BLUE MOUNTAINS

STRONGER FAMILIES ALLIANCE

Evaluation Report

An evaluation report
for the Stronger Families Alliance and Blue Mountains City Council

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Executive summary

Background

The Stronger Families Alliance (the SFA) is a broad alliance of community organisations, government departments, voluntary organisations and businesses that aims to improve outcomes for young children and their families across the Blue Mountains local government area. The work of the SFA is supported by the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) through the work of its Child and Family Services Development Officer. This Evaluation on the progress and functioning of the Blue Mountains SFA was commissioned by the Blue Mountains City Council and undertaken by a research team from Charles Sturt University: Associate Professor Frances Press, Dr Sandie Wong and Associate Professor June Wangmann.

Formed in 2006, the SFA aims to improve how services are delivered to young children and their families in the Blue Mountains. The SFA promotes services working together more effectively and in ways that are informed by the best available evidence. A key outcome of the initial work undertaken by the SFA was its collaboratively developed Child and Family Plan, launched in 2010. Through this plan the SFA has sought to:

- Strengthen families through neighbourhood and service networks;
- Move children and their families beyond vulnerability; and
- Create child-friendly communities.

The Evaluation was commissioned to determine whether the SFA was making a difference, specifically whether it had been successful in:

- Assisting services in changing their approach to working with children and families; and
- Facilitating services to align their strategies and ways of working with the outcomes and objectives of the Child and Family Strategic Plan.

To undertake this evaluation, the research team interviewed 15 service providers who were current or past members of the SFA. Findings from the interviews were analysed in conjunction with quantitative data already gathered by the SFA.

The results of the evaluation

The SFA aims to maximize the wellbeing and resilience of children and their families living in the Blue Mountains. It has sought to do so through the collaborative efforts of its members to achieve the vision and goals encapsulated in the Child and Family Plan. Informed by a large body of research, the SFA seeks to build community so that families have access to formal and informal networks of support and advice; facilitate the ability of services to intervene early when problems do occur; and enable agencies to work together on the development and delivery of cohesive responses to complex problems. Grounded in a philosophy of early intervention and prevention, these approaches are designed to offer the best possible support to children and families to generate responses to problems that are effective and long lasting. Has the SFA been successful?

The responses gathered through interviews told an extremely positive story about the work of the SFA which was backed up by the quantitative data. Service providers confirmed the positive impact of the SFA, reporting that their work practices were much more congruent with evidence-based approaches to working with children and families and that collaborations between agencies were stronger and more effective. Respondents spoke of how their understanding of how to work effectively with children and families had fundamentally changed. They were better informed and felt more effective. Notably, a significant indicator of the success of the SFA was the number of interviewees who commented on the effective way that the SFA network was mobilized to generate a swift and well-organised response to those affected by bushfires in 2013. This is especially notable because it is in times of stress that such structures and processes are tested.
Importantly, the SFA had not only changed how staff in many services approach and understand their work but also what is delivered. It has been instrumental in rolling out a number of programs and initiatives across the Blue Mountains region which provide new and soft (non-stigmatising) entry points for families to build community networks, and where necessary seek support. The School-Centred Community Hub Program is an example of such an initiative.

Collaborative, evidence-based approaches to working with children and families are considered to be the most effective way of mitigating threats to children's development and wellbeing (Moore 2009; Corter & Pelletier, 2010). However, strong and effective collaborations involve much more than agencies working alongside one another. They require agencies to be 'on the same page' about what is important for children and families; and for children and their families to have ready access to high quality supports when conditions are challenging (Moore, 2008; Press, Sumson & Wong, 2010). This can only be achieved through purposeful and informed leadership (Press, 2012). The data from this Evaluation establishes that the SFA has successfully developed the types of collaborations that support positive outcomes for children and families. In short, agencies are more connected and work more collaboratively, their staff are better informed, and there are a significant number of programs and activities now available to children and families that are directly linked to the achievement of the objectives of the Child and Family Plan.

More specifically, and in summary form, the SFA has:

1. **Instigated and embedded evidence-based strategies designed to improve outcomes for children and families.** In particular, the SFA has been successful in:
   - Making the best available research evidence accessible to Blue Mountains services thus supporting informed and skilled face-to-face service delivery to children and families;
   - Increasing the accessibility of services to families, through coordinated outreach in a range of locations including schools, townships and early childhood programs;
   - Re-designing program delivery to be more responsive to family needs;
   - Improving the appropriateness, efficiency and range of service-to-service referrals of children and families who need multiple forms of support;
   - Increasing the capacity of services to identify and respond to risks to children’s development;
   - Providing a range of programs designed to improve transitions for children into primary school - a key point in children’s lives that has consequences for their later success at school; and
   - Improving access to early intervention services at school designed to prevent early school failure.

2. **Successfully built strong collaborations between services.** The evaluation points to a number of strategies to achieve this including:
   - The development of a shared vision for change based on what children need (as exemplified in the Child and Family Plan). This cultivates a systems focus for all services and supports the development of service-to-service collaborative relationships to attain the vision;
   - The formation of strong manager-to-manager professional relationships to instill collaboration across the child and family workforce in the Blue Mountains;
   - The creation of shared understandings, based on the best available evidence, across the service system about what works for vulnerable children and what is available for them;
   - The development, launch and continued use of the Child and Family Plan to reinforce shared understandings, establish common goals, and inform the strategic planning and evaluation processes of individual services; and
   - The modelling of collaborative processes by the SFA that services then use with each other, internally and with their clients.
3. Used a number of highly effective change enablers. These include:
   - Council’s role as the ‘backbone’ of the SFA, organising, coordinating and leading the SFA. Council was regarded as a neutral body that could provide ‘non-partisan’ leadership across the sectors concerned with child and family outcomes;
   - The specific skills and knowledge utilised by the SFA convener;
   - The careful selection of proven tools and strategies to drive change and improvements in practices;
   - Contemporary, evidence-based professional development events that are multi-sectoral and available to both management and frontline staff. These create a shared knowledge base, an agenda for change and a process for changing mindsets and habitual practices across the SFA membership; and
   - Collaborative strategic planning processes - such as those used to create the Child and Family Plan - which focus on shared learning and relationship building

It is in the light of these findings a set of recommendations was made and provided to the SFA Executive and the Blue Mountains City Council.
Background to the evaluation

Introduction

This is the report of an evaluation of the progress and functioning of the Blue Mountains Stronger Families Alliance (the SFA) commissioned by Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC). The SFA is a broad alliance of community organisations, government departments, voluntary organisations and businesses with the overarching goal to improve outcomes for young children and their families across the Blue Mountains region. It aims to do so through the creation and maintenance of a collaborative, integrated service system informed by the best available evidence. The BMCC plays a critical role in supporting the functioning of the SFA through the work of its Child and Family Services Development Officer.

The SFA approach to making a difference in children's lives was originally captured in the SFA Child and Family Plan, launched in 2010. The three foci of the Child and Family Plan (2010) are:

- Strengthening families through neighbourhood and service networks;
- Moving children and their families beyond vulnerability; and
- Creating child-friendly communities.

(See www.strongerfamilies.co for full Plan & attachment one).

This evaluation is based on research which gathered service provider information and perspectives on the extent to which to the SFA and its associated SFA Child and Family Plan had resulted in:

- Services changing their approach to working with children and families; and
- Service strategies and ways of working being aligned with the objectives of the Child and Family Plan.

Building on these insights, the research sought feedback from participants on how best to strengthen to work of the SFA. In doing so, the evaluation identified supports and barriers to the achievement of its goals to inform the future functioning of the SFA.

To supplement service provider perspectives, the research has also drawn upon quantitative data previously gathered through the SFA concerning SFA-generated professional development events and community activities.

The research team

The project was undertaken by a research team from Charles Sturt University (CSU): Associate Professor Frances Press, Dr Sandie Wong, and Associate Professor June Wangmann. The team has extensive experience and background in investigating collaborative practice in and across child and family services (For a list of relevant projects and publications undertaken by team members see attachment Two). The research team was supported by CSU’s Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) in conjunction with CSU’s Research Office.

Evaluation approach and method

The specific questions posed by the research were:

1. How have the SFA partners used the SFA approach to change to reach the project end outcomes?

2. What evidence is there that the SFA is making progress to achieve its final outcomes?

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1 www.strongerfamilies.co.

An overview of the Plan’s outcomes and objectives can be found in Attachment One: Child and Family Plan Outcomes and Objectives.
3. What approaches to change have been particularly effective and should be taken forward into the new iteration of the SFA?

4. What advice (given in retrospect) would have made the SFA more effective in meeting child and family needs?

The research evaluation proceeded in two distinct stages.

**Stage 1:** This involved obtaining stakeholder perspectives and analysing the data. Stage 1 proceeded in three parts:

1) Interviews with key SFA members;
2) A meta-analysis meeting in which aggregated data was shared with the SFA Executive;
3) Circulation of the draft report to the SFA membership for comment.

**Stage 2:** Following the Stage 1 report, additional quantitative data that had previously been gathered was provided to supplement the qualitative story. In addition, SFA members submitted case-in-point stories to illustrate in detail the types of activities undertaken as a result of the SFA.

**Stage One: Part 1: Interviews with key SFA members**

Information about the project and invitations to participate in the research were emailed to current and former core SFA members (n=36) listed on the SFA database. A follow-up email was sent to members who did not reply to the first invitation. Fifteen members/former members were interviewed.

To protect confidentiality, the following breakdown of membership characteristics is presented in general terms. Approximately 50% of those interviewed had been involved in the SFA since its inception in 2006. Of these participants, a small number were no longer involved due to changes in employment. Participants were drawn from a diversity of SFA members with almost equal representation from government and non-government organisations, as well as broad representation across the sectors engaged in the SFA including, but not limited to, education, health, disability and community services.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted. Most (n=13) interviews were conducted face-to-face. Two were conducted by phone. Interviewees were invited to provide additional information by email if they chose. One interviewee took up this option. Most interviews were digitally recorded with recordings used as prompts for note taking. After writing up interview data the researchers reviewed the data for recurring themes, identified responses for which there was strong agreement, and re-matched themes to overarching questions.

**Stage One: Part 2: Meta-analysis meeting**

The findings of the initial thematic analysis were presented to the SFA Executive and representatives of the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC). Immediately following this presentation, the findings were then used as the basis of a meta-analysis meeting held with the SFA Executive members. In presenting the themes identified through their analysis, the research team was interested in the response of the Executive to these themes: for example, whether the themes resonated with the experiences and perceptions of the Executive; the interpretations and elucidations that committee members brought to bear on the issues raised; and points of discrepancy. The responses from this meeting were used to develop a more nuanced and refined understanding of the data and its implications. Notes from this meeting have informed the discussion of findings and analysis contained in the draft report.

**Stage One: Part 3: Feedback on draft report.**

Once compiled, the draft report was circulated to the full SFA membership to provide further opportunities for comment and feedback. Two comments were received. Both respondents endorsed
the report and its findings and neither suggested modifications. However, through a series of iterative
discussions with the SFA Executive, it was decided to produce a second report (the Stage 2 Report)
that incorporated existing quantitative data that had not previously been available to the researchers.

Stage Two

Following acceptance of the Stage One report, additional quantitative data and illustrative “case-in-
point” stories by the SFA Executive were provided to the researchers. The following quantitative data
was made available:

- A report on the School-Centred Community Hub program, including the types of programs
  organised and attendance figures;
- Records of professional development events, including topics covered and attendance figures;
  and
- The 2013-2014 SFA Output Evaluation, which captured initiatives that the SFA members
  had carried out to implement the Child and Family Plan in that year.

Importantly, reflection on the Stage One report was an impetus to develop a diagrammatic
representation of the SFA’s Theory of Change using the Child and Family Plan (See Attachment

Case-in-point stories were gathered via a template through the SFA Executive. These stories were
generated by service providers. Where relevant the case-in-point stories have been used to illustrate
the themes arising from the data. To comply with the ethics requirements of the CSU Ethics
Committee, stories that relate to information concerning individual families have been excluded from
the report.

In the interviews conducted as part of the Stage One report, conversations were often wide-ranging.
Unsurprisingly, participant responses did not follow a linear question and response format. Thus in
analysing the interview data, the researchers identified themes emerging from across the interview
data set. These themes were then matched with the most relevant questions. These findings were then
shared with the SFA Executive and circulated to the SFA membership more broadly for feedback as
part of the Stage One data analysis process described above.

Subsequently, the themes arising from the interviews were re-examined in conjunction with both the
data obtained from the meta-analysis undertaken with the SFA Executive in Stage One and the
quantitative data gathered by the SFA as part of its internal monitoring processes in Stage Two.

All interview material constituted data for analysis, as did the quantitative data provided. Please note
that, in this report and the findings, the use of direct quotes and case-in-point stories are illustrative.
The quotes are unattributed, and identifying material within quotes has been removed to ensure the
anonymity of participants.
Background to the Stronger Families Alliance

Community context

The work of the SFA occurs against a distinctive geographical and community context that presents a particular set of challenges and opportunities. The BMCC local government area is extremely diverse. It comprises 27 settlements (villages) across a 110 km ridge-line, each village has a low population, and the total Blue Mountains population is 79,000. The 2011 census data for the whole area showed 4.9% unemployment, and 32.9% not in the labour force. The Aboriginal population is 1.7 % (ABS). The socio-demographics vary considerably from village to village with some pockets of extreme social disadvantage and high levels of unemployment.

The ridgeline settlement of villages throughout the Blue Mountains, combined with the spread of housing from the ridgeline into the bush, makes connecting to services and accessing employment difficult. The 2011 census data shows 50% of Blue Mountains residents travel outside of the Blue Mountains for work each day. For many families transport is an issue; there is a limited public transport system and 45% of households have either no car or one car. Because 60% of the population uses the family car to get to work each day, this leaves a significant number of carers without ready access to services and connections. Taken together these factors combine to leave many parents vulnerable to social isolation.

Overview of the Stronger Families Alliance

The SFA is a unique network of community organisations, government departments, voluntary organisations and businesses with the primary goal of creating and sustaining a collaborative, integrated service system to better support children, their families and their communities.

The SFA is convened and resourced by the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) and its ongoing work is supported by an Executive. The Council provides the backbone to the SFA, instigating and coordinating the SFA’s efforts to drive change. The governance structure is regularly reviewed to ensure that it reflects more sophisticated levels of integration as the group develops, adds new members and expands its focus.

The two phases of the Stronger Families Alliance

The development of the SFA to date has occurred in two main phases.

Phase One:

The SFA was formed in 2006 through a state government, local government and community sector partnership. It evolved in response to growing national and international research concerning children’s early brain development from conception to the early years of a child’s life, and the critical importance of ‘getting it right’ in the early years. Informed by this substantial body of evidence, its goals and strategies have been driven by an understanding of the effectiveness of a systems-wide approach grounded in prevention and early intervention.

In 2006, the SFA began a 5-year process of multi-organisation strategic partnership and planning, scoping needs and opportunities to work collaboratively, and using a variety of organisation development approaches including appreciative inquiry to engage and consult with key stakeholders. A key outcome of this process was the development of The Child and Family Plan and its launch in 2010.
In the process of developing this plan the SFA applied the best national and international research to the challenge of providing better outcomes for young children, their families and their communities. The Child and Family Plan developed between 2006-2009 was designed to be dynamic and responsive, capable of being adapted over time to reflect developments in relevant research and the needs of communities in the Blue Mountains area.

Phase One of the SFA approach utilised two key ways of working: firstly, policies and practices were developed by drawing upon the best available evidence; and secondly, emerging practices were tried out on a small scale and if successful, replicated and adapted more broadly. The School-Centred Community Hub program for example, started as a small ‘test’ initiative in Blackheath, and, following its success, was scaled up to additional Blue Mountains sites.

This Evaluation is concerned with Phase One of the SFA.

Phase Two:

At the end of 2014 the SFA launched a new iteration, which expanded the reach of the SFA to include children up to 18 years of age. This means the shared approach of the SFA now ranges from prenatal to early adulthood and encompasses:

1. Creating resilience and wellbeing for children, young people and their families; and
2. Taking a prevention and early intervention approach to mental health issues in children, young people and their families.

As a result, the SFA is in the process of engaging many new stakeholders from the mental health sector and the youth sector. In addition, the SFA is actively engaging community members as equal partners to services. Building on the previous approaches to change and SFA capability, this expanded focus involves:

- The attraction and retention of members focused on the issues that can lead to the development of mental health problems, including the child protection and domestic violence sectors;
- The re-alignment of the SFA culture, established networks, governance structure and systems;
- The design of a shared measurement system for the SFA so that it can measure, or assess, its impact over time; and
- Processes and practices for collaborative partnership with the community.

In 2015, the SFA adopted a new governance structure to better reflect these changes. This structure aims for continuity regarding the implementation of the current Child and Family Plan, and adopts new working groups to create the new Child and Youth Plan. (See attachment four: SFA Governance Structure 2010 - 2014 & attachment Five : SFA Governance Structure 2015-)

The Stronger Families Alliance drivers for change

Establishing a shared vision

To bring previously unaligned services together, the SFA utilised a number of collaborative strategies outlined in the Stronger Families Alliance Theory of Change 2007-2014 (see Attachment Three) to create and agree upon a unifying vision that eventually came to be encapsulated in the Child and Family Plan. This shared vision for change is driven by the following:

- Research that establishes positive impact on children's development and wellbeing by using approaches grounded in prevention and early intervention and coherence in service delivery;
- Recognition of the growing complexity of family life and the risks of adverse child developmental outcomes posed by family isolation and inadequate access to appropriate support;
- The rights of children to health services, education and appropriate care and protection (Child and Family Plan, 2010).
Hence, the three foci of the Child and Family Plan (2010) are:
- Strengthening families through neighbourhood and service networks;
- Moving children and their families beyond vulnerability; and
- Creating child-friendly communities.

The key elements of this vision as they are articulated in the Plan are that:
- Every Blue Mountains family has access to a collaborative service network which is unique to their neighbourhood, supports child development and is a natural gateway into community life;
- Children are nurtured within strong and resilient families and communities that are able to keep their children safe and well; and
- All members of the community understand the different ways they can support children to reach their full potential.

**Precis of underlying concepts motivating change**

In the following section we provide a brief précis of key concepts underpinning the work of the SFA in order to place the project findings in context. The concepts outlined below are selected because they are explicitly referenced in the Child and Family Plan and because they emerged as key from our discussions with stakeholders.

The Child and Family Plan (2010) encapsulates the approaches adopted by the SFA in the first phase of its development. Significantly, prompted by reflection upon the initial Stage 1 Report and the work of the SFA since its inception, the SFA has articulated a revised SFA Theory of Change based on the Child and Family Plan (See Attachment Three). A theory of change explains how a group of early and intermediate achievements in the life of a long-term program sets the stage for achieving long term outcomes at the end of the program (Anderson, 2010).

First and foremost, the SFA has sought to drive systems level change. To do so, it has adopted methods drawn from organisational development, literature on high-performing collaborations and, later in its evolution, the collective impact movement.

**An ecological model of child development**

The vision and strategies encompassed by the Plan are based on an understanding of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development (see for instance, Bowes, Grace and Hayes 2012). This model recognises that each child's development is profoundly affected by the family and community context into which the child is born. For example, if a child is born with a health or developmental problem, his/her wellbeing and future development will be profoundly impacted by how quickly the problem is detected, followed by the family’s timely access to appropriate interventions and support. However, if the family is unable to access services and support, the risks posed by such problems may compound over time and become much harder to shift, further compromising the child’s development. Access to support can depend on many factors that exist outside the family, including the availability of services, their cost and their geographic accessibility. Hence, where we are born counts.

**Prevention and early intervention**

Following from this, the work of the SFA is grounded in an understanding of the impact of prevention and early intervention. Prevention and early intervention approaches encompass three key elements:
- The provision of universal² services to prevent problems from occurring (for example, early childhood education, early childhood health clinics and nurse visits);

² 'Universal' can be understood in two distinct ways: those services that are open to all families— that is families do not require referral for access; and services that every family has access to, for example school education.
• The timely detection of risks to healthy development and the provision of appropriate interventions to prevent problems from occurring or escalating; and
• The availability of support early in the life course (Press, 2006).

Such an approach recognises that there are needs shared by all families, and further, that all families need additional support at some time during the life course. In cases where families are confronted with multiple risks or vulnerabilities, successful interventions are more likely when agencies work together on the development and delivery of cohesive responses as early as possible (Moore, 2008).

Community capacity

In seeking to provide the protective factors that enable families and individuals to successfully circumvent or overcome risk, prevention and early intervention strategies also involve strengthening communities —otherwise known as building community capacity. Community capacity building can be understood as:

… the interaction of human capital, organisational resources, and social capital that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and to improve or maintain the well-being of a given community (Chaskin cited in Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013)

One important element in strengthening community capacity has been to collaborate with the community to drive desired change. In Phase One, the SFA sought to achieve community collaboration through engaging parents in the steering committees of the five School-Centred Community Hubs programs that arose out of the SFA. It later conducted a large consultation program with children (see Case in Point Story on page 18). In Phase Two, this has entailed the utilisation of methods such as the Harwood approach3.

Collective impact

Collective Impact recognises that social problems are multi-layered and complex, and are rarely successfully addressed by any single organisation. In Collective Impact (CI) initiatives, organisations work together on a common agenda to solve a “specific social problem” (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 36). A number of Collective Impact initiatives have “demonstrated substantial and consistent progress toward their goals” (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012, p.2).

The five conditions identified by Kania & Kramer as necessary for the success of CI initiatives are:
1. A common agenda: a shared vision for change.
2. Shared measurement systems: agreement on what and how outcomes are measured.
3. Mutually reinforcing activities: coordinated activities that harness the diverse and collective skills of the group.
4. Continuous communication: to build trusting, open relationships and common language.
5. Backbone support: a specifically-created organisation dedicated to coordinating the activities.

Engaging in a collective impact initiative requires:
• Sustained and continuous engagement with, and reflection on, governance and infrastructure to facilitate collaboration;
• Development of joint strategic plans; effective community involvement; and
• Evaluation of outcomes (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012).

3 The Harwood approach is not discussed in detail as it is outside the scope of this report which only evaluated SFA activities up until 2014. The SFA formally began collaboration with the community, starting with the Harwood approach in 2015. Further information can be found via: http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/
Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is an asset-based approach to organisational development that focuses on “strengths and successes” (Coghlan et al., 2003, p. 6). It challenges the common practice that organisations often adopt when seeking to improve their practices, which is to focus on identifying ‘problems’ and their possible solutions. Appreciative Inquiry begins with organisations focusing on what already works well, and envisioning a “desired future” (Coghlan, Preskill & Tzavaras Catsambas, 2003, p. 6) in which more of ‘what works well’ is occurring. Participants then work together to plan and implement the tasks and resources needed to bring about this desired future.

Elliott (1999) describes Appreciative Inquiry as a pluralistic and participatory process “by which the best practice of an organisation can become embedded as the norm” (pp. 202-203). Using Appreciative Inquiry to involve stakeholders in the facilitation of change and evaluation processes, has been found to be facilitative in changing habitual ways of thinking about organisational processes and activities, leading to innovation and better outcomes for clients. It is also argued to increase the validity of data, and raise organisations’ capacity for evaluation (Coghlan et al. 2003).

Strengths-based approaches to working with families

In the past two decades there has been a significant shift in the ways practitioners in many fields work with families, from a deficit approach focused on families’ problems to a strengths-based approach. Grounded in socially just understandings about the dignity and worth of individuals, as well as in their strengths and potentials, strengths-based approaches build people’s capacity for self-efficacy. A strengths approach requires practitioners to assist clients to see and appreciate their strengths and resources, and to work with and from these strengths as the basis for change. Taking a strengths-based perspective does not deny the material, financial and/or psychological difficulties that many families face (Weick et al. 1989, p.352). A particularly dominant articulation of strengths approaches in Australia comes from St Luke’s (McCashen, 2005) and is based on five key principles:

- **Respect** for people’s intrinsic worth, rights, capacities, uniqueness and commonalities
- **Sharing** of information and ‘knowledge’, resources, skills, decision-making
- **Collaboration** teamwork and partnership, consultation and inclusion
- **Social justice** equity, access, ‘equality’, participation, self-determination
- **Transparency** having things out in the open, open information and communication
Evaluation findings

Introduction

The key questions that guided the evaluation were:

1. How (if) have the SFA partners used the SFA approach to change to reach the project end outcomes?
2. What evidence is there that the SFA is making progress to achieve its final outcomes?
3. What approaches to change have been particularly effective and should be taken forward into the new iteration of the SFA?
4. What advice (given in retrospect) would have made the SFA more effective in meeting child and family needs?

1. Are the SFA partners using the SFA approach to change to reach the project end outcomes?

“To me the SFA is 3 words: WE, US, OUR”

Participants were asked both if and how the SFA partners used the SFA approach to change to reach the project end outcomes. However, for the purposes of reporting, these two parts of the question have been separated.

There was strong affirmation that the SFA had led to real and meaningful change. From stakeholder responses, this change was evident at multiple levels. Firstly, individuals spoke of having a deeper understanding of how they themselves could work more effectively with families. Secondly, access to evidence-based information has also led to changes in how their agencies worked with children and families. And thirdly, agencies work together more effectively to improve outcomes for children and families.
2. How have the SFA partners used the SFA approach to change to reach the project end outcomes?

In answer to the question “How have SFA partners used the SFA approach to change to reach the project end outcomes?” the following themes emerged:

- Creating of strong organisational and professional relationships
- Developing of shared understandings about what works for children and families
- Gaining greater knowledge about the services and supports available for children and families
- Actively using the Child & Family Plan as a reference point for planning, evaluation, and decision-making
- Cultivating a systems view
- Reinforcing and modelling ‘best-practice’ approaches

However, overarching these themes was a firm belief that the agencies involved in the SFA were not only working together, but functioning as an alliance. The choice of the word "alliance" when choosing the name for the SFA was described as a ‘light bulb’ moment, as it captured the strength of the various agencies’ sense of common purpose.

Organisational and professional relationships

The SFA has established strong professional relationships between managers of key agencies that have, in turn, supported the sharing of knowledge and shared approaches to support families. As a result, service system collaborations have become stronger and inclusive of a broader and more
diverse range of services than had occurred previously. Additionally, collaborative relationships at management level help generate and support collaborations between front-line staff as managers both model collaborative work, and set the expectation that collaboration should happen. According to a number of service providers, this has resulted in many families having more ready access to a suite of services that respond to their particular needs and aspirations for their children.

Case-in point story:

Working systemically

The biggest impact that the SFA has had on me and my service has been strengthening the value of working systemically. It’s a very different way of working, contrasting with a more narrow view where we only do the specific part of the work our service is set up to deliver.

Working in this way stops the whole ‘pass the parcel’ approach that can happen when clients are passed from service to service, without respectfully and effectively ensuring that they access the particular help they require. The SFA professional development forums are excellent examples of how the SFA helps service providers to enhance their knowledge of available services, facilitates linkages amongst service providers and ensures clearer referral pathways.

The SFA reinforces for myself and colleagues the value of working collaboratively with other services. The Child and Family Plan provides backing for the approach. It is a valid document, backed by the Council, and demonstrates how the systems approach is workable, both practically and theoretically. Evidence shows that connectedness is a significant protective factor that mitigates vulnerability.

Working systemically also allows for the potential for cultural change, for example around domestic and family violence and child protection. When government, non-government and private organisations work together on this, individuals are empowered and systems change.

Contributed by a social worker.

Shared understandings about what works for children and families

“We are all on the same page”

For agencies and staff who want to make a difference for children, working with families living in adverse or vulnerable circumstances can be tough – especially if staff feel isolated, or unsure of whether what they are doing is making a difference. The SFA has worked hard at creating shared understandings based on the best available evidence, of ‘what works’ for vulnerable children and families, and ‘what’s available’ in the Blue Mountains area. Sharing a common foundation of evidence-based knowledge has supported agencies to strengthen collaborations.

Between 2006 and August 2015, the SFA organised 20 professional development sessions aligned with the achievement of the objectives of the SFA (see Attachment Six). This suite of professional development sessions has made highly respected national experts accessible to Blue Mountains professionals to share their research knowledge and expertise about what works with families. This series of ‘inspiring and stimulating’ professional development events has successfully transformed participants’ understanding of how to support children, families and communities. For example, a number of participants referred to the ongoing impact of the sessions provided by Professor Frank Oberklaid in the early stages of the formation of the SFA, with one participant describing an early session as a ‘galvanizing event that gave momentum’.
A key characteristic of these professional development sessions has been that they bring together staff from different agencies who have different professional backgrounds and skill sets. This in turn creates a forum for the exchange of ideas and dialogue that is the hallmark of strong and effective collaborations.

**Case-in-point story:**

**Launching library programs for babies, children and young people**

The very first Professor Frank Oberklaid presentation in the SFA was a revelation for the Blue Mountains City Council library staff. After the presentation the staff felt compelled to launch programs that we linked together to keep children using the library throughout their childhood.

Being exposed to Frank’s research alerted staff to the importance of reading, rhymes and songs to newborns in order to facilitate the neural pathways required for learning. Our eyes were opened to how precious those first few years of life are for children’s development and the difference we could make.

We immediately began Babytime. As the babies are read to in the library environment they are already learning that reading is fun, social and interactive. New connections and friendships are formed through Babytime that we purposely foster due to what the staff have learnt through the SFA about the importance of breaking down the isolation that many parents feel that contributes to post-natal depressions, child abuse and lack of harmony within the home. This program had great attendance from the beginning – there was huge community demand for a program for babies.

From Babytime we then launched the Books 4 Babies Kit as an extension of the program. The program is a partnership between Blue Mountains City Library, Megalong Books, the Friends of Blue Mountains Libraries and Blue Mountains District ANZAC Memorial Hospital. The kit is given to every newborn and contains a board book, information about the importance of reading to children, forms for the Library, 6 months free membership to our Toy Library and information on the Library’s Babytime and Storytime (for 3-5 year old) sessions. These initiatives were backed up by acquiring a new and expansive collection of board books for babies.

The Summer Reading Challenge seemed a natural progression to keep children engaged reading and our library service to supply them with books. Evidence has shown that children’s literacy drops significantly over the summer holidays, so we developed this program to encourage children to continue reading while they were not at school. Over the past 8 years the program has seen 68,810 books borrowed for the summer reading challenge with 3,871 children participating. As the children became teenagers we had to launch a teen-age program in response to their demand!

*Contributed by the library manager.*

**Greater knowledge about what services and supports are available for children and families**

By being part of a wider network, staff and agencies have developed a greater awareness of the types of services available for children and families in the Blue Mountains region. This, in turn has broken down the isolation of staff and helped staff connect families to relevant services. For example, one participant spoke of it being easier to ‘ring and get advice’ and another stated that that 'collaboration has opened [my] eyes to what’s available in the community...and helped with isolation factor.’

**The Child and Family Plan**

‘Every project has a focus…but [we are] all going in the direction of the Plan together’.
Participants considered that the Child and Family Plan had been instrumental in reinforcing shared understandings and the achievement of common goals. The Plan was described as a tangible reference point that agencies could use in their strategic planning, and the setting of short and medium term strategies and goals. One participant spoke of his/her work becoming much more purposeful because of the Plan; another described it as a ‘guiding tool’; another as a tool for ‘keeping on track’. Another participant explained that the objectives of the Plan were explicitly linked with his/her organisation’s evaluation and forward planning.

The success of the Plan in supporting agencies to work effectively with families is attributed to several factors, including its co-development; its strong evidence base; its accessible language; and its ‘professional look’.

**Case-in-point story:**

**Using the Child and Family Plan to launch our child-friendly city**

Creating a Child-Friendly Community is Part C of the Child and Family Plan, and in 2011 an Implementation Group was established to begin work on this part of the Plan. Our group decided to focus on children’s consultation practice because of the SFA’s enthusiasm for the topic. We also thought we could kick-start work on other areas in the Child and Family Plan using child consultation as a catalyst for change. These areas included ‘actively engaging children in opportunities to play and participate in the community’ and ‘creating a built environment and public spaces that are better designed to include children and stimulate their development’.

We started by inviting world-renowned expert, Dr Karen Malone, to run two days of workshops on the topic *How Child-Friendly is My Community?* The purpose of the workshops was to educate ourselves about the negative impact of children’s gradual withdrawal from public space, learn best practice responses to this problem and learn how to consult with children as a way to improve our practice, services and advocacy on behalf of children.

We followed up with an active child consultation “community of practice” and running other interactive professional development events. As a consequence of this two year focus a new way of working towards creating a child-friendly city was established in the Blue Mountains that we originally set out in our Child and Family Plan. Specific initiatives include:

- Identifying Council development projects and then including child consultation as part of the development process. For example, in a large development in the middle of Springwood the SFA and Council partnered to consult 65 children aged 3 to 12 and produce a written report for the landscape architect.

- A child consultation process in one area involved 240 children and residents about how we can make our community more child-friendly. The information was synthesized and passed onto Blue Mountains City Council to inform its design masterplan for this township. These are used to guide development as funds become available over the long term.

- The SFA Hub network across the Blue Mountains consulted children about places they play in their towns and their preferences for play activities at community events. This gave all the services involved valuable ideas about how to make community events and festivals more fun and engaging for children. The information about what makes community spaces ‘play-friendly’ for children is in the process of being passed on to the Council to assist with design masterplans for each town involved in the project.

- Council services including the library, family day care, recreation centres, aquatic centres and parks have used children’s consultation in the design of new premises and programs to increase their uptake and usage.

- The creation of the Bush-Tracker Program: Bush Walks by Kids for Kids put consulting with children at the cornerstone of the program and furthered SFA goals to see more of our children use the bush as a playground.
- Services within the SFA have implemented child consultation as an embedded part of their service processes. For example, one Out of School Hours Service started using a child representative on the employment interview panel for the service. Through these and other initiatives we have taken steps towards ensuring Blue Mountains children feel like they are welcome in the community, that the community is a place where children are encouraged to learn through play and that future Blue Mountains developments and township urban design is informed by these principles. (579)

Contribution by a community development service manager

Cultivating a systems view

The vision and objectives encapsulated in the Child and Family Plan, informed by the best available evidence, had helped cultivate a systems view. Participants could locate their agencies' work within a system-wide collaboration designed to improve outcomes/experiences for children and families. For example, one participant explained that through having a more comprehensive understanding of available programs and services, s/he could now help ensure families were better supported through the various stages of their child's/children's development. The following quote typifies this sense of service providers being able to link families with support and networks relevant to the different stages of children's development: "Mothers' groups can later tap into toddler groups and then into school."

As part of this systems-wide focus, the SFA has been able to engage organisations for whom children and families have not been 'core business'. A successful example of this has been the work of Parks and Wildlife Service and the Bush-Trackers program.

Case-in-point story

Helping our communities' most vulnerable children

The ‘Moving Children Beyond Vulnerability Group’ (MCBV) was established early in the life of the SFA. Our job was to implement the Child and Family Plan: Part B – Moving Children Beyond Vulnerability. The key issues we have focused on are

- Helping mainstream services identify children at risk and know how to extend help to them;
- Knitting together a fragmented service system for dealing with at-risk children and families,
- Highlighting and getting help to ‘invisible’ children – for example those whose parents are using services such as mental health or drug and alcohol. For many of these children, nobody is charged with responding to how the issues in their family are impacting on their happiness and development. Our goals were to improve the ways our agencies worked with vulnerable children and to educate the wider child, family and community sector about our discoveries. The key elements of our success in this venture could be summarised as: shared vision; respectful relationships developed over time; and commitment to the best interests of vulnerable children and families.

Our approach involved bringing together a range of different services that worked with parents and carers experiencing vulnerability. Services participating came from sectors such as mental health,
domestic violence, family support, community health, disability, and drug and alcohol. We established a shared vision for vulnerable children in the Blue Mountains and a shared practice.

We utilised a range of organisational development practices to achieve this aim, particularly appreciative inquiry, which helped us work outward from current common ground to develop more common ground as we proceeded to learn together. Learning together had a significant spin-off in that it generated enthusiasm for working collaboratively in this previously fragmented sector. It helped many in the group recover from burn-out and prompted the realisation that we needed diverse services and professionals to work together to get a real impact locally.

The Stronger Families Alliance provided a strong philosophical base and a process of creating change using organisational development practices and having a learning focus. The SFA Child and Family Plan was a significant guiding tool and a reference point for our set of shared goals/values, it prioritised what issues to focus on and gave us a shared approach to practice, particularly strengths based practice.

Together we have helped the children and families we work with access many more services so that everyone’s needs, including children’s, are considered. Over time we have charted an increase in referrals both across agencies with our group and from our agencies into mainstream services for children such as early childhood education. We have cemented this change in our service system by establishing new referral pathways, both inside and outside the group, that we have a lot of confidence using because we trust and know each other. We have also impacted our sector’s capacity through planning interactive whole of sector professional development days based on what we have learnt. These have focused on recognising vulnerability and building resilience, building a team around the child and promoting children and young people’s mental health. We have grown in our ability to plan and lead these professional development workshops that get consistently high attendance and ratings from attendees.

Contributed by a Family Support Service manager(538)

Case-in point story:

Using SFA change methods to start the Bush Trackers Program

The Bush Trackers Program encourages kids and families to get out into nature through a series of maps focused on local bushwalks suitable for children aged from 2 – 12+. The initiative responds to the SFA’s goal to reduce the ‘green curtain’ in our community – families not using the bush as backyard due to parents either fearing the bush or not knowing where to take their children in the bush.

Our 18 maps resulted from taking groups of school children aged 8 – 9 on a bush walk in their neighbourhood, and providing them with art diaries to record their responses in. The artwork is given to a graphic design team who combines the children’s drawings, words and favourite places into a map. Our maps are widely distributed through shops, schools and tourism outlets and through our website. Bush Trackers is run through a partnership between the schools, local government, the environmental sector and the tourism industry.

-20,000 maps have been printed and distributed to community members and tourists since October 2012.
During 2014-2015 the Bush-Trackers website had 11,500 visits with 85,000 downloads of maps from site.

16 class groups have provided written survey responses about the program. These show the children overwhelmingly enjoy the bush walk excursion, with a high proportion then returning to the bushwalk with their parents.

The program has attracted $99,600 to grow the program beyond the Blue Mountains, reach CALD children, establish a solid evaluation framework and ‘train the trainer’ kit so that other communities can implement the program independently of SFA input.

The Stronger Families Alliance development process and ways of working provided inspiration and modelling to me about how to launch this initiative using a multi-stakeholder approach including:

- Using processes used in the SFA Main Group to help the Bush Trackers group form and work together. I worked with the group to articulate their shared vision and desired outcomes for the project and then we entered a process of continually seeking input from everyone into the design, implementation and funding of the project as it grew;

- Starting with a small pilot, learning from this and then gradually scaling up;

- Using authentic community engagement by putting children’s views at the heart of the project and the design of the maps;

- Working with schools by taking the ‘school’s point of view’. For example, Bush Trackers is directly linked to multiple points in the Stage Two curriculum. I think this is why we have had such fantastic participation from schools. (419)

Contributed by a National Parks manager

Modelling ‘best-practice’ approaches

There was widespread agreement that the philosophical foundations of SFA and the theories it espoused were evident in the way that the SFA worked. Most frequently, participants referred to strengths-based approaches, appreciative inquiry and collective impact. Significantly, a number of participants stated that understanding and observing these ways of working had changed their own practices. Their own perceptions of families had changed, and indeed their own capacities to generate change had been fostered through such ways of working. In turn, by embodying these understandings in their own work with families, families were being encouraged to adopt the same tools.

Case-in-point story:

Strengths-based approaches at an early childhood centre

Many vulnerable families are referred to our early childhood centre. These families are experiencing significant disruptions (e.g. relocation, moving house, family separation and domestic violence), which makes obtaining the child care benefit to attend our service and then keeping their children attending really hard. When families are unable to stick with our service, their children miss out on receiving an early childhood education.

In response our service changed the way we enrol and build a relationship with vulnerable families in their early stages of contact with us. In thinking through how to implement this initiative one gap we identified was that staff members may not understand the rationale behind this new policy and procedure. They had varying levels of exposure to strengths-based approaches so would not necessarily take on the initiative. We worked together to re-write procedural information in a new
Form called "Because we believe".

This format clearly states the rationale behind this and other policies and procedures. Our policy now starts with this statement:

"Because we believe that we can set the tone of children and families’ expectations and the climate for interactions we know that if we ask negative questions we will get negative answers, and we will encourage children and families to interpret their experiences negatively, or perceive negative intentions on behalf of others … So instead we start by asking children and their families if they need our help or support to solve a problem. We try and keep our own emotions out of our interactions when we are finding a child or their family difficult and frustrating … We know we often express these emotions in our tone rather than in what we say."

We also changed our procedures so that we took on more of the pressure, administrative and problem-solving work vulnerable families are confronted with in obtaining the child care benefit. This removed a significant practical and emotional barrier to enrolment.

Being a member of the SFA gave me exposure to the ideas that shaped this initiative - the importance of the strengths-based approach and the crucial step of positive engagement with families in their first experience with us. There are frequent discussions and research circulated with SFA partners about the importance of the strengths-based approach in all of our work, no matter the setting. Working with vulnerable children and families can be very difficult for staff involved - I think that being a member of the SFA promotes a "Can do" sense - seeing what has been achieved by other organisations encourages a sense of optimism in the face of these challenges and generates new ideas to make a difference. Attendance at SFA meetings always provides an injection of enthusiasm and commitment to working with vulnerable children and their families. I carry this enthusiasm, and ideas we generate together back into my Centre which then drives our continual development of supportive policies and practices such as this one.

As a result of this initiative we have enrolled a greater proportion of vulnerable children referred to us. Through building positive relationships with families early, they are remaining with the service over the longer term, which means we can provide an early childhood education to the children in our community who most need it. (541)

Contributed by Early Childhood Centre manager

3. What evidence do we have that the SFA is making progress to achieve its final outcomes?

"Now we do good work that is both collaborative and cohesive".

Respondents were confident that the SFA had made progress toward its outcomes. When asked to discuss how they knew the SFA was working, many participants contrasted their previous experiences of trying to address child and family concerns with their current practices. The SFA had supported them to adopt new practices and to work more closely with other agencies. Other participants, who were former SFA members now working in other geographical areas, had noticed the success of the SFA strategy because it contrasted starkly with their current work experiences in which work was less collaborative and less responsive to child and family needs. Some participants, who were also parents, noticed the increased number of ‘family-friendly’ initiatives taking place in the region, which they attributed to the work of the SFA.

In general, the responses to the questions concerning evidence of progress, fell into the following categories:

- Continued agency commitment to the SFA
- Ongoing agency collaborations that are strong and effective
• Swift and effective responses to families in emergencies
• Initiatives for improved support to children and families

Continued agency commitment to the SFA

“I go to each meeting with a sense of optimism”
“People don’t hang around if it’s not effective”.

Membership of the SFA requires an ongoing commitment of time and action from people who are already busy in their day-to-day work. A significant number of participants made observations to the effect that the SFA would not endure if it were not making a difference; that they would not be prepared to give up their time and offer such a high level of positive engagement. Thus the longevity of the SFA and the relative stability in core membership were offered as strong evidence of its success. Relatedly, participants considered that the fact that the SFA was attracting new members and increasing its membership overall was indicative of its success.

Strong and effective agency collaborations

There was widespread agreement that the SFA has changed the culture of how agencies worked together in the Blue Mountains in ways that enabled them to improve what they could provide for children and families. The SFA Output Evaluation for 2013-2014 supports this view. It documents over 50 completed initiatives designed, for example, to roll out successful collaborations to new areas, share best practice evidence with the sector, and distribute high quality resources to families.

Specifically, the SFA has:
• Built organisational relationships that did not exist previously, especially (but not exclusively) between the government and non-government sector.
• Generated a shared commitment to common goals.
• Resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of the services available for children and families in the Blue Mountains Region.
• Facilitated a highly functioning communication network resulting in:
  o increased collaboration between agencies; and
  o improved referral pathways.
• Enabled families to receive better advice and more comprehensive responses to their needs.
• Improved the accessibility of information, advice and support to families thus supporting the earlier identification of risks to children’s development and wellbeing.

A tangible example of these types of changes is the School-Centred Community Hub Program (discussed further on pages 26). One aspect of the program involves actively linking early childhood education and care services in the provision of initiatives to support young children’s transition to school. Improved communication and cooperation between prior-to-school services and schools have meant that additional school-based intervention and support can be provided at an earlier stage of children's schooling. One participant commented that before the SFA “the school gate was padlocked to early childhood [services]”, but now there are many shared initiatives.

Swift and effective responses to families in emergencies

Several participants highlighted the swift and effective responses that were organised through SFA member services to families in crisis following the extensive bushfires of 2013. They noted that organisations were now so used to working together that they were able to re-focus and coordinate their efforts rapidly and efficiently to bring in other players (for example, the police).
Case-in-point story:

Providing a rapid response to families affected by the 2013 bush fire

In October 2013 one of the Blue Mountains’ worst bushfires destroyed 198 houses in our area and partially damaged approximately 300 other houses. Immediately after the fire we were overloaded with many families flagged ‘red’ on our system because they required immediate counselling for trauma as well as having a huge range of other urgent practical needs as a result of losing their homes and property. The needs of families were completely beyond the scope of one agency and we needed to rapidly set up a way to help families in a really chaotic environment.

The School Hub already had in place all the connections and collaborative ways of working we needed to help these families quickly. We used already existing joined-up services and networks to put in place immediate practical help that met the huge and diverse range of needs. The breadth of organisations involved assisted us in the critical role of getting the word out through the local neighbourhood grapevines about what was available, such as goods and services.

Just as importantly this network let us know what children and families actually needed as the disaster recovery process unfolded over the next year. One example of this is our rapid creation of a school holiday program for children. Parents whose homes had been lost or severely damaged had children off school for the holidays and were struggling to look after them on a practical level because they were massively preoccupied and stressed with all the work required to get their homes and lives back on track. A partnership was quickly formed with Hub services including the neighbourhood centre, a local church, schools and a family support service to get this holiday program off the ground in a week.

The children loved the holiday program to the extent that it is now an established event each school holiday and one that our agency plans to continue to support for the children in our community. (325)

Contributed by a Neighbourhood Centre manager.

Initiatives for improved support to families

Participants also provided very specific examples of small scale and larger scale changes and initiatives as signs of success.

- The School-Centred Community Hubs program: Utilising refocused, patchwork funding from eight different funding sources, this program involves five Hubs that reach ten schools.
- Making spaces within adult work environments more child-friendly through the provision of books and toys. This enabled children to be more settled while service providers spoke to adult family members and provided a message to children that they were valued and welcome.
- Local events that engage a range of health and support agencies, providing a soft entry point for families who may need additional support.
- Paint the Blue Read and its mascot Billy Booksie: An early literacy program based on early intervention and community development principles (see case-in-point story, page 27).
- Bush Trackers: This initiative was raised by many participants as a concrete example of work toward a child-friendly community (see case-in-point story, page 21).

The School-Centred Community Hubs Program
The School-Centred Community Hub program is an example of a successful SFA initiative that reaches families with young children in ways that are consistent with a prevention and early intervention approach. There are five School-Centred Community Hubs:

- Blackheath and Mount Victoria Hub: This services Blackheath and Mount Victoria through two schools.
- Katoomba Hub: This services Katoomba through two schools.
- Mid Mountains Hub: This services Wentworth Falls, Lawson and Hazelbrook through four schools.
- Winmalee Hub: This services Winmalee through one school.
- Lower Mountains Hub: This services Blaxland and Warrimoo through three schools.

Each Hub offers supported playgroups each school week, short parent-education courses (usually three to six sessions each course) throughout the year, community engagement events such as community breakfasts, and school fun days. The supported playgroups and community events are often attended by other service providers, thus enabling families to seek advice and support without formal referral, or to simply become aware of what is available in the community. Providing such soft entry points for family support is an important means of effective family support. Interagency and parent engagement is reflected in the Hubs’ steering committee structure which involves local services, voluntary organisations, schools and parents.

Case-in-point story:

**Paint the Blue Read Program**

The *Paint the Blue Read* initiative commenced in response to primary school teachers and principals reporting on the worrying number of children arriving at school not ‘reading ready’. These children did not know how to hold a book, had no or little experience listening to stories and weren’t familiar with the language rhythms that other children learn through songs and nursery rhymes. It became clear that parents of these children did not know about the importance of providing pre-literacy experiences like reading, singing & saying nursery rhymes to children, or did not know how to do this.

*Paint the Blue Read* is a community awareness and education program that uses a community development approach to turn around this issue. Together we created a key message “stories, rhymes and play every single day” and resources to help parents do this. The initiative has a mascot, Billy Booksie, who regularly appears throughout the Mountains promoting and modelling pre-school reading. We work with approximately 30 partners, many of them small businesses & service clubs like Rotary and Lions, that regularly hold what we call “reading tents”. These are small informal pre-literacy events where partners read to children, sing songs and say nursery rhymes. We purposely hold these in places parents go everyday such as businesses,
shopping centres, parks and community events. We also work intensively with pre-schools and schools during an annual Reading Week which has grown to include events in nearly every town and school in the Blue Mountains.

The initiative was born at a SFA Pre-Literacy Summit that approximately 50 people attended from different organisations that cared about early literacy. The Summit was a follow-up to a previous SFA event where Professor Frank Oberklaid highlighted the importance of early brain development and how preschool reading experiences stimulate brain development. At the Summit we came to understand teachers’ concerns regarding children arriving at school not ‘reading ready’, the issues in our community contributing to this situation and what to do about this. The participants used the interactive learning process of the SFA to either partner with each other to launch initiatives, or plan initiatives internal to their service. Along the way the SFA then helped us by facilitating the development of a structure for the collaboration.

Paint the Blue Read has grown steadily over time. Now when Billy Booksie appears at large community events it is common for children to call out to him; he has rock star status for many preschoolers in our community! In 2015 we conducted a brand recognition survey about Billy Booksie in a community we had been working in. We found that 50% of parents and grandparents could identify who Billy Booksie was, what he stood for – the importance of early literacy for young children - and the types of activities at home that promote pre-literacy development. (475)

*Contributed by a community development service manager*

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**Case-in-point story**

**Establishing a School-Centred Hub**

Our School-Centred Community Hub was established to respond to a parent community which was socially isolated because of geography, a lack of public transport and socio-economic disadvantage. These problems were compounded by the fragmented and siloed nature of the service system in the area - schools and services had very little cross-over despite working with the same client groups. There was a significant disconnect between early childhood centres and primary schools. Referrals by schools to support services were limited with little knowledge about what was potentially available to families.

Our approach was informed and supported by what the SFA had learnt through the establishment of a prototype Hub established in another community. This involved:
- Engaging a broad range of community stakeholders in the development of School Community Hubs and a school-based supported playgroup as a first program. We invited everyone with an interest ‘to the table’ which broke down barriers to parents being involved and led to the establishment of a multi-stakeholder steering group.
- Viewing the engagement of school leadership in the Hub Steering Committee as a critical success factor. Over time this allowed us to proceed with our work at the pace the school could manage.
- Holding a community engagement day to find out what the community wanted for its children and families
- Engaging a broad spectrum of services in joint professional development and shared learning activities around brain development and progressive service models. This forged direct links with schools and created a ‘same page’ approach.

The establishment of the Hub was overseen by the SFA group that had developed the first Hub. This group framed the development of my Hub as an exercise in learning how to replicate a successful program from one community context to another. This group included a member of our local NSW Family and Community Services Office who amended the service specifications of an existing program my service was running so that core funding could be re-diverted to beginning the new Hub. Being part of this highly developed relationship network also enabled us to quickly establish a higher level of collaboration at our Hub. This was characterised by a strong shared intention for children and a shared vision of success. The SFA assisted practically by providing guidance, facilitation and finding additional establishment funding for us.

There were some immediately visible positive outcomes from these initiatives including families experiencing less social isolation due to new programs for parents and community being run at school, parents having a key worker at school who linked them to other services, the beginning of transition to school activities for children and a change in the school’s culture of working with families. Over the longer term increasing numbers of children and parents have received either early or intensive support due to our group establishing effective referral pathways. Our focus on jointly planning activities with community has brought parents to the school and we have increased resources flowing into the community through including churches and service clubs in our group. (503)

Contributed by a family support manager
4. What approaches to change have been particularly effective and should be taken forward into the new iteration of the SFA?

“Basically I think bring it all forward. Nothing there I would get rid of”

Those interviewed were highly supportive of the strategies that had been adopted to form and sustain the SFA, despite the fact that, for some participants, some strategies - especially in formative stages – seemed to be slow and time-consuming. A number of participants noted that a retrospective view enabled them to observe how the time invested at the ‘front-end’ had embedded change.

Participants identified the following strategies as contributing to success:

- The BMCC as backbone;
- The leadership capabilities of the SFA convenor;
- The distributed leadership model of the SFA;
- Adoption of carefully selected tools and strategies to drive change;
- Multi-sectoral evidence-based professional development; and
- The co-development and articulation of shared goals and strategies through the Child and Family Plan

The BMCC as Backbone

‘Blue Mountains Council’s contribution to SFA is outstanding and highly valued and highly regarded’

A key element of the Collective Impact approach is the provision of a ‘backbone organisation’. Because the collective impact approach is reliant upon different agencies working to a common purpose, an organising and coordinating element is essential. This element is referred to as the backbone. The backbone coordinates efforts to drive change. In the case of the SFA the backbone has been provided through Blue Mountains City Council’s Child and Family Services Development Officer.

Almost all participants commented on the skill and effectiveness of the current facilitator in driving change through this backbone role (the skills and attributes considered important are discussed under leadership capabilities). While it is important to recognise and acknowledge the personal dimension of leadership, it is equally important to regard these attributes as essential skills for the delivery of the backbone function.

The importance of the Council taking on the role of the backbone was underscored by a number of participants. As a ‘neutral’ body broadly representative of the Blue Mountains community, the Council is able to provide leadership to all the organisations involved in the SFA, without being seen to take over areas of expertise or threaten agencies’ autonomy.

The work of the backbone was regarded as ably supported by the governance model which successfully engaged those in management positions of key institutions.
Case-in-point story:

Connecting the business community to the Stronger Families Alliance

I have been part of other volunteer collectives in the community that haven’t kept their steam and then fizzled out. In my experience rotating chairs and secretaries rarely works because of lack of continuity and focused commitment; even when you leave the coordination to one agency they can be so preoccupied with their own business that they eventually forget to call meetings.

Having Council take the role of backbone in the Stronger Families Alliance has meant we have overcome these problems, and this has meant the Stronger Families Alliance has been given the chance to survive, and to have forward planning, continuity and longevity. The Council have really put their money where their mouth is by funding our backbone’s position and then going on to incorporate many aspects of the SFA thinking into their own approach to providing services for children.

The key element of the backbone’s contribution is providing processes that enable us to do holistic, collective planning to create holistic solutions. The Backbone has also kept the show on the road and created resources and documents we all use in our work now.

I am on the board of a community bank so I am part of a group that considers many different funding applications that come in for our Community Grants Program. Because of the work the Backbone has done to help us understand and explain the business case for investing in children, I can more easily explain to the Board the big picture behind why we should fund grant applications. For example, a school breakfast program application looks small but is really important because children that are hungry can’t learn, and not doing well at school due to poverty has life-long consequences. Since December, 2009, our bank has given some $200,000 to the community, a large proportion of this to children.

I also present on behalf of the SFA to different business groups in the community about why they should get involved with creating a positive community for children. I get a really good reception with lots of people having ‘aha’ moments. This is partly because of the presentations and hand-outs the backbone has created – they get the messages right about how the community impacts children’s brain development and why children’s good brain development is a long term investment in our economy and community. (388)

Contributed by a member of the business community

Leadership capabilities

The following leadership skills and attributes displayed by the backbone facilitator were identified as those that effectively driving change:

- A vision of what an integrated collaborative alliance would look like and achieve;
- The ability to see the big picture;
- Modelling the collaborative behaviours and skills that drive change;
- The capacity to identify, utilise and share robust evidence to address current issues;
- Thoughtful selection and application of tools and strategies to drive change;
- Skills in consultation and collaboration, including listening; and
- Persistence, ‘the capacity to tell the same story over and over as if it’s the first time’.
The distributed leadership model of the SFA Executive

Many of the leadership attributes of the backbone facilitator were adopted by other members of the SFA as the initiative progressed. These leaders consistently modelled expected ways of working that generated a commitment to aspirational outcomes throughout the larger SFA group. The commitment and drive for change was regarded as shared, and the work of the backbone was ably supported by the work of the Executive. The SFA’s distributed leadership model is reinforced by its governance model. The widest SFA leadership group (the SFA Main Group which includes the Executive) created and intermittently changes the governance model. This process and the resulting governance models reinforce the distributed leadership in the group. Importantly, there was widespread agreement that the philosophical foundations of the SFA, and the theories it espoused, were evident in the way that the SFA worked on a day-to-day basis.

Adoption of carefully selected tools and strategies to drive change

Participants commented favorably on the various tools adopted by the SFA in driving systems change. Most frequently mentioned in relation to the first stage of the SFA were appreciative inquiry, collective impact and strengths-based approaches. While some of these strategies are geared toward effecting systems change (e.g., collective impact and appreciative inquiry) others, such as strengths-based family practice, are oriented to work with families. In combination the focus on systems and strengths appears to have fundamentally shifted attitudes and ways of working for many participants.

Participants felt that such approaches had successfully embedded change, modelled to them new and more effective ways of working, and generated shared understandings and shared goals.

“(I) now have [an] understanding of collective impact,… SFA reinforced that practice and each person has value…[the] whole is bigger than the individual.”

Significantly, a number of participants stated that understanding and observing ways of working had changed their own practices. “I thought - there’s something here that really works.” In turn, by embodying a strengths-based orientation in their own work with families, some participants reported that families were encouraged to adopt the same tools.

Multi-sector, evidence-based professional development

Many participants reported the profound impact that the provision of evidence-based professional development had had upon their understanding of how to work with children and families, and their work overall (see Attachment Six). Many described that this professional development had been transformative for them personally as well as changing how they and their agency worked. The provision of shared professional development that brought different people and agencies together had been instrumental in developing a shared knowledge base and agenda for change.

The co-development and articulation of shared goals and strategies through the Child and Family Plan

The collaborative development of the Child and Family Plan was ‘hard work but transformational’. The plan was regarded as unifying, as solidifying agencies’ commitments to common goals and to working in a collaborative fashion.

“Collaboration from the beginning has embedded collaboration throughout”

The official launch of the plan was also regarded as significant. The launch was a celebration of all that had been achieved though working together; and, in bringing people together, it reinforced the collective nature of the commitments to vision and objectives of the plan.
5. What advice would you give, in retrospect, to make the SFA more effective?

Because participants valued the processes undertaken to date to establish and maintain the SFA and its associated Child and Family Plan, the responses to this question were not as wide-ranging as they were to the previous questions. Responses tended to fall into three categories:

- The need for a shared approach to measuring impact;
- The need to ensure sustainability of the SFA; and
- Promotion.

Measuring impact

Many respondents raised the need to develop a shared measurement system to enable the SFA to monitor impact. Becoming more specific about measurable outcomes was seen as important in enabling the SFA to identify and track effective strategies. The importance of measurement is also underscored by the literature of collective impact, which has informed much of the work of the SFA.

Sustainability

Maintaining and growing the mix of government and non-government agencies represented on the SFA, and increased community membership (non-agency), were regarded as critical to its ongoing success. People welcomed increasing representation from Council areas relevant to children, young people and families. There were mixed views about the expanded structure of the SFA in relation to youth. While many responses indicated excitement at the opportunities this offered, others were more cautious about the SFA’s capacity to sustain such a large brief.

Additional observations were made with regard to ensuring that the SFA remains sustainable into the future. The resources made available for the work of the backbone need to be commensurate with the demands of the expanded scope and membership of the SFA. Although the membership and scope of the SFA had grown, the backbone resources have been effectively reduced while the Council reviews the department and directorate the position sits within.

The SFA has been successful in facilitating collaborations between government and non-government agencies, but these collaborations can be threatened when managers change. Top-down collaboration drivers support the engagement of middle managers, team leaders and frontline workers, making it easier to sustain cross-sectoral involvement over the long term. Sustaining strong, successful and ongoing collaborations with government may be better supported through engagement and shared leadership from the regional executive level of the Local and State Government Agencies involved in the SFA. The new SFA Child and Youth Plan, and accompanying governance structure, may provide an opportunity to develop this support and alignment with the core work of government agencies involved.

In addition, involving front-line staff in building the understandings generated through the SFA in addition to focusing on agency managers, is an important element of sustaining change. While managers are essential for cultivating organisational buy-in, frontline staff carry the implementation on the ground, and can help sustain momentum when managers change.

A few responses pointed to the desirability of enabling ‘easier’ (less time-consuming) commitment from organisations for which children are not ‘core’ business.

Promotion

There are opportunities to market the SFA, its work and its successes more effectively. A number of suggestions were put forth, including the Council website, the use of social media, and the revival of the newsletter.
Discussion

The SFA aims to maximise the wellbeing and resilience of children and their families living in the Blue Mountains. It has sought to do so through the collaborative efforts of its members to achieve the vision and goals encapsulated in the Child and Family Plan, a plan informed by evidence about what works to support children and families. Collaborative, evidence-based approaches to working with children and families are considered to be the most effective way of mitigating threats to children’s development and wellbeing (Moore 2009; Corter & Pelletier, 2010).

This Evaluation is based on research that gathered service provider information and perspectives on the extent to which the SFA and its associated SFA Child and Family Plan had resulted in:

- Services changing their approach to working with children and families; and
- Service strategies and ways of working being aligned with the objectives of the Child and Family Strategic Plan.

A limitation of the Evaluation is that it has not sought the perspectives of families or children, nor has it sought to measure child or family outcomes. Nonetheless, the overwhelmingly positive story told by the data establishes that ways of working for many agencies in the Blue Mountains have fundamentally shifted toward a model that is more effective for families (Moore 2009; Corter & Pelletier, 2010).

A number of findings stood out for the researchers during the course of the project. Firstly, the positive response to the SFA and its work was extremely strong. While some participants noted challenges facing the SFA, no responses were doubtful of its impact upon the work undertaken for families in the Blue Mountains. Further, a considerable number of respondents spoke of how their understanding of how to work effectively with children and families had fundamentally changed. They were better informed and felt more effective in their work. The available quantitative data backs up this story. Agencies are more connected, work more collaboratively, have better informed staff, and there are a significant number of programs and activities now available to children and families that are directly linked to the achievement of the objectives of the Child and Family Plan. The researchers were also struck by the way in which those who were interviewed knew what they were trying to achieve and why, rather than seeing the objectives of the SFA as vague ideals unrelated to their day-to-day work.

Leadership is critical to such success (Glasby & Peck, 2006; Horvath & Morrison, 2007; Press, 2012; Siraj Blatchford, I., & Siraj Blatchford, J. (2009)) and the Council’s role, as backbone, has been a key driver. Achieving systems-change requires leadership that champions the need for change while building the capacity of the system to generate change. The SFA has successfully drawn on research to tell the story of why and how the service system needs to change. It has then drawn on a repertoire of carefully selected ‘tools’ to generate and sustain change. The Child and Family Plan (2010) described the need for both facilitative and collaborative leadership, and these two streams appear evident in the work of the Council as backbone supported by the SFA Executive. The evidence from this evaluation shows the SFA performing strongly against indices of backbone success (see Attachment Seven: FSG Indicators of Backbone Effectiveness), most particularly those indicators linked to “vision and strategy” and “aligned activities”. Indices relating to “shared measurement” and “public will” seemed to be merging as strong foci for the work of the SFA into the future.
Conclusion

The overarching vision of the SFA as expressed in the Child and Family Plan (2010) is that:

- Every Blue Mountains family has access to a collaborative service network which is unique to their neighbourhood, supports child development and is a natural gateway into community life;
- Children are nurtured within strong and resilient families and communities that are able to keep their children safe and well; and
- All members of the community understand the different ways they can support children to reach their full potential.

The data from this Evaluation indicates that the SFA has been successful in working toward these aspirations. Importantly, it has developed the types of service collaborations that support outcomes for children and families. Such collaborations provide:

access to multiple services to children and families in a cohesive and holistic way. They recognise the impact of family and community contexts on children’s development and learning and focus on improving outcomes for children, families and communities. Through respectful, collaborative relationships, they actively seek to maximise the impact of different disciplinary expertise in a shared intent to respond to family and community contexts. (Press, Wong & Sumsion, 2010)

Such strong collaborations are often attempted but are hard are to achieve. The model for change adopted by the Blue Mountains SFA, and encapsulated in the Child and Family Plan, has been highly successful.
References


Corter & Pelletier (2010). Schools as integrated service hubs for young children and families: policy implications of the Toronto First Duty Project. International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy. 4(2) 45-54


Glasby, J., & Peck, E. (2006). We have to stop meeting like this: The governance of inter-agency partnerships. Integrated Care Network.


Attachment one: Child and Family Plan outcomes and objectives

To download a copy of the Child and Family Plan go to www.strongerfamilies.co

Part A: Strengthening families through neighbourhood service networks

**Outcome 1: Parents nurture their child’s ongoing development from the prenatal period onwards**

1.1 Parents increase their use of developmentally effective parenting practice.
1.2 Children and their parents increase their number of engaging and supportive formal and informal relationships.
1.3 Parents are more able to build their families’ social and economic capacity.
1.4 There is an increased, helpful response to children and families experiencing child abuse and neglect and family violence.

**Outcome 2: Children arrive at primary and high school with the skills and abilities necessary to achieve in the school environment**

2.1 Unborn babies and babies receive increased community programs that stimulate their holistic development.
2.2 Parents increase their understanding and practice about the use of home and family as a key learning environment for children.
2.3 Children, particularly vulnerable children, have increased access to quality long day care or preschool centres.
2.4 Children and parents increase their capacity to settle into primary and high school.

**Outcome 3: Families increase their social supports & community connections**

3.1 Schools and other services increase the opportunities they provide to children and families to build informal, positive and supportive relationships with each other.
3.2 Schools and other organisations increase the opportunities they provide for children and families to connect with their community through their local school.

**Outcome 4: Collaborative universal service systems are created at a neighbourhood level**

4.1 Schools and prior-to-school services increase their number of collaborative partnerships through Hubs.
4.2 Child, family and community services targeting children prenatal to 5 years old increase their levels of outreach, collaboration and referral to targeted services through local Hub steering committees.
4.3 Voluntary and business organisations are engaged in Hub steering committees.
4.4 Professionals in the child, family and community sectors increase their use of strengths-based, family-centred and interdisciplinary practice.
Part B: Moving children and their families beyond vulnerability

Outcome 5: All children and families have many different connections to others in the community
5.1 Children and families have increased opportunities and support to connect to their community.
5.2 Children and families have new connections to their community.

Outcome 6: Families promote the safety and wellbeing of their children
6.1 Services establish trusting relationships with children and their families to build protective factors and resilience.
6.2 Families increase their capacity to identify and use their unique knowledge, skills and resources.
6.3 Families increase their ability to plan for their future.

Outcome 7: Children and families receive an immediate and compassionate response aimed at meeting their basic needs
7.1 Vulnerable children and their families have increased access to programs that give practical assistance.
7.2 Vulnerable families receive assistance that they consider meets their immediate priority needs.
7.3 The Blue Mountains community joins or initiates advocacy and/or campaign projects targeting the basic needs of vulnerable children and families. (e.g. nutrition, health, housing, transport)

Outcome 8: Targeted child and adult services coordinate with each other and the universal service system
8.1 Adult targeted services working with vulnerable parents include consideration of children’s needs in their case work.
8.2 Adult targeted services increase their coordination to better meet the needs of the children of their parent clients.
8.3 Child- and adult-targeted services increase their parent clients’ community connections through service networking and supported referral into the universal service system.

Part C: Creating child friendly communities

Outcome 9: Learning is supported and valued from birth
9.1 Community knowledge of how to give children a good start in life, from the prenatal period onwards, is improved.
9.2 Children are actively engaged in opportunities to play and participate within the community.
9.3 Promotion and practice of increased access to early childhood education are established and progressed.
Outcome 10: The community supports children and their families
10.1 Initiatives supporting healthy lifestyles for children are established and promoted.
10.2 Initiatives are established that increase community responsibility for families impacted by social isolation and disadvantage.
10.3 Initiatives are established that increase awareness that child protection and family violence are a community responsibility.
10.4 Children’s input into public participatory and decision-making processes is increased.

Outcome 11: The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly
11.1 The built environment and public open spaces are better designed to include children and stimulate their development.
11.2 Children and their families’ mobility is improved through infrastructure that is environmentally sustainable and safe.
11.3 Businesses demonstrate increased child- and family-friendly practice.
11.4 Community awareness around environmental sustainability is increased.
Attachment two: Research team publications of the CSU team

Projects on integrated and/or collaborative child and family programs completed by members of the team include:


Publications (peer reviewed)


Reports


Attachment three: Stronger Families Alliance’s Theory of Change 2007-2014

The Problem:

The SFA is a place-based population level program that seeks to solve the problem of compromised child development in our city by:

(i) Reinforcing and building social conditions that promote positive child development outcomes (prevention)

(ii) Intervening early so that small impacts on children’s developmental outcomes are resolved early (early intervention)

(iii) Responding differently to children whose developmental outcomes are being negatively impacted due to complex issues in their lives including child abuse and child and neglect, social isolation and poor early learning and care experiences.

The Solution:

Children’s developmental outcomes are the result of a complex interaction of factors in their family, community and service system. Left unchanged, the current system of service provision to children and families, including the system’s interface with the community, provides a poor response to social complexity in children’s lives. In order to improve compromised child developmental outcomes in our city a systemic change is needed that focuses on changing (i) our child and family service system and its interface with the community (ii) the focus and practice of services for children and families in our community.

Our Theory of Change:

The Stronger Families Alliance’s theory of change is the group’s guiding framework for creating long lasting change in the developmental outcomes of children in our City. Our theory of change has two major targets for change to achieve better child developmental outcomes in our city. These are: (i) our service system and (ii) our services’ foci & practice. Our theory of change details the strategies, principles and practices we have selected to guide how we will change our system, our services and practice to improve children’s outcomes.

Our service system

The child and family system is a complex web of agencies and community groups that collectively create a set of conditions that underpin and shape children’s developmental outcomes. Services & community groups within this system range from those with immediate contact with a child and family, to those that shape the child’s community and the larger societal conditions children grow up within.

Our service system: What we will change

1. From a system that fixes problems to a system that prevents problems

Changing towards a preventative system involves the community, services and professionals changing our system’s purpose from fixing children’s developmental problems to include a purpose centred on preventing problems and responding early when problems do arise\(^4\). The new science of early childhood development shows us that a key component in creating a preventative system is to find ways to engage with children and their families as early as possible in children’s lives.\(^5\)

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\(^4\) For reference see Child and Family Plan, page 40, note 4.

\(^5\) For reference see Child and Family Plan, page 40. note 5.
2. From a fragmented system to a collaborative system

Poor linkages between agencies and community groups within the child and family system are a critical barrier that limits the system’s capacity to respond to social complexity and itself. This means that communities with service systems characterised by isolated, fragmented services and community groups are less able to work adequately with children who have complex problems, or work together to intentionally change the purpose and performance of their child and family service system.

In contrast collaborative place service systems are characterised by agencies and community groups within a geographically defined place having networked, coordinated and collaborative relationships with one another. These relationships give community groups and services within the system a joint capacity to (i) respond to children with complex needs (ii) respond to changes in the community that are impacting on children’s developmental outcomes and (iii) create and implement a plan to change the child and family system itself.

The service system: How we will change

The SFA’s theory of change involves changing the service system through the use of collaborative leadership to promote joined-up action, collective impact to guide our strategy for change and organisational development for--change tools and processes.

1. Collaborative leadership

Collaborative leadership is the set of capabilities that enables leaders across silos to work together to achieve desired outcomes that can’t be achieved by their individual departments or organisations working alone. These silos might be inside an organisation or within a sector. Collaborative leadership is widely seen as a critical leadership capability needed to respond to social complexity or to change a complex system. Collaborative leadership involves leaders’ ability to deeply engage across diverse stakeholder groups, develop new and shared views of problems and to participate in developing shared solutions through a group learning process. In contrast to leadership approaches based on hierarchical structures, collaborative leadership groups require participants to develop (i) a shared vision for their work together, (ii) strong & cohesive relationships (iii) ways of sharing power and credit and managing conflict productively (iv) patience and foresight to focus on long-term goals (v) the ability to balance the needs of their individual organisation with the needs of the collaborative group.

2. Selected elements of the collective impact approach

Collective Impact is a framework to tackle deeply entrenched and complex social problems. It is an innovative and structured approach to making collaboration work across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organisations and citizens to achieve significant and lasting social change. The framework includes five strategy elements for change of which the Alliance uses four. These are (i) A common agenda - developing and being guided by a shared vision and agenda for change (ii) Mutually reinforcing activities - realigning the ways projects, programs and organizations in the service system work together to better harness the diverse resources in our community available to

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6 For reference see Child and Family Plan, page 40, note 6.
8 For reference see Child and Family Plan, page 40, page 4.
9 For reference see Child and Family Plan, page 40, note 6.
children (iii) Continuous communication – building trusting, open relationships and a common language within the group (iv) Backbone support – using a dedicated resource to facilitate the group and coordinate the actions the SFA to achieve its goals.

Organisational development change processes

Organisational development (OD) involves the use of planned system change processes to help groups meet their strategic objectives. Interlinked group processes help move groups through stages of planning and implementation while at the same time deepening working relationships, creating a culture that supports and enables strategy implementation and the ability of groups to learn and adapt. OD involves the use of large group processes that engage multiple cohorts of people to contribute perspectives and potential solutions to the change process. Appreciative inquiry is a touchstone organizational development approach used by the SFA. Appreciative inquiry is a theory, set of tools and a way of thinking about change that draws on the strengths, deeply held purposes and internal resources of people and organizations involved in change processes.

Overview: Our service’s foci and our practice

The Child and Family Plan is the Stronger Families Alliance’s roadmap setting out what areas of our service’s foci and practice we believe we need to change, reinforce and grow in order to promote better child development outcomes in our City. The Child and Family Plan sets an agenda for change of our service’s foci and practice in the areas of:

(i) Service coordination, service interface with the community and prevention and early intervention practice (Child and Family Plan: Part A)
(ii) Engaging and working with families whose children have poor developmental outcomes (Child and Family Plan: Part B)
(iii) Creating community conditions that support positive child development outcomes. (Child and Family Plan: Part C)

Our service’s foci and practice: What we will change through the Child and Family Plan

The Child and Family Plan sets out ‘levers for change’ that the SFA believes are most critical to positively change child development outcomes in our City based on the evidence and practice wisdom. In the Plan these are divided into three areas;

Part A: Strengthening families through neighbourhood service networks:
- Refocusing services towards early intervention both in the life of the child and the life of the problem.
- Providing social supports to enhance parenting
- Creating programs with ‘soft entry points’ to universal and targeted services
- Assisting parents to improve the quality of their child’s home -learning environment
- Promoting access to quality early childhood education, especially for children who are vulnerable to poor child-development outcomes.
- Creating holistic transition to school programs.

Part B: Moving children beyond vulnerability:
- Making prevention of child abuse and neglect a priority for everyone
- Changing towards strengths-based family centred practice

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14 See Child and Family Plan, page 40, note 14
16 Child and Family Plan, pages 16-17
• Improving child development outcomes by minimalizing risk factors and building protective factors
• Recognising and engaging vulnerable children and families
• Promoting child and family resilience
• Promoting strong and varied family-community connections

Part C: Creating child friendly communities:
• Involving the whole community in improving child development outcomes.
• Reaching out to new parents to pass on knowledge about raising children
• Creating community environments that promote play-based learning
• Supporting children’s early literacy development in the community
• Promoting children’s healthy physical development
• Advocating for children’s rights to safety and improving children’s input into community decision-making
• Using child-friendly urban design in city planning
• Connecting children to nature and promoting environmental sustainability

Our service’s foci and practice: How we will change

To support the SFA to change their services’ foci and practice we use change strategies that involve learning together about the new science of child development; involving a greater range of stakeholders in child, families and community work; enhancing our inter-disciplinary practice and taking a strengths-based approach to each other’s participation in our change process.

1. Learning about the shared evidence base for change

The emerging science of childhood development provides diverse professionals, disciplines and services in the child, family and community sector with a common view on the causal pathways that lead to positive child development outcomes. By learning about this shared evidence base together the SFA members can co-create and implement a common philosophy, outcomes strategy and approach (our Child and Family Plan) that is scientifically valid and acceptable to all.

2. The ecological model of child development guides. Whom we will work with

The ecological model of child development shows that child development is influenced by multiple and interrelated factors in the environment, including the child’s family & extended family network, neighbourhood, community and larger societal influences. Because of the wide range of environmental factors contributing to child development, changes in the way we work with children need to take a broad view of the different groups and services who can make a contribution. These stakeholders need to be drawn from many levels - family, neighbourhood, community, business and government, all of whom impact on children’s development.

3. Improve our interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practice

Interdisciplinary practice is the set of skills that professionals working across diverse disciplines need in order to work together effectively to provide a coordinated or collaborative service to a child, family or community. In this model professionals understand (i) the unique contribution each others’ disciplines make to meeting child, family or community outcomes (ii) the mindsets, approaches and

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17 Child and Family Plan, pages 19-21
18 Child and Family Plan, pages 22-24
19 Child and Family Plan, pages 6 & 7. See corresponding references on page 40: note 1 & 5.
20 Child and Family Plan page 8. See corresponding reference on page 40: note: 23
language of other disciplines enough to form an effective partnership and (iii) how to coordinate disciplinary strengths to best support children and their families.

4. **Strengths-based organisational development processes**

In the process of changing our services’ foci and practice, services and professionals use strengths-based approaches to change. This involves all partners recognizing and using the diverse personal, professional and organizational resources and expertise each brings to the table. Strengths-based facilitation processes are used to leverage professional and personal strengths, unite professionals from a range of disciplines and create a higher level group purpose focused on creating better outcomes for children.  

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21 Child and Family Plan page 10. See corresponding reference on page 40: note 15
The Stronger Families Alliance’s Theory of Change

**Problem**
- Complex social factors compromise child development
- Compromised child has lifelong impacts, is difficult to fix and expensive to society

**Solution**
- **Complexity requires a systemic response:**
  - Change the service system for children and families
- **A changed service system:**
  - Enables a new service focus & practice.

**What will we change?**
- **Preventative:** From a system that fixes problems to a system that prevents problems & intervenes early.
- **Collaborative:** From a disconnected & siloed system, to joined up, collaborative system.

**How will we change our system?**
- **Collective impact**
  - Common agenda
  - Backbone support
  - Alignment
  - Organisational development
  - Collaborative leadership

**System**

**What will we change?**
- **Child and Family Plan:** An evidenced policy and outcomes roadmap to change our services and practice.
- **Service focus and practice:**
  - Shared evidence & learning
  - Ecological
  - Inter-disciplinary
  - Strength-based

**Impact**
- **Improved child development outcomes for all**
- **Impact of complex issues on vulnerable children minimised.**

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Attachment four: The Stronger Families Alliance governance structure 2010 - 2014
Attachment five: Stronger Families Alliance governance structure 2015 -

The SFA has designed a new governance structure that reflects changes that have occurred in the SFA in the past year. The governance structure illustrates the continuity of the SFA’s work implementing the current Child and Family Plan and how the SFA is using new working groups to create the new Child and Youth Plan & evolve the way it works together. The new governance structure additionally captures the core SFA process to capture emergent actions, Emergent Action Tracking. These actions either implement the Child and Family Plan or develop how the SFA works together to create positive change for children and young people.

| = Continuing governance group
| = New short term working group

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**Backbone**

- **SFA Main Group**
  - **Emergent Action Tracking (EATS)**
  - **Moving Children and Young People Beyond Vulnerability Implementation Group**
  - Service initiatives
    - Partnership initiatives
    - SFA programs:
      - 5 School Based Hubs
      - Blue Mountains Consortium
      - Paint the Blue Read
      - Bush-Trackers
      - Positive Education Program
  - Advocacy for prevention and early intervention working group
  - Marketing and communications working group
  - Community collaboration working group (Harwood)
  - Designing shared measurement working group
  - Shared performance measurement trial working group
### Attachment six: Stronger Families Alliance professional development events

Professional development events planned for 30+ people & using the SFA’s multi-sector learning approach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2006</td>
<td>Getting to the heart of community development conference</td>
<td>Expose community developments to the new science of early childhood development.</td>
<td>Community development workers interfacing with children</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2006</td>
<td>Early childhood reading summit</td>
<td>Gain more in-depth understanding of brain development and reading, plan initiatives</td>
<td>Services, networks and businesses involved in early literacy</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2008</td>
<td>Creating a shared plan from evidence – Universal services and schools.</td>
<td>Planning session with Professional Frank Oberklaid for SFA members</td>
<td>SFA members only</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2008</td>
<td>Early childhood summit</td>
<td>Expose whole sector to the new science of early childhood development.</td>
<td>Multi-sector learning event</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2009</td>
<td>Imagine Winmalee for Children</td>
<td>Engage the community of Winmalee in the planning of the new school Hub</td>
<td>A cross section of the community, plus services, in Winmalee</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2009</td>
<td>Creating a shared plan from the evidence – Vulnerable children</td>
<td>Planning session with Professor Marianne Berryman for SFA members</td>
<td>SFA members only</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2009</td>
<td>Blackheath, Katoomba and Mt Victoria school professional development day: Early brain development science &amp; the role of schools</td>
<td>Create readiness in school communities for launch of SFA Hubs.</td>
<td>Staff at Blackheath and Katoomba Public School, community development &amp; family support workers.</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2010</td>
<td>Winmalee school professional development day: Early brain development science &amp; the role of schools</td>
<td>Create readiness in school communities for launch of SFA Hubs.</td>
<td>Staff at Winmalee Public School, community development &amp; family support workers.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 2010</td>
<td>Launch of the SFA Child and Family Plan</td>
<td>Exposure to the evidence base behind the plan and place based initiative planning.</td>
<td>Multi-sector learning event</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>Creating a child friendly city forum (half day)</td>
<td>Engage and expose professionals to the evidence based behind ‘Child friendly city’ part of the plan</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>Creating a shared plan from the evidence – Vulnerable children</td>
<td>Planning session with Professor Karen Malone for SFA members</td>
<td>SFA members only</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>Child consultation workshop</td>
<td>Gain skills in how to consult with children</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2012</td>
<td>Building our skills in child consultation</td>
<td>Deepen skill development in child consultations, plan child consultation collaboratively.</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event Title</td>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>Event Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2012</td>
<td>Moving children beyond vulnerability – Recognising vulnerability and building resilience</td>
<td>Build ability of the universal services to work with vulnerable children, create connections between the universal and targeted systems for children.</td>
<td>Universal services</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2013</td>
<td>Child and Youth Development: A collaborative approach</td>
<td>Cross skill child and youth focused workers, build ability to support transition and children in middle childhood/tweens</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2013</td>
<td>Child and Youth Development: A collaborative approach</td>
<td>Cross skill child and youth focused workers, build ability to support transition and children in middle childhood/tweens</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>Wentworth Falls School staff development day: Early brain development and the role of schools</td>
<td>Create readiness in school communities for launch of pre-hub formation linked initiatives in the school.</td>
<td>School staff, community development and family support workers.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2013</td>
<td>Building a team around the child</td>
<td>Breaking down social isolation and siloed service delivery for vulnerable children.</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2014</td>
<td>Positive Frameworks for Social Change</td>
<td>Build and raise awareness of systems leadership in SFA. Gain understanding of how to leverage systems based initiatives to get positive results for community.</td>
<td>Multi-sector – leadership/management focused.</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2015</td>
<td>Children and Young People: Mental health and wellbeing forum</td>
<td>Understand the shared evidence base in children &amp; young people’s mental health. Build awareness of the mental health system.</td>
<td>Multi-sector</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attachment Seven: FSG Indicators of Backbone Effectiveness

## Backbone Effectiveness: 27 Indicators

### Guide Vision and Strategy
- Partners accurately describe the common agenda
- Partners publicly discuss/advocate for common agenda goals
- Partners’ individual work is increasingly aligned with common agenda
- Board members and key leaders increasingly look to backbone organization for initiative support, strategic guidance and leadership

### Support Aligned Activities
- Partners articulate their role in the initiative
- Relevant stakeholders are engaged in the initiative
- Partners communicate and coordinate efforts regularly, with, and independently of, backbone
- Partners report increasing levels of trust with one another
- Partners increase scope/type of collaborative work
- Partners improve quality of their work
- Partners improve efficiency of their work
- Partners feel supported and recognized in their work

### Establish Shared Measurement Practices
- Shared data system is in development
- Partners understand the value of shared data
- Partners have robust/shared data capacity
- Partners make decisions based on data
- Partners utilize data in a meaningful way

### Build Public Will
- Community members are increasingly aware of the issue(s)
- Community members express support for the initiative
- Community members feel empowered to engage in the issue(s)
- Community members increasingly take action

### Advance Policy
- Target audience (e.g., influencers and policymakers) is increasingly aware of the initiative
- Target audiences advocate for changes to the system aligned with initiative goals
- Public policy is increasingly aligned with initiative goals

### Mobilize Funding
- Funders are asking nonprofits to align to initiative goals
- Funders are redirecting funds to support initiative goals
- New resources from public and private sources are being contributed to partners and initiative

Source: FSG and Greater Cincinnati Foundation