

3. EVALUATION OF STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

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Corporate Plan Output: Policy Advice	

The purpose of this report is to inform the Committee of the findings of an evaluation of Strengthening Families undertaken by the Council for the Strengthening Families Local Management Group.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the findings of an evaluation of the Canterbury Strengthening Families Project. The full evaluation report and a background paper on Strengthening Families (from the Ministry of Social Policy Post-election Briefing Papers) have been separately circulated. Lyn Campbell, Children's Advocate and a member of the Canterbury Strengthening Management Committee will be in attendance to answer any specific queries regarding Strengthening Families.

BACKGROUND OF STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

"Strengthening Families" is a national strategy the Government adopted in 1997 to improve the services being provided to high-risk children, young people and families.

Strengthening Families aims to achieve:

- better outcomes for children by helping families meet their care, control and support responsibilities
- improvements in families' abilities to resolve difficulties and problems, and maximise the outcomes and opportunities for their children
- clearer definitions and better collaboration between the health, education and welfare sectors locally and nationally
- better use of existing resources

Local co-ordination is designed to improve outcomes for individuals and families through:

- Inter-agency case management approach
- Identifying gaps and overlaps in services
- Joint initiatives to use resources more effectively

The Canterbury project was initiated in 1997. A set of protocols was developed by workers from across agencies and signed off by the Senior Management Group in early 1998.

The Council was invited to join the Canterbury Management Group in the early stages of its inception here. The Council has made no direct financial contribution but Lyn Campbell, the Children's Advocate, has been an active member of the Local Management Group.

EVALUATION

The Christchurch City Council undertook the evaluation on behalf of the Canterbury Management Group of Strengthening Families. The purpose of the evaluation was to investigate the perceived effectiveness of the Canterbury Strengthening Families Project case management.

The Council undertook the evaluation as it was important that it was done by an organisation which did not have a direct responsibility for implementing or funding the initiative. It was also consistent with the Council's Children's Strategy which identified the need for the Council to promote "inter-sectoral networks and partnerships that promote best practice in the interests of children and their families."

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Overall the evaluation process found there were significant benefits associated with the Strengthening Families Project.

Key strengths of Strengthening Families identified in the evaluation, which are of particular interest to the Council, are:

- Firstly, that the involvement of the Christchurch City Council was considered to be a major strength of the project.
- Secondly, the localised approach was perceived critical to the project's success. Canterbury already had some systems and processes in place and these were incorporated within the project rather than overridden. The Canterbury Local Management Group identified its way of working and did not allow national policy to override it.

Operational Outcomes

The evaluation identified that the project enhanced communication and co-ordination between agencies. The improved communication and collaboration between agencies helped to:

- identify gaps
- eliminate overlaps
- clarify roles and strategies and
- provide a more holistic approach

Inter-agency co-ordination also meant that agencies could get the whole picture of the family and then develop appropriate interventions. The increased monitoring and review of cases meant that families received a continuity of service. This co-ordinated approach also resulted in families receiving a consistent message from agencies and staff.

Most participants in the evaluation had a strong belief that the processes of the project resulted in positive outcomes for families and they were able to identify key components of the project which they believed contributed to positive outcomes for clients.

Barriers and Weaknesses

Few weaknesses were identified in the project. Key barriers were:

- lack of time and resources
- over-whelming workloads
- lack of understanding of Strengthening Families
- limitations of job outputs and lack of flexibility in service provision and policies
- organisational changes

There is little involvement in the project by Iwi or Maori providers at a management or case management level. Responsiveness to Maori has been identified as a priority for the project.

There was low participation by Pacific Island families in the project. The reasons for the low participation and involvement of Pacific Island families in the project need further investigation.

National and Local Project Relationship

The lack of clarity between national and local roles and the lack of consultation with local agencies prior to implementing national Strengthening Families initiatives locally were considered to be a problem.

There appeared to be some communication and co-ordination problems associated with the national and local components of the Strengthening Families Project. It is ironic that there is a lack of co-ordination and collaboration with a project which has collaboration as one of its primary focuses.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

The Canterbury Strengthening Families Management Group has endorsed the evaluation report. It will develop strategies for building on the strengths and addressing the shortcomings identified in the evaluation.

Recommendation: That the Committee:

1. Receive the report.
2. Note that the involvement of the Council was considered to be a key strength of the project.
3. Note the key role played by the Children's Advocate in developing and managing the Strengthening Families Project locally.
4. Endorse the Council's on-going involvement in Strengthening Families as a means of enhancing partnerships between local and central government.

**Chairman's
Recommendation:**

1. That the Christchurch City Council continue with its involvement in the Strengthening Families Project to ensure effective co-operation between local and central government.
2. That the evaluation of significant programmes such as this be encouraged (Note: attached for the information of members is a copy of correspondence received by the Mayor from the Chair of the Evaluation Committee).