



Curtin University

Midland Communities for Children Plus

Process Evaluation Report 2012

An analysis of the first eighteen months of implementation of the Midland CfC Plus prepared by Local Evaluator, Dr Amma Buckley and Ms Jade Beavington, Research and Graduate Studies, Humanities, Curtin University.

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Acknowledgements

We wish to sincerely thank the community stakeholders and members of the Swan Alliance who gave their time to participate in this process evaluation. While stakeholders identified a range of issues and challenges within the first 18 months of the Initiative, there was genuine concern that findings emerging from this evaluation constructively inform future developments within the site. This report adopted a strengths-based perspective in providing an account of the major themes emerging from interviews.

The research team

Data collection and analysis for this publication involved Dr Amma Buckley (Chief Investigator) and Ms Jade Beavington, (Research Officer) from Curtin University as Local Evaluator for Midland Communities for Children Plus.

Abbreviations

AEDI	Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)
CaLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CfC	Communities for Children
CP	Community Partner
CSP	Community Strategic Plan
CDO	Community Development Officer
EO	Executive Officer
EOI	Expressions of Interest
FP	Facilitating Partner
FaHCSIA	(Department) Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
FSP	Family Support Program
FTB	Family Tax Benefit
LGA	Local Government Authority
NGO	Non-government organisation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on the finding of a process evaluation of the Midland Communities for Children (CfC) Plus Initiative undertaken in 2012. As the Local Evaluator, Curtin University is contracted to undertake both formative (process) and summative (outcomes) evaluation of the Initiative from 2012-14. As stakeholders involved in the implementation of Midland CfC Plus, the Swan Alliance (consortium representatives and staff) and Committee members were invited to participate in interviews and reflect upon the strengths and challenges for the first 12 to 18 months of the Initiative's operations. Data was collected over a four month period from March to June 2012 with 27 stakeholders participating in interviews. This report outlines the dominant issues emerging from the amalgam of individual perspectives arranged in the broad thematic areas of: service integration, governance, engagement of vulnerable families, extent to which Activities are aligned with Family Support Program (FSP) Guidelines, and Activity evidence base.

The Executive Summary highlights the major strengths and challenges identified in the initial phases of the Initiative and includes recommendations for consideration and further action.

Service integration

There was considerable support expressed for the positive potential of the CfC model as a vehicle to promote collaborative, co-ordinated service delivery to maximise engagement of families and children vulnerable to poor outcomes. Stakeholders participating in the process evaluation discussed ways that the Initiative's resources were assisting the realisation of long-standing service integration aims and that multi-layered collaborations were linking previously unconnected sectors. In particular, the way the Initiative had facilitated a connection between schools and services was regarded as a salient example. The Initiative's model of service delivery in 'place' was considered highly beneficial for supporting and building such connections. The 'place-based' designations adopted by Midland CfC Plus, incorporating the four places of Altone, Bullsbrook, Ellenbrook, and Midland, promoted service integration enabling the diverse needs within the Swan District to be clearly considered.

Identified also were barriers that had impeded service integration. From the outset, FaHCSIA's awarding of the tender to the Swan Alliance consortium, an 'out of area' applicant, over local contenders undermined crucial local support and cooperation. The requirement to implement the Initiative within a relatively short timeframe was made more onerous by the Facilitating Partner's lack of local context and connections. Nevertheless, community stakeholders identified limited consultation with local agencies about the strengths, challenges and gaps in the site informing the Initiative's 'blue print', the Community Service Plan (CSP). Another barrier included the site name and boundaries—although not the responsibility of the FP— was characterised as not reflecting inclusivity or geographical priority areas, matters considered important to a service integration agenda.

Governance

Overall, the governance of Midland CfC Plus, which incorporates the management and decision-making processes, has included the development of policies, procedures and structures necessary to guide operations of the Initiative. Acknowledged were considerable challenges and effort associated with establishing the Initiative, appointing staff, developing a service plan and putting in place the necessary systems, all within a relatively short time frame. Specifically, the inclusion of components such as the Community Capacity Fund and professional development components were highly commended.

Some initial challenges associated with governance, such as dissemination of information and short timelines were reported to have improved over time. The major governance issue identified by interviewees related to the Midland Communities for Children Plus Committee (the Committee) particularly the lack of clarity around the structure, role, size and changing membership of this body. Despite established TOR, some processes remain unclear or appear to have been not effectively communicated to proxies and new committee members. Additional issues relating to governance include decision making associated with supply of services (Activity contracting), namely the inconsistent use of Tender and Expressions of Interest, and the right of veto related to Committee decisions. Finally, as staffing is a significant component of governance, there was uncertainty about the roles and responsibilities as well as the extent to which Facilitating Partner (FP) staff can provide support to Community Partners (CPs).

Engagement of vulnerable families

The successful roll-out and early achievements of Activities provides clear evidence about the Initiative's capacity to engage families and children vulnerable to poor outcome. The Initiative's resourcing, together with the place-based model of local service provision, were seen to have strengthened existing collaborative networks and fostered smoother and more appropriate service access and engagement of families.

Given this level of participation and engagement, many Activities now exceed initial targets. Interviewees identified the need for the Initiative to support CPs in managing the commensurate risks and resourcing implications for associated organisations due to unexpectedly high levels of participation in some Activities. While diversity of Activity offerings was understood by some as a strength of the site, a review of the delivery costs and decisions about quality or quantity of Activity offerings was highlighted for ongoing consideration. Further to this was the awareness that such decisions need to take into account community perspectives gathered from bottom-up or grass-roots consultation.

Extent to which activities are aligned with Family Support Program Guidelines

Many interviewees considered that the Activities offered as part of the Initiative were consistent with FSP guidelines in terms of their prevention and early intervention focus, improving the family functioning, safety, wellbeing, and skills and resource development of children and families considered disadvantaged or vulnerable to poor outcomes. Yet, there were broader concerns with the limited scope which vulnerability was being framed by FaHCSIA as

characteristic of certain groups. In addition, opportunities for further discussion and clarification were identified in two areas; namely the implications of the 'Plus' component for Activities in the CfC site, and the notion of Activity sustainability, particularly the direction that CPs should be heading in order to meet their contractual obligations in this regard.

Activity Evidence Base

Many interviewees remarked that the Activities selected for the Midland Initiative were achieving positive outcomes. There was an emerging sense that the CSP had flexibility and certain parameters could be adapted based on evidence and discussion. However, unresolved concerns remained about the accuracy of current asset mapping, the nature of the Activity Working Group process, confusion about the funding of services within State/Commonwealth provision, Activity size and lack of knowledge about progress with Aboriginal engagement and consultation. Due to the perception that consultation and decision-making processes used to develop Activities did not arise from a robust evidence base there was a call to revisit the Asset Map to better reflect the strengths, challenges and gaps within the site.

This report offers a retrospective view of the Initiative in its first 12 to 18 months of operation. In many respects, the Initiative has moved forward with some of the initial concerns resolved, some important knowledge gained in terms of communication, consultation and 'right-fit of Activities while some aspects still requiring reappraisal as the Initiative transitions into a service delivery phase.

The following recommendations have been developed to address the major findings from the process evaluation.

Service Integration Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Issues discussed by stakeholder about the naming and composition of the Midland CfC Plus site be conveyed to FaHCSIA.
- Progress in service integration within the Midland CfC Plus site is discussed with stakeholders, particularly identified strengths, existing gaps in current approaches, and ideas/strategies for a shared vision.

Governance Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The purpose and structure of the Committee be reviewed by the Swan Alliance in conjunction with stakeholders to provide greater clarity on topics including (but not limited to) structure, members' roles, decision-making capacity, use and updating of proxies, and veto rights and that these issues are reflected in a revised Committee TOR.
- A fuller range of processes related to supply of services (tender or other options) for Activities be investigated and proposed changes be discussed with stakeholders.

- A review is undertaken of the current roles and staff designations and the how these positions can best support Community Partners and the Initiative as a whole.
- The FP develops effective and timely communication strategies in relation to its Committees, sub-committees and CPs.

Engagement of Vulnerable Families Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- As part of the annual review of Activities information is collected on expenditure associated with running an activity (including in-kind and other contributions) for a more accurate assessment of program costs.
- The FP investigate possible re-deployment of un-allocated Activity funds to Activities exceeding their contract milestones in providing service to vulnerable families or to ensure parity in contract length.
- The FP develops a plan of action to incorporate community consultation and feedback into the work of Initiative.

Alignment with FSP Program Guidelines Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Further discussion occur with stakeholders across two areas: first, unpacking the term ‘vulnerability’, the dominant description for disadvantage within FSP Guidelines and second, a better understanding of the ‘Plus’ component in a CfC site.
- The FP provides further clarity about what sustainability means for Activities, and what direction CPs should be heading in to meet their contractual obligations.

Activity Evidence Base Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Based on the existence of more current statistical profiling and greater knowledge of the site, that the Midland CfC Plus Asset Map be updated on an ongoing basis.
- The FP reviews the appropriateness and functionality of the Activity Working Group sub-committee structure and TOR and that suggested changes be tabled with the Committee.
- The FP develops a knowledge sharing process so that decisions/discussions related to the Aboriginal Reference Group can be shared with the Committee.

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CONTEXT

Communities for Children

The Communities for Children (CfC) Initiative is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) under the Family Support Program (FSP) to enhance the development of children within 52 designated sites around Australia. CfC aims to improve coordination of services for children 0-12 years old and their families, identify and provide services to address unmet needs, build community capacity to engage in service delivery, and improve the community context in which children grow up (Macklin & Jackson, 2010; Muir et al., 2010).

Selection of Communities for Children sites

Site selection is a government decision based on a range of information including the proportion of children in the community, number of families receiving Family Tax Benefits (FTB), projected population growth, consultations with State and Territory governments, and other indicators of disadvantage, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) and Australian Education Development Index (AEDI) (FaHCSIA, 2012a; Muir et al., 2010). Also taken into consideration is the existing level of physical infrastructure to enable the implementation of CfC; the level of other similar existing services in the community; and a national spread of urban, regional and remote sites (Muir et al 2010).

CfC sites usually encompass several suburbs in an urban setting or a cluster of small townships in large rural or remote areas. Site geographical boundaries and the name of a site are determined by FaHCSIA. Most commonly, the major business district or service centre within the selected boundaries is the name given to the site, particularly in urban and semi-urban settings. In its 2008 evaluation report, Stronger Families Stronger Communities National Evaluation Consortium (SFSCNEC) reports that for some sites the designated boundaries delineated by FaHCSIA have been problematic due to: size (encompassing several geographically disperse communities); composition (contrary to 'natural' community boundaries and/or administrative boundaries); and relevance (omission of proximal communities with target demographic characteristics akin to disadvantage).

Service focus

The FSP has a particular focus on ensuring services are available for families and children who are vulnerable to poor outcomes because of multiple or complex needs, or who lack resources (financial, physical, personal or social) to support their wellbeing and positive family functioning. Therefore as a component of FSP, CfC aims to assist families to build their resources and capabilities to enable more positive family functioning. FSP guidelines identify particular groups based on well-established evidence that experience greater difficulties accessing and using resources and services, and are therefore more susceptible to poorer consequences. These include: Indigenous families, single parent or blended families, young parent families, families living in areas of locational disadvantage, those experiencing housing instability or high mobility, families where violence or significant trauma is an issue, families involved with the child protection and/or family law or justice system, families experiencing financial hardship, disability, grandparent or extended family carers, mental health or substance abuse issues, and many CaLD families, particularly refugee families (FaHCSIA, 2012a).

The Facilitating Partner model

In most of the 52 sites, non-government organisations (NGOs), as either a single entity or consortium of organisations, have been selected through a competitive tender process to implement CfC in identified locations. Organisations contracted by FaHCSIA are referred to as the Facilitating Partner (FP), and in the case of a consortium of organisations, the organisation responsible for the legal and financial accountability is referred to as the 'lead agency'. Following the signing of a contract between the FP and FaHCSIA, the site has six months to engage in extensive consultation with local service providers, government agencies and families within identified communities; undertake asset mapping of existing services; identify gaps; establish administrative and governance structures culminating in the submission of a Community Strategic Plan (CSP) for implementation over the life of the project (Muir et al., 2010). The National Evaluation of CfC identifies FPs as a key strength of the model, particularly due to their role in promoting a sense of community ownership of the Initiative, providing small agencies with opportunities to obtain funding, develop networks, and building capacity through access to training in areas such as preparing funding applications, program implementation, and evaluation and reporting (Muir et al., 2010).

The findings from the both the National Evaluation of CfC, (Muir et al., 2010), and the final local evaluation reports for a number of CfC sites, (Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with Hume Early Years Partnership, Communities for Children in Broadmeadows, Victoria, 2010; Communities for Children Cranbourne Community Partners and Windermere Child and Family Services, 2010; Kilmany Uniting Care in partnership with Centre for Community Child Health and East Gippsland Communities for Children Community Partners, 2008; Newell & Graham, 2009; Sheather, 2009; Social Policy and Research team of the Benevolent Society, 2010), suggest that FPs have been most effective when they are an NGO embedded in the community and have had appropriate administrative support and strong communication skills, which have allowed them to capitalise on pre-existing interagency collaborations and networks. FPs perceived as being outsiders, new to a CfC site, have been challenged with concerns that the funding period does not allow the time necessary to establish and develop local knowledge and relationships to work effectively in the community. In addition, in some sites local agencies have resented the leadership role of the FP organisation. The FP's dual role as facilitator and monitor/auditor has been regarded as presenting inherent difficulties to genuine collaboration. Consequently, FPs have been reported as most successful when they have provided clear and regular information to stakeholders, and have developed transparent and equitable decision-making processes and structures in addition to the CfC Committee.

Therefore, the capacity of the CfC model to achieve its aims has been vastly dependent upon the qualifications, skills, experience, and personalities of the Project Manager, staff and volunteers, as good communication, organisation, facilitation, contract management and conflict resolution skills are required (Muir et al., 2010). These high-order demands on Project Managers have resulted in recruitment difficulties, particularly in rural and remote areas, with some sites experiencing high staff turnover (Muir et al., 2010). These issues have implications in terms of the loss of continuity of accumulated skills and knowledge, and highlight the need for adequate training and ongoing professional supervision of staff (Young & Hendrick, 2009). Evaluation findings indicate that CfC is a complex model which may not always be well understood by the

community or those involved in its delivery. The fact that many issues that affect performance and implementation are beyond the scope of the FP and local stakeholders have been widely recognised (Family and Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) 2012; Muir et al., 2010; Young & Hendrick, 2009).

The Midland site

Prior to becoming a CfC Plus site, the geographical designation of the site was commonly referred to as the Swan District. The site is a predominantly metropolitan area in the northeast outer region of Perth, Western Australia. Eleven priority suburbs were identified for inclusion including: Beechboro, Bullsbrook, Caversham, Ellenbrook, Kiara, Koongamia, Lockridge, Middle Swan, Midland, Midvale, and Stratton. These suburbs are all located in the City of Swan, with the exception of the majority of Midvale, which is located in the Shire of Mundaring.

Midland CfC Plus is one of eight ‘Plus’ sites in Australia. According to Minister for FaHCSIA Jenny Macklin (2010), Plus sites deliver “a more co-ordinated approach between child and family services, state child protection authorities, and adult services for parents where there may be a higher risk of child abuse and neglect”. In working toward this goal Midland CfC Plus has identified three key strategies:

1. Family and Child Connect;
2. Community and Schools Connect; and
3. Services Connect.

The Facilitating Partner

The Facilitating Partner for the Midland CfC Plus Initiative is the Swan Alliance, a consortium of three organisations: Ngala, Anglicare, and Mission Australia, who tendered for and were awarded the FP contract. The Leadership Group (LG) consists of a representative from each organisation and carries out operational management. The contracted Agency for the consortium is Ngala who manages the contractual and reporting requirements within the consortium.

The process evaluation

The process evaluation was undertaken by the Local Evaluator in partial fulfilment of the contract with the FP to provide research and evaluation support for Midland CfC Plus for the period 2012-2014. Process evaluation is formative, which means that ideally it occurs as an integral part of the development of a program, and is used as a working tool to inform its improvement. This type of evaluation involves analysing the extent to which the processes being used in the implementation of a program are in accord with its overarching goals. Both the processes and relationships internal to the Swan Alliance (intra), and between the Swan Alliance and Committee members (inter), during the first 12 to 18 months of establishing the Midland CfC Plus were explored and inform this initial process report. The process evaluation corresponds to an element of the project description in the Local Evaluators contract to:

- Evaluate Midland CfC Plus: provide the Swan Alliance with an analysis of the strength and challenges of the local initiative, recommendations on service integration, engagement of vulnerable families and the extent to which the various projects were aligned with the Family Support Program guidelines.

Accordingly, the process evaluation focused on Swan Alliance and Committee members' perceptions of strengths and challenges of the local initiative. Dominant themes in the data obtained have been reported against five areas identified in the contractual requirements of the Local Evaluator.

- These areas are: service integration, governance, engagement of vulnerable families, extent to which Activities are aligned with Family Support Program (FSP) Guidelines, and Activity evidence base.

A strengths-based approach

A strengths-based perspective was adopted by the Local Evaluator. This approach works from the assumption that there are always areas of strength, and that there is the capacity to work together to develop and build on these. This approach views identifying and acknowledging issues and challenges as important in enabling stakeholders to locate opportunities and strategies to manage challenges effectively. Moreover, research exploring procedural justice suggests that when people consider that they have had an opportunity for their voice to be heard in decision-making, they are more likely to trust and support a decision, even if it does not reflect their individual perspective (Drew, Bishop & Syme, 2002). This is particularly significant in this evaluation, since some of the issues raised by stakeholders who participated are beyond the scope of the FP and Committee members. Consequently, the importance of seeking feedback from stakeholders and reporting the data they contribute to promote productive future collaboration is emphasised.

METHOD

This study was conducted from March 2012 to October 2012 in accordance with the goals of the evaluation outlined in the contractual requirements.

Participants

As stakeholders involved in the development of Midland CfC Plus, interviewees were drawn from members of the Swan Alliance and the Midland CfC Plus Committee. Some 27 people participated in interviews providing a diverse range of representation from CPs, FP, representative of NGOs and government agencies, possessing short term through to ongoing involvement with the Initiative.

Materials

An information sheet outlining the aims of the project was provided to potential participants along with a consent form. This aimed to ensure that participants understood their involvement in the process evaluation and how the information would be utilised. The consent form emphasised that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time, in which case no information provided would be used.

Procedure

Data collection occurred over a period of four months from March to the end of June 2012. Participants were initially informed of the process evaluation at Committee meetings during this period. Further details were provided by email and telephone. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted in person or by telephone. Interviewees were asked to reflect upon their involvement with Midland CfC Plus and their perceptions of the strengths and challenges during the first 12 to 18 months. All interviews were transcribed verbatim then examined and compared for themes, relationships, subtleties and complexities. The dominant themes in the data have been reported against five areas identified in the contractual requirements of the Local Evaluator. These areas are: service integration, governance, engagement of vulnerable families, extent to which Activities are aligned with Family Support Program (FSP) Guidelines, and Activity evidence base. These areas strongly corresponded to the areas interviewees provided feedback on, which reinforced the use of these areas to structure the analysis and write-up of the findings. Dominant themes indicate that the perspectives discussed in the findings were commonly expressed by a number of interviewees. Data from interviewees has been paraphrased and supplemented by direct quotes that most concisely capture the wider sentiment expressed by interviewees.

Ethical considerations

All data has been de-identified in this report in accordance with the ethical clearance granted for the project by Curtin University. Care was taken not to use direct quotes that would identify an interviewee.

MAJOR FINDINGS

SECTION 1: SERVICE INTEGRATION

The terms “linkage”, “co-ordination” and “integration” have been used to distinguish approaches by the degree of service connectivity sought along a continuum from relatively low level through to wholesale merging of previously separate services (Leigh et al., 2008). Linkage refers to a relatively minor degree of connectivity, with services remaining discrete entities and largely continuing to operate as usual but with improved connection to other services. Co-ordination involves services continuing to remain discrete while participating together in a structured and planned manner. Full integration is said to be attained when discrete services cease to exist, replaced by a new service, unit or program. The three terms are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation. Thus, while the CfC model has often been associated with an integration agenda, the way integration is conceptualised by stakeholder interviewees, and the degree of connectivity sought does not necessarily encompass full integration, and would reasonably vary according to the context of the site.

1.1 Existing co-ordination structures

Frequently identified by stakeholder interviewees was the strong informal collaboration and advocacy by service providers in the area directed at identifying and responding to families with complex needs through development of co-ordinated service delivery prior to Midland CfC Plus.

There was widespread acknowledgement by interviewees that in the past families with complex issues residing in the Midland area often faced a “*disconnect*” (Interviewee 13) and were required to “*service shop*” (Interviewee 9) to get their needs met. This situation consequently led to the pursuit of a more co-ordinated approach among Midland area services due to “a *ground*

swell of interest around developing an integrated service delivery model in Midland'
(Interviewee 16).

This connectedness was understood as arising from a shared concern for the needs of families and communities in the Midland area, rather than prioritising the interests of any individual service provider. Stakeholder interviewees described a 'joined-up' approach to service co-ordination, pre-dating the CfC Plus Initiative, using collective local knowledge about issues for families and communities, existing services, areas of expertise, and knowledge of service gaps that would be strengthened by an integrated approach. Many stakeholder interviewees cited the work of the Early Years groups in the area and the advocacy undertaken by the Midland Coalition of Schools as examples of non-competitive collaboration between providers. Valued also was the 'seeding' work undertaken by key Midland area service providers committed to service integration informed by grassroots-level insights. Indeed, there was a strong perception by interviewed stakeholders that the connectedness of service providers in the area was an important factor in Midland being selected as a CfC 'Plus' site by FaHCSIA.

Additional background to the pre-CfC context shared by a number of interviewees included discussions about the preliminary work undertaken by local stakeholders in mounting the case for a CfC site in the Swan District, particularly as the area have been overlooked in previous funding rounds despite strong determinants including population growth and service gaps. Local stakeholders conducted needs-based assessments and with the support of local political representatives lobbied for CfC funding in Midland. In 2010, FaHCSIA announced the Midland area as one of the eight newly funded CfC 'Plus' sites. Based on this preliminary work, interviewees recalled a high level of expectation that the competitive tendering process would lead to a successful local application. However, the result did not favour any local applicants instead the contract was granted to what was described as an 'out of area' consortium, the Swan Alliance.

It is therefore understandable that this funding decision coloured the initial attitudes of community stakeholders towards the Midland CfC Plus Initiative and the Swan Alliance as FP.

1.2 Broader integration

Many stakeholders acknowledge the growing benefits of integration efforts being established due to the Midland CfC Plus. This is best summed up by an interviewee who considered that by *"having various sectors in the room together, including a focus on children, families, and adult services, has started to close the gap"* (Interviewee 26). Reported was the breaking down of barriers and greater opportunities for collaboration between services that may not have traditionally worked together in the past. Wren (2010) argues that this bringing together of services to tackle complex issues is crucial. Some stakeholders noted that the CfC Plus initiated collaborations continued beyond official Activities.

Schools were identified by stakeholders as a good resource for promoting integration due to their awareness of, and established relationship with families. Complementing this was the assertion that at the school level there was greater knowledge of the available support services as a result of Midland CfC Plus, which enhances the capacity of schools to act as an information and

referral channel between families and services. This suggests that Midland CfC Plus is making good progress under the Community and Schools Connect strategy.

Stakeholder interviewees noted that these collaborations were encouraging not only outreach, communication, and connections between service providers and families, but also amongst families, who told other families about support services and encouraged/assisted them to access services, leading to increased community participation. Such outcomes confirm the Initiative's capacity to facilitate multi-layered collaboration and participation.

Stakeholders considered that the 'place-based' approach adopted by the Midland CfC Initiative provides the resources for service delivery and local engagement. The inclusion of places that were understood as under-resourced or distant from services, such as Bullsbrook and Ellenbrook, was viewed as particularly beneficial in promoting community engagement and participation. Generally, the place-based model which forms the basis of the CSP has been well implemented leading to successful outcomes.

As one stakeholder expressed:

Once upon a time, poor Bullsbrook was just sitting out there on the edge, watching from the outside, thinking, ugh, it would be good if we could have that. Now they've got a really enthusiastic little community that's committed to being part of it. That's really important for people to know that they're included because then they'll participate.
(Interviewee 23)

A number of stakeholders also identified the successful partnership between the Swan Alliance and the Local Government Authority (LGA) City of Swan in support of service integration within the CfC site and more broadly. Due to the work being undertaken as part of the CfC Initiative, the City of Swan was reported to be exploring potential strategies to "stretch" (Interviewee 10) Initiative Activities to neighbouring suburbs with similar needs. The place-based model implemented by the Initiative utilises four place planning locations identified in the City of Swan Place Planning Strategy, thereby reducing boundary issues discussed in the Context Section.

1.3 Barriers to connecting

Winning the tender

There was widespread acknowledgment that the CfC model was designed to bring community stakeholders together and in doing so facilitate integration and innovative approaches to support services. As one interviewee described it, "the model of Communities for Children and what FaHCSIA hopes it's going to achieve is to better connect and leverage funds, opportunities, brains, goodwill" (Interviewee 5). However, there was a sense that this kind of integration required stakeholders to reach some sort of consensus about their common purpose and vision. Some interviewees acknowledged that the inability to achieve a common direction was strongly influenced by unresolved tensions and resentments related to the Swan Alliance winning the tender for the Midland site.

Site name and boundaries

Some community stakeholders believed the name of the site ‘Midland Communities for Children Plus’ creates a barrier to forming an equitable connection. Naming the site ‘Midland’, lead to perceptions that the needs of Midland place were greater than the other three places despite their history of being under-resourced. Further, while stakeholders were in strong agreement that the place based model was a source of strength in promoting integrated service delivery, a number of interviewees voiced concern that other suburbs within the region, such as Ballajura, Forrestfield, and Gigiganup had been excluded. These suburbs were not included due to reasons determined by FaHCSIA but stakeholders contended that these communities remain vulnerable to poor outcomes, and including them would be consistent with integration agenda. As an example, one stakeholder interviewee commented:

Ballajura has two distinct areas, there’s the lake estate area, where there’s million dollar homes, then you’ve got south Ballajura that’s got a high proportion of public housing, and increasingly high numbers of new migrants, refugees. (Interviewee 9)

As discussed in the Context Section, SFSPNEC (2008) also argues that issues of size, composition and relevance related to geographical boundaries present significant obstacles for both FPs and CPs. In the Midland site, internal boundaries mostly correspond with LGA designations, which alleviate some of these boundary issues. Nevertheless, decisions about the composition of Midland CfC site and name were made by FaHCSIA, prior to the tendering process. It is recommended that issues related to site name and boundaries be referred back to FaHCSIA for future consideration.

Importance of local context and relationships

Having an Executive Officer (EO) and FP consortium external to the area was portrayed as a challenge to success due to the lack of established relationships with community stakeholders; a situation that has been common to many CfC sites as discussed in the Context Section of this report. There was an expressed recognition by interviewees that the process of engaging stakeholders and developing a nuanced understanding of community dynamics including areas of expertise and gaps was a demanding and time-consuming task, particularly for outsiders.

Confidence in the capacity of the Initiative to flourish was initially undermined by what was reported as limited engagement by the Swan Alliance with community stakeholders’ and further compounded by delays in the appointment of the EO. An examination of Swan Alliance records shows that the EO position was advertised the month the contract was signed with FaHCSIA and within three months the successful applicant commenced in the position. This would be considered a normal timeframe for employing staff, particularly from interstate. In seeking to identify early the need to consult with the community and develop a strategic plan, the Swan Alliance employed a temporary community development officer, with extensive local knowledge and experience, who began engaging with the community in August 2010, prior to the signing of the contract with FaHCSIA.

Consultation and communication

Some interviewees considered that many of the initial decisions about Activities were not informed by the insights of local groups who had engaged in extensive needs-based analysis in the area prior to the implementation of Midland CfC Plus as previously discussed. A number of stakeholders saw this was not only a missed opportunity, but demonstrated a lack of recognition for prior endeavours. The following remark, *“to come in and not utilise those pre-existing groups that have done a lot of work around what’s needed is wasting time”* (Interviewee 15), is illustrative of a variety of similar comments.

Another barrier to integration identified by interviewed stakeholders was the perception that the Swan Alliance had made decisions about Initiative Activities prior to relationship building and consultation phases — essential to the grass-roots approach inherent in the CfC model — which for one interviewee was *“putting the cart before the horse”* (Interviewee 23). From the FP’s perspective, there were significant time and resourcing pressures in developing and submitting the Community Strategic Plan (CSP) to FaHCSIA within six months of signing the contract. Swan Alliance interviewees revealed that one of the first tasks undertaken by the EO was to request an extension for submission of the CSP recognising that there was insufficient time to undertake community consultation and meet the initial deadline. Moreover, the extensive work that was undertaken by a FP in establishing necessary systems, processes and procedures during the first six months of operation was made more challenging by an already shortened timeline.

This section of the report identifies that the Midland CfC Plus Initiative has made significant inroads into establishing an integrated service model by capitalising on and adding to the existing strengths and capacity within the site community. At the same time, highlighted were barriers to integration, including the outcomes of the tender process, the site designation and the impacts of truncated timelines on consultation and relationship building processes. Now that the Initiative has passed its initial phase, it appears an appropriate time to revisit the topic of service integration with stakeholders.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Issues discussed by stakeholder about the naming and composition of the Midland CfC Plus site be conveyed to FaHCSIA.
- Progress in service integration within the Midland CfC Plus site is discussed with stakeholders, particularly identifying strengths, existing gaps in current approaches, and ideas/strategies towards a common vision.

SECTION 2: GOVERNANCE

Governance refers to the processes, procedures and structures that are used to guide management and decision-making. For the Midland CfC this includes the management of committee and sub-committee structures.

2.1 Opportunities for growth through evaluation and resourcing

Having a process or formative evaluation was viewed positively by many of the study's stakeholder interviewees. Specifically identified was the capacity to contribute their perspective and reflections about the Initiative's development, which for one participant "*adds some sort of authenticity to what we're doing because then we're not just a bunch of people getting together to try to do good things but there will be an evidence base to inform what we do*" (Interviewee 12). Moreover, some stakeholders participating in interviews described the 'cathartic' benefits of being able to discuss issues and challenges related to the Initiative through a confidential process. As evaluation is no longer a mandatory requirement for CfC Initiatives, the Swan Alliance's commitment to evaluation support is commendable.

Resourcing initiatives

The FP administers a pool of funding made available on an application basis for capacity building proposals from individuals or small to medium not-for-profit organisations within the Midland Initiative boundaries. The fund is administered by the FP with the support of a sub-committee of the Midland CfC Plus Committee. The inclusion of the Community Capacity Building (CCB) Fund within the Initiative was viewed as an extremely beneficial component, particularly in the ways that it resources and enhances the professional development of workers in the area.

The development of that community capacity building fund to strengthen people working and the agencies in Midland I think is a really great initiative. (Interviewee 3)

Another cited example involving the CCB Fund was the Initiative hosting a professional development workshop, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, which was positively appraised.

2.2 Timelines and dissemination of information

All stakeholder interviewees believed the timelines and workload associated with the implementation of the Initiative had been very challenging. Timelines for tasks associated with the Initiative were described as oscillating between rushed and slow, a hurry up and wait scenario, causing frustration for stakeholders, and in some cases impeding effective consultation with both the Committee and the community.

Early in the establishment phase, there was a sense that information at the Committee level was not distributed in a timely enough manner to enable members to familiarise themselves with materials prior to meetings, or to make arrangements to attend Activity Working Groups where decisions were being made. Activity Working Groups composition and processes are discussed further in the Activity Evidence Base (Section 5). More broadly however, there was a sense that the number of meetings associated with Activity development placed too heavy a burden on stakeholders who often had vast work commitments beyond their involvement with Midland CfC

Plus. The requirement to attend multiple meetings is not confined to the CfC Initiative. This is increasingly a sectoral issue with both Federal and State initiatives including within contracts the obligation for service providers to have multi-layered collaborations with all tiers of government and relevant stakeholders. Nevertheless, since mid-2012, Initiative meetings have substantially decreased with Committee and CP meetings occurring on a bi-monthly basis.

A final related issue was dissemination of information with many stakeholders highlighting that while notification about meetings and distribution of information such as meeting agendas and minutes had improved, the need for improved timely and effective communication was identified. It is therefore recommended that information sharing and communication processes between the Midland CfC Initiative and community stakeholders be reviewed.

2.3 Structure, role, decision-making and membership of the Committee

Since the establishment of the Midland CfC Plus Initiative in early 2011, policies, procedures and structures have been developed to guide management and decision-making. Aside from the Leadership Group, which has project oversight and responsibility for implementing the CSP, there is one major governance body, the Midland Communities for Children Plus Committee (the Committee). The Committee includes two sub-committees: the Activity Working Group and the Community Capacity Building (CCB) Fund Sub-Committee. The Activity Working Group is tasked with focussing on individual Activity and CP development across the site and makes recommendations to the Committee about Activity parameters and selection. The CCB Fund Sub-Committee makes recommendations on allocation of funds. A separate and relatively new forum is the Community Partner Advisory Group (CP Group). Policies and procedures associated with the Committee include: Committee Terms of Reference (TOR), Conflict of Interest Guidelines, Activity Working Group TOR, CCB Fund and Community Partner Selection Guidelines. The CP forum also has CP Advisory Group TOR.

Despite the development of policies, lack of clarity and transparency about the membership and purpose of the Committee was a challenge identified by stakeholders. The Committee was depicted as a “*moving feast*” (Interviewee 16) with a fluid membership and attendance, and an ambiguous role where stakeholders were unclear about whether the structure was intended to constitute “*a strategic decision-making body, just a reporting arm, rubber stamp, or collection of whoever wants to come*” (Interviewee 6).

Some stakeholders highlighted the way the constant influx of new members and volume of proxies who attended made it difficult to establish a sense of trust at meetings because the identities and agendas of Committee attendees were unknown. For other interviewees, the size of the Committee was often an obstacle to in-depth discussion. As Valentine and colleagues (2007) note a looser, larger committee can be harder to manage than a smaller structured composition.

Another aspect associated with Committee meetings was nomination procedures for Committee members (membership and use of proxies). While nomination forms were developed in the normal course of implementing the Initiative, nomination procedures for proxies was a reoccurring issue for stakeholders. Specifically the requirement to have greater discussion and clarity within the Committee about the responsibilities involved in briefing a proxy to ensure

consistency and informed decision-making. As one stakeholder expressing concern about the shifting Committee attendance remarked:

The Bullsbrook meeting there were like 12 people or something, and we made some important decisions there. If I'm sending a proxy, it's my responsibility as a Committee member to brief my proxy. That's actually my commitment, that's not something that we've talked about as a Committee; that we've all got that responsibility, so agencies understand that you need to do that, to be consistent in voting on things. Some of the agencies there perhaps don't have that level of understanding, or dare I say, sophistication. Who's there on the day can [change the decision quite substantially]. (Interviewee 3)

The Committee TOR, which are subject to annual review, outline the rights and responsibilities of members including voting rights should consensus, in the first instance, not be reached. The Committee TOR also states that “Members should ensure that their alternates (proxies) are equipped to participate in any required decisions” (p. 4). Members participated in the development and approval of Committee TOR, which were finalised in March 2011. While relevant policies and procedures are in place, these do not appear to have been subject to review or communicated on an ongoing basis to proxies or new members who join the Committee.

An area of particular concern for stakeholder interviewees was the, at times, unilateral decisions making undertaken by the EO which appeared to contravene the assumed purpose of the Committee as a participative and democratic decision-making structure. Therefore, the extent to which the Committee is a fully-fledged decision-making group or as an advisory body that makes recommendations to the FP needs to be more clearly articulated. As one stakeholder recalled:

It was agreed at the Committee that one thing happen, and all of a sudden, the opposite happened and that was rationalised by the Executive Officer saying she had the ability to make [the final decision]. I said why are we here? Are we a decision making body or not? And I don't know if we've got a firm decision on that; do the Committee make decisions or do they simply make recommendations which are then determined by the Swan Alliance hierarchy? If it's the former, then it can't be overturned by the Executive Officer, it must be overturned by the Committee, if it is only a recommendation, then that needs to be made clear. (Interviewee 18)

Ultimately the Swan Alliance as FP has the over-riding administrative and financial responsibility for decision-making associated with the Midland CfC Plus Initiative according to FaHCSIA contractual obligations, although this is not clearly stated in the Committee TOR. Voting rights for Committee members or their proxy implies the ability to make decisions, but not necessarily final decisions. The Swan Alliance's capacity to veto decisions made by the Committee is not explicitly stated. It is timely to revisit the TOR as soon as practical to provide greater clarity on the nature and decision making responsibilities of the Committee.

Although many interviewees acknowledged that governance of the Initiative had improved over time, the challenges that circumscribe the initial phase to some degree have undermined

confidence in the FP, and more broadly, in the CfC model. More than one stakeholder raised the question of the benefits of a FP model. As the following stakeholder interviewee reflected:

I did a little bit of research into the other Communities for Children sites across Australia and not all of them have a Facilitating Partner model. Some of them FaHCSIA gives money straight to Community Partners. If we go back and do it again, I'd like to have that discussion with FaHCSIA, some of the key not-for-profits, and the key government people, sitting down and going okay, your area's been ear-marked for 3.3 million dollars, what model would work best? If we went down a Facilitating Partner model, which would be best to take on that, someone local, or do we bring in a big consortium of highflying players that have done it in other areas? Or does your community know what you want? I sometimes feel we could have done without the Facilitating Partner in the middle. (Interviewee 9)

Regardless of this perspective, the dominant formula in CfC sites across Australia is based on a FP with the capacity to broker services, either an individual organisation or consortium, possessing an understanding of the designated site community but not necessarily as a service provider in the Early Years sector.

2.4 Supply of services

While the potential for conflict of interest for agencies in the tendering process was seen to be well managed from the perspective of some stakeholders, reported as problematic was the seemingly inconsistent use of tendering processes and expressions of interest (EOIs) as mechanisms to select CPs. An EOI process was not seen to fully scope the potential capacity of some agencies to become CPs. As one stakeholder discussed:

Do we put it out to a tender process or do we do an expression of interest process? Which is another kind of tricky one because you know, expression of interest process was almost like, well, we picked this agency and this agency, but we know there's a tonne more agencies out there that could do it as well. I think just around that tender or expression of interest process; either pick one or the other. (Interviewee 9)

According to SFSCNEC (2008) across CfC sites, FPs largely awarded Activity contracts through an open, competitive tendering process, and in only a few instances did FPs ask agencies directly to provide a CfC Activity or develop a proposal. This usually occurred where no tenders were received for a CfC Activity proposed in the CSP, or where time or resources were not available for undertaking a tender process. Nevertheless, Muir et al (2010) found that an open tendering process required extensive administrative effort, was usually protracted, and at times, led to tensions among local agencies. Discussions in the literature about this process while inconclusive about the 'best way' forward, did suggest that EOI and tenders were often supplemented by a quotation or submission based process. A multi-level or staged approach may require some further investigation by the Swan Alliance.

Despite the description that consultation and decision-making processes were "clunky" (Interviewee 18), the turbulent early phase of the Committee was understood by some

stakeholders as part of the “*storming and norming*” (Interviewee 14) process of group formation. To this end, some stakeholders recounted times where they had encouraged others to remain involved and committed to the Initiative for the greater benefit of the community. Stakeholders’ understanding of group processes, commitment to maintaining their involvement, and encouraging others to remain engaged, can be viewed as positive for the future of Midland CfC Plus.

2.5 Staffing

Due to the considerable challenges in the initial phases of the CfC Initiative, a number of interviewed stakeholders considered that the EO had an unenviable task. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the context identified earlier, the EO’s communication style was generally characterised as defensive, with stakeholders reflecting that at times they found her antagonistic and difficult to work with. As one stakeholder put it:

The EO’s very defensive, so trying to deal with someone who is that defensive, who says, “I want to listen to you”, “I want to hear you”, and then goes on talking without appearing to hear what is being said ... very contradictory, to say one thing and do another. (Interviewee 6)

As the EO had previous experience in a similar role at another CfC site, some interviewees reasoned that the support required to establish the Initiative was not given sufficient consideration. Moreover, there was generally a lack of clarity about the roles of FP’s Community Development Officers (CDOs) and the nature of support they could provide to Community Partners (CPs). Part of the confusion may relate to the role of CDOs in other local organisations e.g. the City of Swan. It is recommended that the FP revisits the title, job description and capacity to support CPs.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The purpose and structure of the Committee be reviewed by the Swan Alliance in conjunction with stakeholders to provide greater clarity on topics including (but not limited to) structure, members’ roles, decision-making capacity, use and updating of proxies and right to veto and that these issues are reflected in a revised Committee TOR.
- A fuller range of processes related to supply of services for Activities be investigated and proposed changes be discussed with stakeholders.
- A review is undertaken of the current roles and staff designations and how these positions can best support to Community Partners and the Initiative as a whole.
- The FP develops effective and timely communication strategies in relation to its Committees, sub-committees and CPs.

SECTION 3: ENGAGEMENT OF VULNERABLE FAMILIES

3.1 Developments in engagement

Supporting children and families vulnerable to poor outcomes within a holistic framework represents a key priority of the Communities for Children model. The desire to engage and provide appropriate support to children and families vulnerable to poor outcomes was repeatedly identified by stakeholders as a key motivator for involvement. Midland CfC Plus was perceived as facilitating engagement of families by resourcing stakeholders to access clients previously untapped. As one stakeholder aptly summarised these sentiments:

There will be smoother pathways and more appropriate referrals, so the [Communities for Children] model, I can see having potential to engage with the community. It is a very complex situation here because Midland (place) has been well serviced, but I don't think there has been enough money to really drill down for those really vulnerable and at risk children and families. They [services] are doing great work and have made amazing differences in people lives but with additional money, and additional resources in terms of staff and facilities, they are doing so much more. (Interviewee 2)

CfC Plus funding was understood as enhancing capacity for early intervention and prevention by engaging families vulnerable to poor outcomes before they become involved in formal statutory systems, such as the Child Protection or Criminal Justice system. As mentioned previously, the capacity the Initiative has brought to connect agencies with schools, viewed previously as an untapped resource was highly praised. The way this engagement is functioning to reduce social exclusion, foster positive relationships amongst children, parents, and schools, and build community capacity is summed up by the following interviewee:

The spin-off is behaviour at school has certainly improved substantially because children have better respect for one another; they have more social skills and also more understanding of game skills, rules and regulations, that type of thing. They [parents] seem to be talking to one another more freely, finding other parents. Every little Activity that's going begins to break down the barriers and also strengthen. We've got communities that are positive, they're cooperating, they're socialising, they are working along together, less reliant on handouts, getting involved, getting motivated. You have got people who are becoming more proactive rather than just sitting back and waiting for things to happen. We're seeing the capacity building of the group. We've got a lot of vulnerable children who, whether it is their speech, their social skills, their physical ability, [previously] haven't had the support mechanisms in place to really help them make a good start. (Interviewee 17)

Stakeholders noted that it is often difficult for families to access the support they need due to a constellation of barriers, particularly geographic isolation. In this regard the place-based nature of CfC was seen as increasing capacity of services to support 'hard to reach' families. Being able to address the local context and needs, and resourcing local support services to connect with families, rather than services provided by external agencies that were not as invested in the community was understood as a key strength of the Initiative. Various comments were made in connection with the large scale of the area and associated challenges that size creates for the

engagement of families vulnerable to poor outcomes. For instance, some stakeholder interviewees believed that there were pockets in the Swan District that community support services would not have known about without the strength of a place-based Initiative. In particular, Bullsbrook and Ellenbrook were highlighted as under-resourced places with expanding populations and limited capacity to engage with families prior to the release of CfC Plus funding. Stakeholders acknowledged that prior service arrangements were untenable for families facing a range of barriers that impact on their capacity to travel to services, such as transport, financial hardship, and lack of awareness about what support services were available. These barriers were assessed as being particularly acute for families from CaLD backgrounds. Therefore, the Initiative's model of service delivery in 'place' was considered highly beneficial for supporting and building connections with families vulnerable to poor outcomes.

3.2 Quality versus quantity

Despite these positive examples of engaging vulnerable families, also reported was a sense that fostering social connections and reducing social exclusion were being limited due to the nature and scope of Activity offerings associated with the Initiative. One such area related to an apparent preference by the Initiative for "neat, tidy little Activities" (Interviewee 16). Given that the use of a range of engagement strategies is a hallmark of CfC funded services, a variety of discrete offerings is not an unusual practice. In particular, soft entry points offer non-stigmatising ways to engage parents/children in their own communities (for example, mobile playgroups or community recreational activities). Nevertheless these strategies are often accompanied by more intensive client-centred practices (for example, home visits) in the suite of CfC offerings (Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009) as is the case for the Midland CfC Plus Initiative.

Regardless, many interviewees voiced dissatisfaction with the seeming lack of transparency in the process of selecting and developing Activities, and the subsequent difficulties arising for CPs in implementing some Activities. While these challenges will be discussed more fully in the Activity Evidence Base (Section 5), stakeholder interviewees were vocal in identifying the adverse implications for engaging families vulnerable to poor outcomes. On the one hand, it was observed that CPs able to engage 'hard to reach' families over and above the numbers specified in their contract milestones are being held up as champions by the Initiative. On the other hand, this comes at a considerable cost, as the Initiative funding does not adequately reflect the resources required to achieve this. Some stakeholders noted the paradox that Activities have been so successful in engaging families that they are surpassing their capacity to provide. This apparent under-funding has potential adverse implications for the occupational health and safety of staff, duty of care with respect to participants, and continuity of quality programs. One stakeholder summed up this dilemma:

What are we going to do? Am I going to send some my staff [not allocated to Communities for Children] up there to help out? We can't say no [turn away families from Activities] because we've been working on relationships and connections for so long, so I think we've set ourselves up. The reality being that (laughs) it's working too well. (Interviewee 4)

At this stage, most Activity funding has been allocated, however an understanding of actual costs of conducting programs will be important knowledge for decision making in future funding

rounds. It is recommended that as part of the annual review of each Activity, information is gathered about the total costs of running a program including in-kind contributions. This would also include the costs of CP staff members attending Midland CfC Plus meetings as per contractual requirements.

While stakeholders discussed a clear preference for working in a collaborative and integrated manner, this was at times contradicted by concerns that such associations could undermine established trust if the Initiative was perceived to be unresponsive to identified need. As an example, some stakeholders acknowledged that the Initiative is positioned within the historic context of scepticism towards government service delivery and funding models by community members, particularly Aboriginal Australians. Therefore, stakeholders argued that Midland Initiative ensure an on-going, flexible and participative community consultation process that seeks to capture the changing realities and needs of local families. As a community consultation process is a planned activity for the Initiative, it is recommended that a community consultation strategy be developed as a matter of priority.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- As part of the annual review of Activities information is collected on expenditure associated with running an activity (including in-kind and other contributions) for a more accurate assessment of program costs.
- The FP investigate possible redeployment of un-allocated Activity funds to Activities exceeding their contract milestones in providing service to vulnerable families or without parity in length of contract.
- The FP develops a plan of action to incorporate community consultation and feedback into the work of Initiative.

SECTION 4: EXTENT TO WHICH ACTIVITIES ARE ALIGNED WITH FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM GUIDELINES

4.1 Benefits of prevention and early intervention focus

In general, interviewed stakeholders remarked on the clear benefits of many Activities being implemented by the Initiative in facilitating stronger families and communities. The prevention and early intervention focus of Activities, and their aim of improving family functioning, safety, wellbeing, and development of children and families was viewed as supporting enduring positive change in the long-term. In particular, Activities within the Initiative were understood as encouraging social inclusion. As one stakeholder observed:

That earlier intervention focus, and really you can see that they're working towards social inclusion, the agenda for having people that particularly weren't heard or weren't supported in the community, like really disadvantaged families, are starting to get some much need services, very early! Giving that good parental support will impact on their children. With time, hopefully it will better help them, be better educated, be better connected to services, and help [reduce] their disadvantage. (Interviewee 26)

4.2 Issues related to 'vulnerability'

While numerous stakeholders saw their personal mandate and the directions of the Initiative as synonymous with supporting children and families there was a shared concern about the way that the notion of vulnerability was being attributed within service provision funding arrangements. Many stakeholders considered that a definition of vulnerability as characteristic only of specific groups within society neglected the fact that all families can experience periods of vulnerability. It is conceivable that vulnerability is used as shorthand for 'vulnerability to poor outcomes' which is prevalent in FaHCSIA literature. However, the use of this umbrella term to describe particular groups was considered disempowering for families and community members. As one stakeholder reflected:

All families are vulnerable at one time or another. The pigeon hole of government is that these homeless children or families within the protective care systems are the only vulnerable families. (Interviewee 13)

Furthermore, it was contended by stakeholder interviewees that participant demographic targets identified for Activities, such as requirements to include a certain number of Aboriginal people or people with a disability, was often inappropriate, complicating the outcomes that the Activities were designed to achieve. There was a risk that the collecting sensitive data could damage the relationship between Activity workers and participants. For example, one stakeholder reasoned that FaHCSIA needed to be more aware that different demographic groups may not want to access the same program, and overlaying additional demographic criteria associated with being at-risk or vulnerable was redundant in cases where the 'vulnerability' of participants had already been established due to the presence of other factors.

Some of the targets; the bit that says we've got to have x number of staff, x number of old people, x number of people with disability, x number of people who are Aboriginal in one group where, in addition, all had to have post natal depression. The concept that you would, and this is partially FaHCSIA's responsibility, simply get Aboriginal groups and mainstream groups to access the same program just because they say it's a good idea, it's just not going to happen. We said they're all vulnerable already because they've got mental health issues; we can't layer on top of that a whole bunch of other criteria they have to have as well. Once you explain these things to FaHCSIA they usually understand, it's just that when they try and write guidelines for everybody, they can't do it.
(Interviewee 14)

It is evident that stakeholders regarded FaHCSIA's guidelines as ambiguous in a number of respects due to the perception that vulnerability was being defined in an exclusionary manner. For example, various stakeholders identified that proximal suburbs recorded similarly poor scores on the AEDI—an indicator of vulnerability to poor outcomes used by FaHCSIA—had been excluded from the Midland CfC Plus site. As one interviewee concluded:

In Forestfield AEDI scores are sort of the same as here but they've been excluded...if that could be part of what was taken on board in the [Midland CfC Plus] model...now the people on the bottom of the hill are literally left out in the cold, high Aboriginal population, all of that stuff, but there's no services for them, whereas Midland has got so many programs. (Interviewee 9)

4.3 Understanding the 'Plus' in a CfC site

Overall there was a lack of clarity among interviewees about what the 'Plus' component of the Midland CfC site entailed in terms of Activity focus. Some stakeholders understood the 'Plus' as signifying a focus on child protection but did not consider the Activities operating in the Midland site as any different from other CfC sites. As one stakeholder interviewee commented:

I don't know what the definition of Communities for Children Plus that FaHCSIA is really operating on, it doesn't appear to be any different than any other Communities for Children [site] I've been involved in. (Interviewee 5)

4.4 Activity sustainability

The question of whether Midland CfC Plus Activities can remain sustainable beyond the first funding round (2011-2014) was a key concern for many stakeholder interviewees. Sustainability is a requirement of FaHCSIA CfC funding, and is described as “the need to develop strategies to maintain outcomes and processes, and to secure ongoing funding, where appropriate” (Department of Family and Community Services 2005, p. 5).

The Midland CfC Plus CSP (2011) discusses sustainability in terms of there being either no longer a requirement for an Activity or for ongoing government funding. This is reinforced in the contractual conditions for CPs including the development of a Sustainability Plan for Activities that addresses the 'sustainability of outcomes' for participants. Stakeholder interviewees' dominant interpretation was that the Activity was responsible for the ongoing outcomes in participants' lives, namely that they would 'fix the problem' and consequently there would no

longer be a need for the Activity. This does not account for the in- and out-migration within the site, or external factors that influence the ongoing benefits for participants. This particular wording was not located in FSP documentation (in the public domain) and in evidence base terms, there are few, if any, long-term studies that examine whether outcomes endure for participants (Sayers et al., 2010; Wise, da Silva, Webster & Sanson, 2005).

Nonetheless, a number of stakeholders reported proactively introducing sustainability measures with their Activity participants including development of mentoring relationships, use of volunteers, and securing funding beyond the current round. There was recognition that this was not possible across every Activity, and that some funding would still be required to meet administration and running costs. This uncertainty about sustainability clearly requires further examination and discussion with CPs. Supporting CPs to continue to develop and strengthen their evaluation strategies was identified by stakeholders as a potential mechanism to assist in leveraging future funding.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Further discussion occur with stakeholders across two areas: first, unpacking the term ‘vulnerability’, the dominant description for disadvantage within FSP Guidelines and second, a better understanding of the ‘Plus’ component in a CfC site
- The FP provides further clarity about what sustainability means for Activities, and what direction CPs should be heading in to meet their contractual obligations.

SECTION 5: ACTIVITY EVIDENCE BASE

5.1 Activity selection

Some of the interviewed stakeholders perceived a clear connection between chosen Activities and the work that had been undertaken by community advocacy groups, such as the Early Years groups and the Coalition of Midland Schools, to identify areas of need and what were considered important initiatives to support children with their learning and social development. For example, several stakeholder commented on the impact of the Early Years group, which is summed up by the following stakeholder “*first cab off the rank, the Early Years Information and Referral service, [Swan Family Connect], was a direct result of the consultation done with the Early Years groups and other people that came along*” (Interviewee 3). Conversely, as discussed in the Service Integration (Section 1), many stakeholders shared the view that the Initiative insufficiently engaged with existing community networks and advocacy groups in identifying needs and gaps to inform Activity development.

There was a range of challenges identified by study participants about the lack of robustness of the evidence base for Activities. A consistent theme was limited explanation provided about the connection between an Activity and its desired outcomes. Moreover, stakeholders found many of the community needs identified by the FP as “*kind of arbitrary and not very well connected to the reality on the ground*” (Interviewee 5). Other stakeholders highlighted that where consultation did take place, it was predominantly the voices of service providers, with limited consultation with communities about what was needed in each of the four places. Where local knowledge did exist most stakeholders interviewed did not believe the Initiative had always capitalised on this in developing Activities and considered that greater effort was required to authentically enact the participative, grass-roots consultative and development processes that the model of CfC was seen to promise. One stakeholder encapsulates the perceptions expressed by many in saying:

We don't expect Communities for Children to see all and know all. They'll get mixed messages because everyone's got their own barrow. For many people who had been working [prior to Communities for Children] it did just seem like a missed opportunity, or a lot of money that has gone towards layers that perhaps haven't made any [substantive] difference. Our engagement was based on the premise Communities for Children is going to be grass-roots. (Interviewee 16)

An associated theme was the lack of transparency regarding the origin of some Activities, with many stakeholders noting that although they had not been party to every consultation undertaken, some Activity ideas had not emerged or been discussed at any of the consultations processes where they were involved. Various stakeholders expressed frustration that particular components were justified on the grounds that there was clear research confirming the importance of a particular Activity, yet there was a failure to provide evidence to the Committee providing an informed basis to confidently endorse decisions. This is highlighted by a stakeholder interviewee:

We got told there's clear research that shows that those [Activities] are really important, but we didn't get that research. That would have been handy for understanding. There

might be research, it might be really valid, and that would be really great, but they never gave us any of that back-up information. If we had that, maybe we could understand why it's so important, why there's such a push for it. Then you can endorse it more as a Committee. (Interviewee 15)

Acknowledgement by the FP that some Activities had been included because they had been successful in other CfC sites, was seen by interviewees as at odds with the place-based perspective grounded in gaps and strengths, rather than simply a translocation of programs from another CfC site. Some interviewees reasoned that it was not to say that introducing projects from other locations should not happen or would not work, however there needed to be better rationale for such inclusions.

5.2 Asset mapping

The National Evaluation of the CfC Initiative supports the undertaking of a comprehensive consultation process as it found that “barriers, needs, and proposed solutions perceived by service providers do not necessarily reflect those perceived by target groups” (Muir et al., 2010). According to the CSP for the site, such a consultation process for community members has not been attempted for Midland CfC Plus due to time constraints as mentioned previously and the availability of data from a widespread community consultation undertaken by the City of Swan as part of their Place Planning (Community Strategic Plan, Swan Alliance, 2011). Utilisation of the results of the City of Swan consultations to inform the CSP is cited within the document¹, and research conducted by the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Curtin University² with Indigenous families in the City of Swan was also accessed and included in Section 5 Evidence Review of the Plan (Community Strategic Plan Swan Alliance, 2011). Nevertheless, the lack of primary data led to the perception by interviewees that community asset mapping was superficial and out-dated.

Community asset mapping is a capacity-focused approach to developing community programs based on identifying areas of strength, gaps and needs. Aside from illuminating the population demographics for the area, other information gathered includes current support services, service location, services usage, relationships that services have with each other and with their local communities. While developing a community asset map for the area would have been made more difficult by the out-dated census data, interviewees argued that local service provider knowledge could have been utilised to provide more current details to the asset map. Taking into account the limitations of the asset mapping, as one interviewee summed up, it “*wasn't a working tool that they [the Facilitating Partner] used to inform what they were doing*” (Interviewee 25).

The release of the 2011 Census data and the establishment of a range of Activities in different locations across the site now offers the opportunity to update the existing Asset Map with a more nuanced understanding of strengths, gaps and needs of the site.

¹ City of Swan Place Plans – Midland, Ellenbrook, Bullsbrook and Altona

² Enhancing Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health. 2010. School of Nursing and Midwifery, Curtin University of Technology.

5.3 Funding of services within the State/Commonwealth provision

Another area of confusion was the rationale for Activities that already receive, or are eligible to receive funding, particularly for State/Commonwealth health or education services which theoretically fall outside of the ambit of CfC funding. Several stakeholders related instances where a proposed Activity was rejected on the grounds that it was within the domain of a different pool of government funding. In other cases, the existence of government funded services was not held to be an obstacle for an Activity receiving Initiative funding. For example, as one stakeholder cited:

FaHCSIA was very strict about not funding things that were funded by State government or the Commonwealth and yet in Midland, we've got expanded home-visiting services when there are existing State-funded home-visiting services. (Interviewee 16)

Several stakeholders recalled that they had repeatedly stressed a need for more extensive early literacy support and speech pathology in the area due to long waiting periods associated with under-resourcing and the implications that this lack of access has on children's learning, wellbeing and development. Although schools were identified as working towards redressing under-resourcing through development of screening processes for kindergarten and pre-primary, the 0-4 age group was still unable to access screening conducted through schools. The rationale provided by the FP was that the Initiative was not pursuing Activity development around literacy and speech because it fell within the domain of Health funding. This was reported as inconsistent with specific reference made to the approval of Activities that fall within the domain of Child Protection. As the following stakeholder discusses:

We were told that's a health issue so it can't be accommodated within Communities for Children but Health isn't doing anything. Yet other Activities have been approved that cross over into the area of Child Protection, and the rationale has been, well no one else is doing anything. (Interviewee 23)

It has been the Local Evaluator's experience that inconsistent practices in relation to non-duplication of Commonwealth/State funded service provision have created confusion in a number of CfC sites. This matter is not addressed in the relevant literature. In certain circumstances, services that would normally be the ambit of government have gained approval from FaHCSIA based on strong evidence about the historic absence the existence of long waiting lists, these services are seen as technically available and when approved as a CfC offering, this has occurred on a provisional basis. Updating the Asset Map and establishing evidence base around current service provision capacity and gaps will strengthen the argument for proposed future Activities that fall within this description.

5.4 Activity Working Groups

Another area of difficulty identified by stakeholders related to limitations in the process used to determine the funding allocated to an Activity. Questions were raised about whether the stakeholders who participated in the Activity Working Groups possessed sufficient knowledge and awareness of the issues under consideration to make informed decision to successfully implement a particular Activity and achieve the desired outcomes. Processes established in

Activity Working Group TOR excluded stakeholders who may be interested in the role as CP for the Activity, and thus did not allow input by those who had expertise delivering relevant services, and therefore had an idea of the costs involved. Consequently, stakeholders asserted that rather than being thoroughly researched, the allocation of funding to Activities often seen as insufficient to achieve the “*fairly heavy outcomes*” (Interviewee 22) expected in CP contracts.

As discussed in the governance section, the role of the Activity Working Group is to assist in developing of scope, funding, managing the tender process and making recommendations for Activity contracting to the Committee. Feedback indicates that Activity Working Group composition and processes need to be re-appraised. It is suggested that the FP review the appropriateness and functionality of this sub-committee’s structure including TOR and that suggested changes be tabled with the Committee.

5.5 Activity size

Concerns with under-funding of Activities led some to question the relative advantages and disadvantages of CfC sites implementing a more extensive number of smaller Activities, or pursuing a smaller number of Activities which can therefore be better resourced. As one stakeholder reflected:

I think there’s just not enough money sometimes, being allocated to some of the programs. Would you rather have lots of little ones or do a few bigger ones that can be well resourced? I’m not sure. But, that’s the model they’ve chose to go with, with all the different Activities identified as needs in the community. (Interviewee 26)

By implementing a more extensive number of smaller components, the Initiative has the capacity to develop a wider range of Activities and involve a greater diversity of stakeholders directly as CPs. Conversely, there are risks inherent in under-funding and engagement of a larger number of CPs. For example, a number of CPs employ sessional staff and reported being unable to attend meetings because the funding allocated is used for the direct delivery of the Activity and does not stretch to cover staffing costs associated with administration and networking. As one stakeholder expressed:

The funding allows it to be only for one day a week, but then there are also meetings during the week, and you have to run your program during the week, and you have to set up your program during the week. You would technically need someone about two or three days just to get everything done. I think just in those operational aspects it has been challenging. I think some of the other agencies have had similar challenges, especially smaller agencies that aren’t in a position to absorb those costs. There’s a lot of things that are starting to happen that aren’t on the one day you’re specifically asked to work, so then, when you’re actually implementing the program, when you have a contract, you go ‘oh, this doesn’t actually work best’, but it’s because the funding is limited. I think it’s really something that does have to be considered. I know I’ve put in a lot of extra time for CfC which is paid for by [Agency name] for me to do that. At the moment we give up a

fair amount of time, at least a day extra, to allocate to support which needs to be done for the program. (Interviewee 21)

As the majority of Activities for the current funding round have been decided and most are operational, quantity or quality suggestions at this point would serve a limited purpose. If there is CfC funding beyond 2014, the nature and scope of Initiative suite of Activities would need to be based on evidence from a range of indicators as well as insights from the current round.

5.6 Aboriginal engagement

The National Evaluation of the Communities for Children Initiative found community consultation was critical in communities with a high proportion of Indigenous Australians (Muir et al., 2010). It is acknowledged that working with Aboriginal people and communities can be challenging for non-Aboriginal people, and ample time must be invested in communicating and developing the shared understandings needed to work together effectively (Dudgeon, 2000). Given the time pressures of implementing Activities at the Midland site, concerns were expressed about the evidence base for Activities developed to engage Aboriginal people. Stakeholders who discussed the Aboriginal Reference Group—convened in an advisory capacity by the FP, to commence dialogue about the needs of Aboriginal people in the area and culturally appropriate ways of working—considered that this group predominantly drew on people from outside the area, rather than engaging with Aboriginal leaders within their local communities. As one stakeholder commented:

The people around the table weren't from the area, there was somebody from Balcatta and there was somebody from somewhere else, and they didn't feel listened to. Both of them have disengaged from that, because they didn't feel it was a community response...engaging people outside the community but not actually listening to, everybody knows you listen to [names local Aboriginal Elders]... it's about the heart here. On that [Aboriginal] Reference group surely we've got a say, where we see the needs are. (Interviewee 4)

In addition to the perception that the Aboriginal Reference Group had not fostered local Aboriginal input, some stakeholders raised the issue that there was no mechanism to share knowledge between the Aboriginal Reference Group and the Committee. Many of the stakeholder interviewees shared a broader desire to work together to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. As such, there was concern that the potential for knowledge sharing to inform the practice and direction of stakeholders' work, whether in relation to a project funded by the Initiative, or beyond the scope of the Initiative may be lost. One stakeholder characterised the consultation with Aboriginal people by the Initiative as:

All done in secret, contrary to everything we are trying to do...collating the richness of resources that people can contribute and it's not shared across. If we really wanted to see change, [in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people] share with other agencies that could mobilise things whether they are funded or not. (Interviewee 13)

It is recommended that a process be established to facilitate information exchange between the Aboriginal Reference Group and the Committee.

A number of stakeholders highlighted in general there was insufficiently acknowledgment that Aboriginal people do not constitute a singular community, but need to be understood as members of a range of diverse communities, which may not correspond to the boundaries of the Midland site. For example, one stakeholder contended that:

Having events for Indigenous people in Midland and asking some of the Beechboro and Lockridge families to go, you know, they're in conflict, it's not a good strategy.
(Interviewee 8)

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Based on the existence of more current statistical profiling and greater knowledge of the site, that the Midland CfC Plus Asset Map be updated on an ongoing basis.
- The FP reviews the appropriateness and functionality of the Activity Working Group sub-committee structure and TOR and that suggested changes be tabled with the Committee.
- The FP develops a knowledge sharing process so that decisions/discussions related to the Aboriginal Reference Group can be shared with the Committee.

CONCLUSION

Several limitations contextualise this report and should be kept in mind by readers. Evaluation findings from national and international studies reveal the complexities of implementing a collaborative program, and even the most respected evaluation methods may not be appropriate to initiatives that involve collaboration in the early stages of implementation. There is no easy way out of the tension between inclusiveness and effectiveness on committees but it is helpful to establish an wide-ranging advisory committee with a smaller executive committee which is responsible for actually managing the program (Valentine et al., 2007). Further, Valentine and others (2007) argue that this would mean that the burden of attending meetings is not too onerous for parents and small agencies, and that if there are problems with securing attendance at advisory committee meetings it is still possible for program decisions to be made and momentum to be maintained.

Although this report was primarily concerned with evaluating the processes that have been implemented during the first twelve to eighteen months of the Midland CfC Plus, rather than the impacts, in terms of the strategies of the site, this report indicates that good headway has already been made under the Community and Schools Connect strategy. This headway is less evident under the Services Connect strategy, where there needs to be ongoing investment in relationship building and the development of trust between the FP and Community stakeholders. This will in turn allow the Initiative to capitalise on the desire expressed amongst stakeholder interviewees to strengthen collaborative and co-ordinated approaches to service delivery.

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