduced across the country, with a focus
on a case coordination for children in families in difficulties, a second initiative has been
added. It is the development of preventive programmes in 28 priority regions. The initiative
brings together centrally government programme initiatives such as Social Workers in
Schools, and local initiatives. The priority regions were chosen on the basis of levels of
benefit receipt and low decile schools, and with some regard to the strength of the local
management groups. Five regions were covered last financial year (Far North, Gisborne,
Hutt, Porirua, Whangarei) and a further 23 regions were covered by June 2000.

The preventative initiatives provide opportunities for the Local Management Groups to target
assistance to high risk populations before problems reach crisis point or before poor long term
outcomes are exhibited by the children concerned. The target groups for the current
initiatives are:
• children under 10 indefinitely suspended from school
• children of teenage mothers (and the mothers themselves)
• children with a parent in prison
• children of long term sole parent beneficiaries (more than 10 years on the DPB).

As part of the initiative, all agencies working with families at risk have been asked to promote
five messages to parents:
• health care, in particular getting children immunised
• dental care
• the importance of early childhood education
• support for children’s learning at school
• the importance of stable accommodation.
Central government’s part in the preventive initiative is the Family Start and Social Workers in Schools programmes, which are targeted on the priority regions. The additional investment by central government in services for families at risk has become an important part of forming a partnership with local agencies and communities. Further information is provided on these two programmes in the next section of this paper.

Section E: Related Central Government Programmes

As a result of intersectoral policy work, two new government programmes were established.

Family Start

Family Start is a preventative, early intervention, home visiting programme for families at risk with children under 15. It aims to provide intensive support to 15% of families with newborn infants. Financial approvals have been obtained for 17 schemes in various locations around the country (including funding for the expansion and the longer-standing Christchurch “Early Start” programme).

A contract has been let for evaluation of the Whangarei, Ranui Massey and Rotorua sites, and evaluations are planned for some of the new sites which are significantly different e.g. in rural areas. When fully established across the 17 sites, some 4,000 families at any one time will be getting support from Family Start/Early Start – some 16% of the eligible population nation-wide.

Social Workers in Schools

Social Workers in Schools is a school based preventative programme for children and families at risk. It brings together schools and social service agencies in a partnership. It is targeted to primary and intermediate schools. (5 – 12 age groups) in low social economic areas.

The 1998 prototype positions are well in place.

In all, 8,000 pupils are covered in 56 schools. This year the service has expanded by 55 further positions to cover in total at least 35,000 pupils, some 18% of the eligible population nation-wide.

Initiatives to promote children and young peoples’ mental health

- The most tangible outcome of a preventative approach is the publication of the booklet ‘Better Times’ for those working with children and young people at risk of mental health problems. Further policy work is underway on service improvements for children and young people with serious problems include increased funding:
  - for services for children and young people with severe mental health problems who are Child, Youth and Family clients
  - for school leavers with severe disabilities
  - for Youth Horizon Trust’s work in Auckland with children with severe conduct disorders
Crime and Violence-related initiative

- a support programme for prisoners and their families to assist in the re-integration of a parent into a family with children under 5 based on a successful Christchurch pilot. (Managed by the Department of Corrections)
- the continuation of 1996 crime prevention initiatives in the family violence area.

Section F: Management structures

The Strengthening Families approach works by creating collectively managed strategic linkages at the policy level; co-ordination at the delivery level; and joint arrangements at budget funding, purchasing and reporting levels. It has used many of the “levers” available within the government social sector in a way that reflects the collaborative nature of the approach at each level. The “levers” include:

- common directives (for example, requirements for joint action contained in Cabinet minutes)
- using the priority setting and accountability structures of government, such as strategic priorities, KRAs, milestones, purchase agreements and contracts (including common KRA requirements across health, Education and Welfare)
- regular monitoring reports on local initiatives
- appealing to common interests (achieving desirable cross sector outcomes with common clients)
- using joint or collaborative contracting arrangements with non-government organisations that reflect the Strengthening Families message.

The Strengthening Families initiative is developed and implemented through collaborative management groups and processes at various levels:

- regular meetings between Health, Education and Social Policy chief executives, (ensures strategy stays on track)
- a social sector chief executives forum (quarterly meetings of chief executives from across the broad social sector to ensure full sector collaboration)
- a policy sector management group (Health, Education and Social Policy Senior Officials Group) and wider policy sector forums (Strengthening Families Senior Officials Group)
- an operational sector management group chaired by the CE of MSP
- local management groups.

The strength of this intersectoral structure which has been established has been recognised. The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, who are using Strengthening Families Local Management Groups in 10 locations in their work bring a local collaborative approach to their initiatives to build capacity in Pacific peoples communities and reduce disparities between Pacific peoples and the population as a whole.