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STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Research on how the programme operates

ORANGA TAMARIKI
Ministry for Children

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

First established in 1997, Strengthening Families is a structured interagency case conferencing system for the coordination of services to families/whānau. It currently operates in 32 areas with one or more part or full-time Strengthening Families Coordinators in each. Oranga Tamariki is responsible for delivering the Strengthening Families initiative and the Partnering for Outcomes function contracts with NGOs to provide all but two of these Coordinators. Most areas also have a Strengthening Families Local Management Group with management representation from both government and community agencies. The focus has been on 'early intervention' for most of the programme's history.

The primary purpose of this exploratory research is to help Oranga Tamariki better understand how Strengthening Families operates across the country, and to inform the future development of this and other early intervention and interagency initiatives. Using mixed methods research, data collection involved a literature scan, document analysis, administrative data, and both telephone interviews and a survey with Coordinators and Local Management Group chairs or proxies. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Why was Strengthening Families established, and how has its purpose and context changed over time?
2. Who delivers Strengthening Families locally and how?
3. What is the role of Strengthening Families Coordinators?
4. How do Local Management Groups operate?
5. What Strengthening Families support is available nationally?
6. Who does Strengthening Families serve?
7. Outside of an outcomes evaluation, is there promising evidence of effectiveness?
8. What is the current national operating model?

The study's findings are as follows:

1. **Across the last 22 years the Strengthening Families' purpose and context have radically changed:** While Strengthening Families has seen a number of incremental developments since its inception, essentially the model remains the same today as in 1999 when salaried Coordinators were first introduced to coordinate local case conferencing within a national framework. However, the purpose and context of Strengthening Families has radically changed over that time, and the programme now largely serves different children through, largely, different professionals.
2. **Over those years there have been significant changes in the degree and nature of national direction and support:** The current infrastructure focus would appear to be 'contracts' and 'systems'. In contrast, there is evidence to suggest that in the early years, there was a much stronger focus on 'training' and 'strategy'.
3. **Nationally and locally there is ambiguity about who Strengthening Families is meant to serve:** While many areas see themselves as clearly delivering early intervention, others may be more focused on either less or more intensive cases. While the length of cases in some areas averages two months, elsewhere the average can be 12 months. There are also significant differences between areas on whether, and, if so how frequently,

families/whānau return to Strengthening Families. In some areas, Strengthening Families may be working with families/whānau with different levels of need.

4. **Many Local Management Groups are struggling – some no longer exist:** There are Strengthening Families Local Management Groups that appear to be meeting both national and local expectations and providing strong governance. They also present as collaborative, well-led and supported locally by both government and non-government agencies; some of these also had a strong strategic orientation. However, this is not the norm, with most struggling, and seven or more areas no longer have a Local Management Group at all. There is also uncertainty among some chairs and Coordinators about the purpose, role, and function of Local Management Groups, and their associated accountabilities.

5. **Significant variation in Coordinator role and functions:** Coordinator roles vary considerably, to the extent that in practice some roles are quite different from others. The role has five key dimensions:
   – engaging with families/whānau at the beginning of the Strengthening Families process
   – formally or informally facilitating family/whānau meetings
   – developing the Strengthening Families professional network
   – promoting Strengthening Families in the community, and
   – undertaking administrative tasks.

   While Coordinators will operate across all of these dimensions, for reasons that may include history, job design, local circumstances of lead agencies and independent facilitators, and/or Coordinator preferences, individual roles may see more of a focus on one or two of the above five dimensions than others.

6. **Variation in local delivery:** As well as issues in relation to the existence of a Local Management Group and Coordinator role and function noted above, there are other variations across areas in terms of:
   – how referrals are dealt with
   – managing too many or too few referrals
   – cover arrangements when Coordinators are ill or leave
   – some agencies not being willing to act as Lead Agencies, and
   – levels of support from agencies, and system gaps.

7. **Strengthening Families does attend to the needs of many families/whānau including Māori, and there is promising evidence of effectiveness:** Generally, interviewees were very positive about the extent to which Strengthening Families benefits families and the wide range of families/whānau that it can serve. While the majority of interviewees believed that Strengthening Families was appropriate and effective for Māori, some felt that more work needed to be done in this area. This was also reflected in the information collected from Coordinators or Lead Agents on family/whānau progress at the point of case closure, as well as from other professionals involved. The satisfaction levels of those families/whānau who attended a planned final Strengthening Families meeting were high.

8. **The Strengthening Families operating model:** Strengthening Families is a structured interagency case conferencing system for the coordination of services to families/whānau. While it does operate differently in different areas, the current operating model has 10 core components:
   – structured interagency case conferences with an early intervention (or a prevention or intensive support) orientation
   – seven core Strengthening Families principles

- a variety of explicit and implicit assumptions
- contracts with NGOs to provide a Strengthening Families Coordinator service for an area or part thereof, with specified case volumes
- use of a mandatory national web-based case management and reporting system
- a referral form, Coordinator manual and associated national information and guidance
- a Local Management Group
- the Strengthening Families website
- local networks of agencies and professionals including lead agencies and facilitators, and
- the passion and commitment of the professionals involved.

Implications for Oranga Tamariki

The research has five potential implications for Oranga Tamariki, which are summarised below.

1. **Consider updating, reorienting, and overhauling Strengthening Families**
   - Large scale child welfare programmes were very different 20 years ago. With the statutory responsibilities Oranga Tamariki now has, a collaborative/community-led redesign could be considered.
   - To strengthen the capability, capacity, and profile of Strengthening Families, consider an update, reorientation, and overhaul of Strengthening Families as a national model.
   - Integrate Strengthening Families better operationally and strategically with other prevention, early intervention, and intensive support initiatives.
   - Consider expanding Strengthening Families so that interagency case conferencing is not the only pathway available to families/whānau.
2. **Re-engage with other government agencies at the national level** Bring Strengthening Families to an interagency chief executive level – such as the Child Wellbeing Chief Executive's Group, or the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan (OTAP) to re-engage with other government agencies and have their opinions included in its operation.
3. **Consider an agreed national strategy and regular reporting**
   - The research suggests support for an agreed and regularly updated national Strengthening Families strategy, implementation monitoring, and public annual reporting.
4. **Oranga Tamariki can learn from the Strengthening Families community, especially for future service development**
   - As Oranga Tamariki develops its prevention services, the experience and passion of the Strengthening Families community, in both early intervention and interagency working, could be better harnessed.
5. **Implications for further evaluation**
   - No evaluation is required for Strengthening Families and the research from this report is considered sufficient to inform Oranga Tamariki of further direction.
   - However, we recommend development and process evaluations be undertaken of any future piloting and/or implementation changes to Strengthening Families.

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INTRODUCTION

First established in 1997, Strengthening Families is a structured interagency case conferencing system for the coordination of services to families/whānau. It currently operates in 32 areas with one or more part- or full-time Strengthening Families Coordinators in each. Oranga Tamariki Partnering for Outcomes contracts with NGOs to provide all but two of these Coordinators. Most areas also have a Strengthening Families Local Management Group with management representation from both government and community agencies. Over most of Strengthening Families' history, the focus has been on 'early intervention'.

Strengthening Families is a free and voluntary service. There are 11 key government agencies[1] that are signatories to the Strengthening Families Memorandum of Understanding that funds the programme, and 215 community-based services. Strengthening Families currently receives $3.5 million annually from the 11 agencies who contribute financially and 'in-kind' to support the programme (2018/19 year).

The primary purpose of this exploratory research is to help Oranga Tamariki better understand how Strengthening Families operates across the country, and to inform the development of this and other early intervention and interagency initiatives. The report addresses the following research questions:

1. Why was Strengthening Families established, and how has its purpose and context changed over time?
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7. Outside of an outcomes evaluation, is there promising evidence of effectiveness?
8. What is the current national operating model?

The research was primarily undertaken by Iain Matheson of Matheson Associates Limited, with further interviews and surveying done by Dorian Gray, Mya-Liston Lloyd, and Sarah Talboys of the Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre. Interviews and a survey were carried out over the period March to June 2019.

In terms of the structure of the report, following a brief discussion on the background to the project and the methodology used, most of the report is devoted to discussing the research findings. The report also contains 12 appendices, which cover:

- All available *SF Reporter* national-level reporting data for the period 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019 (Appendices, 1, 2 and 3);

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[1] The following partnering agencies support the Strengthening Families programme: Oranga Tamariki (previously Ministry of Social Development), Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), Department of Corrections, Department of Internal Affairs, Te Puni Kōkiri, Housing New Zealand, Inland Revenue, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, and New Zealand Police.

- Interview participant information sheets, consent forms, interview guides and survey questions (Appendices 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10);
- Strengthening Families' model characteristics 1997 to 2019 (Appendix 11); and
- Strengthening Families' logic model (Appendix 12).

This Strengthening Families report is also accompanied by a short literature review on the international context and comparable overseas programmes (Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, n.d.).

While the report has primarily been written with an Oranga Tamariki audience in mind (e.g. Partnering for Outcomes, Policy and other internal teams), the researchers have also kept the information needs of Strengthening Families' Local Management Group chairs, Coordinators, Coordinator provider managers and the wider Strengthening Families community in mind.

BACKGROUND

Strengthening Families was established in 1997 as an interagency case conferencing programme to help families/whānau access coordinated and integrated services and support. The programme's underlying theory remains fundamentally the same as articulated by 11 government agencies in 2006:

> *The early connection of families to services and the willingness of both government and community agencies to collaborate in providing the most effective service for each family will enable us to shift the focus from dealing with the consequences of difficulties in children's lives to preventing things from going wrong in the first place* (MSD, 2006, Foreword).

A well as an interagency case-conferencing system, Strengthening Families can also be framed as:

– an integrated social services initiative for more effective and efficient service delivery
– an initiative to build on families' strengths and resilience
– a mechanism for families to access support services and other resources
– wrap-around provision to ensure that children and families get the support they need
– a service for parents engaged with more than one agency who want their provision to be better coordinated, and
– an approach to adapt and develop local service provision in response to identified need.

Strengthening Families was initially based on a local Waitakere initiative, and not piloted before national roll-out (Ministry of Social Policy, 1999). Notwithstanding some very early small-scale studies (Christchurch City Council, n.d.; Majumdar, 2006), only one evaluation has been identified. *Has the investment paid off?* (McKenzie, 2010) was a one-year Dunedin-based cohort study from 2007-8, in which families/whānau had a follow-up interview some months after their involvement with the programme.

The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) also published *Opportunities to Improve the Effectiveness of Strengthening Families* in 2015, which included some data collection and identified the following five opportunities or weaknesses:

– "Consistency in delivery across regions
– Support for Strengthening Families Coordinators and facilitators/lead agencies
– Improve the quality and functionality of data collection for Strengthening Families [note that *SF Reporter* was implemented the year before in 2014]
– The Strengthening Families programme's alignment with other integrated services (i.e. Children's Teams, Whānau Ora and Social Sector Trials), and
– Governance and operational support" (Ministry of Social Development, 2015, p. 4).

However, with the exception of some work in relation to *SF Reporter,* from the documentation reviewed for this study, those five areas do not appear to have been progressed.

Alongside Coordinator provider NGOs complying with their contractual obligations and Coordinators' mandatory use of the *SF Reporter* web-based case management and reporting system, Strengthening Families is supported by the following infrastructure:

– Strengthening Families website
– Referral forms and report formats
– Guidelines
– Coordinator manual (which also includes some additional resources).

In terms of a nationally developed ethos, there is also an implicit expectation in the documentation (Oranga Tamariki, n.d.) that all professionals involved in Strengthening Families will adhere to the programme's seven core principles:

1. *Reliance on active* **participation** *and direction from families.*

2. *Focus on family/whānau* **strengths**, *issues, priorities and desired outcomes.*

3. *Improved* **engagement** *with and* **access** *to services for families/whānau.*

4. **Respect** *for family/whānau values and culture including Tikanga Māori.*

5. **Cross-agency support** *demonstrated by contributions (both monetary and in kind) from a range of government and non-government agencies.*

6. **Commitment** *to a coordinated, trans-disciplinary interagency approach to get the best outcome for the child/young person.*

7. *Respect for the* **capacity of communities** *to offer children, young people and their families an integrated and effective service, plus the commitment to support that through promotion of strong relationships and robust processes adapted to suit those communities* (p. 11).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a mixed methods sequential exploratory design, with qualitative data as the priority; the quantitative and qualitative analysis and findings were integrated during the interpretation stage.

Data collection methods

The study used the following five data collection methods:

– Literature scan (qualitative)
– Document analysis (qualitative)
– Interviews (qualitative)
– Administrative data (quantitative), and
– Survey (predominantly quantitative, but with some qualitative).

Literature scan

The literature scan, published separately,[2] included conventional commercial and academic books and journal articles, other published reports and material (including grey literature), and websites. Such literature fell into three categories:

1. There is a very small body of literature on Strengthening Families in New Zealand; it mainly covers the period 1999 to 2006 (for example, Christchurch City Council, n.d.; Majumdar, 2006; Maharey, 2003; Ministry of Social Development, 2005; Ministry of Social Policy, 1999; Walker, 2001).
2. Evidence-based and systematic review websites: Several such websites (recommended in SuPERU, 2016) were searched for any evidence-based or informed programmes that were similar to Strengthening Families. The scan included the following sites:
   – Blueprints
   – Campbell Collaboration
   – California Evidence Based Clearing House for Child Welfare
   – Cochrane Library
   – Crime Solutions
   – Investing in Children, and
   – Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
3. Early Intervention models were also identified, and some overseas programmes were examined.

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[2] Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre (2020).

Document analysis

The study analysed several documents from Oranga Tamariki predecessor organisations (Ministry of Social Development, Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, and Ministry of Social Policy), including material on the www.strengtheningfamilies.govt.nz website (listed in reverse order), as well as two Oranga Tamariki documents.

– Oranga Tamariki. (2018). Evidence review: Strengthening Families.
– Oranga Tamariki. (n.d.). Strengthening Families guidelines: F18.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2015). Community investment strategy: Line by line review – service level.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2015). Opportunities to improve the effectiveness of Strengthening Families.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2014). Strengthening Families Reporter manual v1.2.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2014). Strengthening Families Coordinator handbook.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2010). Strengthening Families referral form.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2010). Strengthening Families consent form.
– You can make life better for your family. (n.d.) (Family and Community Services brochure).
– McKenzie, M. (2010). Has the investment paid off? Strengthening Families project report (commissioned report).
– Ministry of Social Development. (n.d.). Strengthening Families strategic framework: Key action areas.
– Ministry of Social Development. (2005). Review of Strengthening Families Local Collaboration: Presented to the Minister for Social Development and Employment, April 2005.

Administrative data

Researchers had access to administrative data on Strengthening Families via the Partnering for Outcomes Strengthening Families (*SF Reporter*) website-based information system. *SF Reporter* was introduced in 2014 (MSD, 2014), and all Coordinators use it as their case management tool. It is also a reporting tool, and it was this element of the information system that was made available to researchers (i.e. not case management data on individual families/whānau).

The *SF Reporter* reporting function comprises three screens with the following headings for either viewing or downloading as a PDF report:

– How much did we do? (up to nine sections can be selected)
– How well did we do? (up to four sections can be selected)
– Is anyone better off? (up to three sections can be selected)

SF Reporter is not able to produce individual reports for more than 12 months at a time, but such reports are available by Coordinator, Local Management Group area, sub-region and region, as well as nationally. From a research perspective, *SF Reporter's* reporting function is quite limited, and presentational graphics were used for analysis, as descriptive statistics were not practical. To demonstrate what information is (and is not) available, all *SF Reporter*

national-level reporting data for the period 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019 is included as Appendices 1, 2 and 3.

Interviews

In all, 22 semi-structured interviews were carried out involving 23 people (one was a joint interview). Telephone interviews were held with 11 Strengthening Families Coordinators, nine Local Management Group chairs, and four chair proxies, i.e. Coordinator provider managers where there was either no Local Management Group or no permanent chair. Most (20) individuals were selected by Partnering for Outcomes on the basis that they were best placed to assist the study and represented a range of main centres and provincial areas. All invited individuals made themselves available, and telephone interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. The Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre augmented these interviews with two further telephone interviews, as well as two longer in-depth face-to-face interviews, with Partnering for Outcomes staff. Thematic analysis was used for the interviews, and participant information sheets, consent forms and interview guides are attached as Appendices 4 to 9.

Survey

An electronic SurveyMonkey questionnaire was also developed and sent to all 44 Strengthening Families Coordinators, and 32 (Local Management Group) chairs or proxies (as described previously). While a single questionnaire instrument was used, skip logic was utilised so the questions asked differed across respondents. The overall response rate was 89 percent (68 of 76: 30 of 32 chairs or proxies, and 38 of 44 Coordinators). Geographically, Auckland and Wellington were strongly represented with high numbers of responses. Otago and Waikato were also fairly strong. The survey questions are attached as Appendix 10.

Ethics

The Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre undertook an ethics review of the overall research project, and in particular the telephone interview participant information sheet, and an associated verbal consent form. No unaddressed ethical issues were identified.

Research limitations

As with all research, this study had some limitations. These were as follows:

1. While approximately a quarter of Coordinators and a third of chairs or proxies were interviewed as part of the research, as with all qualitative interviews, the experiences and views of those interviewed are not necessarily generalisable to all.
2. There were some limitations with the functionality of the Oranga Tamariki Strengthening Families web-based case management and reporting system (*SF Reporter*). Some interviewees also commented negatively on both the accuracy and usefulness of *SF Reporter's* generated reports.

FINDINGS

1: Across the last 22 years the Strengthening Families purpose and context have radically changed

> **Key points:**
>
> – Over the years, Strengthening Families has been gradually de-prioritised as a flagship government intervention for high-needs children and families/whānau.
> – The initiative currently suffers from a lack of integrated, high-level national leadership.
> – Nonetheless, the initiative continues to deliver local case-conferencing coordination in much the same way as it did 20 years ago, although serving different children through, largely, different professionals.

Summary

Strengthening Families was first introduced in 1997, and designed with its own particular purpose and context. While the programme has undergone a number of incremental developments since its inception, essentially the model remains the same today as it was in 1999 when salaried Coordinators were first introduced to coordinate local case conferencing within a national framework. However, as shown in Table 1 below, the purpose and context of Strengthening Families has radically changed over that time. A key point to note is that Strengthening Families these days is largely serving different children through, largely, different professionals.

Table 1: Contrasting Strengthening Families 1997/99 with present

	1997 TO 1998	PRESENT
Purpose	– "NZ's most at-risk children" – More government agency than NGO focused – Efficiency & effectiveness – 'Family case coordinating' was one part of an 'umbrella' Strengthening Families strategy – All of NZ	– Families, and no statutory/intensive cases – More NGO than government agency focused – Early intervention & prevention – Stand-alone programme – Most of NZ

Continued below.

Strengthening Families: Research on how the programme operates

	1997 TO 1998	PRESENT
Planning	– Very high national profile – National Coordinating Interagency Committee – Initially unfunded – 70 Local Management Groups – Some regional steering groups	– Comparatively low national profile – No national interagency coordination group – $3.5m in funding (2018-19) – 32 Strengthening Families areas and 25 Local Management Groups – Regional Governance Groups disbanded by MSD
People	– Initially no salaried coordinator – CEO-led – 6 Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, & Department of Social Welfare senior appointments	– Coordinators, and optional facilitators & lead agencies – Oranga Tamariki Partnering for Outcomes-led – No national interagency leadership arrangements
Processes	– Interagency protocols & Draft Local Management Group MOU (for adaptation)	– Contracts, website, *SF Reporter*, manual
Performance	– Annual national monitoring report	– No annual national monitoring report

Evidence

Documents and literature scan

See Appendix 11 for a more detailed examination of the Strengthening Families' model characteristics over four periods of time:

– 1997 to 1998 (full national roll-out)
– 1999 to 2005 (the programme re-launch)
– 2005 to 2015 (the MSD 2015 review)
– 2015 to 2019.

Interviews

A number of interviewees had direct experience of working in or being part of the programme from 2005-2015, and were able to provide some additional model characteristics from that era. For example:

– Strong national leadership by the former MSD Deputy Chief Executive with responsibility for Family and Community Services (Richard Wood).
– The then Social Services Forum (Chief Executives from the Ministries of Education, Health, Justice and Social Development) was responsible for setting strategic direction and ensuring programme integration with related government initiatives.

- All areas had a Local Management Group.
- National Coordinator conferences were run.
- Regular Coordinator training and other professional development opportunities were offered.

2: Over those years significant changes in the degree and nature of national direction and support

> Key points:
>
> – Earlier in its history, Strengthening Families had a greater focus on training and development support, along with a nationally directed strategic focus.
> – More recently, there is more of a contracting focus through an individual relationship between a Coordinator provider organisation and a regional Partnering for Outcomes Advisor.
> – Data collection and reporting systems are of limited value and are not being used to provide information to the NGOs and Coordinators on any emerging trends.

Summary

Figure 1 is a simple model that illustrates the range and focus of national direction and support that has been in place for Strengthening Families over the last 22 years. The interviews, document analysis and literature scan indicate that the current focus is primarily in the 'contracts' domain and to a lesser extent the 'systems' domain. In contrast, there is evidence to suggest that in the early years, the 'training' and 'strategy' domains were more dominant.

Figure 1: National Strengthening Families infrastructure
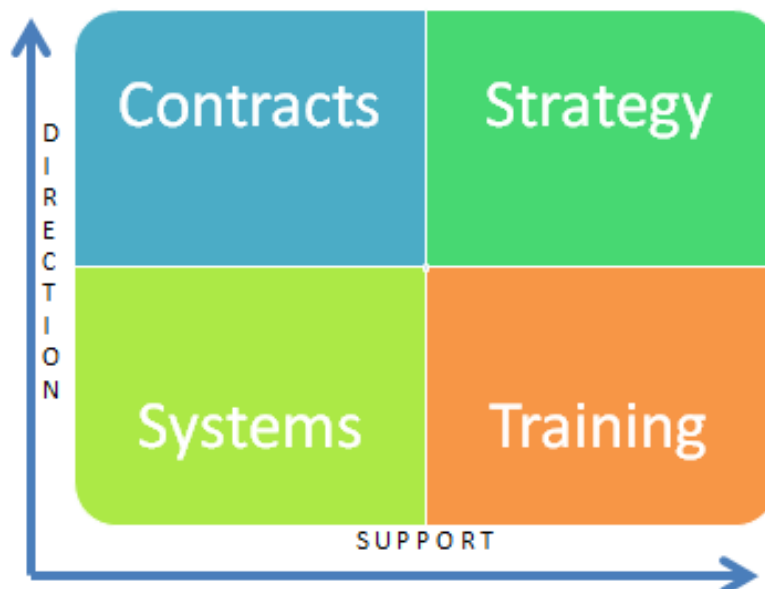
Evidence

Each of the above four domains are now discussed in relation to the evidence identified from the interviews, document analysis and literature scan.

Interviews

Interviewees were asked about their experiences of Strengthening Families' national infrastructure and support. Several mentioned that Strengthening Families was once a high profile, well-supported flagship interagency government programme. In part because of successive moves from the Ministry of Social Welfare to the Department of Child, Youth and Family, the Ministry of Social Development (initially with Family and Community Services, and then Community Investment) and then to Oranga Tamariki, much of the national impetus had been lost, along with, according to one interviewee, a reduction in national office staffing from three to one in a Strengthening Families dedicated role.

Contracts: Some Coordinators reported making contact with the National Office-based Partnering for Outcomes senior advisor for Strengthening Families (or the manager) if they had a particular issue (Local Management Group chairs and proxies less so). However, perhaps because interviewed Coordinators and their managers were directly or indirectly involved in contracting for the Strengthening Families Coordinator service, most reported a stronger relationship with their regional Partnering for Outcomes advisor. Generally, there was a very positive perception of Partnering for Outcomes regional advisors, although some were said to be more focused on contract compliance than supporting the ongoing development of the programme. However, while beyond the control of individual advisors and prior to the establishment of Oranga Tamariki, several interviewees said delays by MSD Community Investment in re-contracting negatively impacted programme delivery in terms of staff retention, referral levels and/or community engagement.

Systems - *SF Reporter*: The online *SF Reporter* tool was mentioned by most interviewees as an important component of Strengthening Families. However, views on its usefulness were mixed. While often frustrated with the process to add new agencies, on the whole Coordinators tended to be more positive about it than either Local Management Group chairs or Coordinator Provider Managers. As one Coordinator enthusiastically put it:

> *The reporting tool, you know, Results Based Accountability (RBA), how we're all on the national, which is great I think that's awesome. We just feed it in now, fill in all the data, every month get it up-to-date, how many referrals we've had, how many we've closed, all the meetings. That goes straight to MSD [sic] down in Wellington and they can just look in any time. I think that's been a major.*

However for others, views on the tool included that: the output at best requires a high degree of interpretation; the output was not sufficiently useful for the time and effort required to enter the data; and it was not 'fit-for-purpose' and the actual users of the tool need to be involved in its redevelopment. Some comments were also made about a perceived lack of feedback from National Office on emerging national, regional and local data trends and their consequences.

Strengthening Families coordinator manuals: Most interviewees who mentioned these resources were reasonably positive: "The guidance manual that's quite helpful. I have been through that. Yes, reasonably helpful".

However, because Coordinators "don't all work the same" (Coordinator interviewee) the usefulness of the manual and its wording may be limited.

Back in the day we all used to write our own operating procedures, so no matter where you went, the Coordinator could show you how it works in their area, because you had this little manual. And then we got this big [national] one, and I don't know whether people still update their local ones. I haven't updated mine (Coordinator).

Strengthening Families website: While mentioned by fewer interviewees than *SF Reporter*, most comments about the website concerned the need to update the content and keep it current. One interviewee pointed out that the two brochures available on the website were still carrying some Family and Community Services' branding and URL (web address) from before 2014.

Training

The training quadrant relates to the training and development of Coordinators, Facilitators, Lead Agencies, Local Management Group chairs and referring agencies. Virtually every Coordinator who was interviewed, and some Local Management Group chairs and Coordination Provider Managers, raised the importance of Coordinator training and development. Most Coordinators, wanted to see a return to the levels of national and regional training and development available before the establishment of Community Investment and the introduction of the Children's Teams, at a minimum. One more recently appointed Coordinator stated that she has never received any Strengthening Families training.

The Coordinator role was also described by some as 'isolated' with most working in teams without colleagues in similar roles. Some formal or informal Coordinator peer support is available in most places. In one region, Coordinators facilitate a monthly meeting in their region; elsewhere in the country at least three smaller groups of Coordinators each meet fairly regularly on a less formal basis. Coordinators saw these meetings as very beneficial and an important part of their support. Some of these Coordinators may also be part of 'natural' local peer support networks e.g. where more than one Coordinator is employed in a Local Management Group. However, several interviewees wanted to see a return to regular, more broadly focused national and/or regional hui or conferences.

In many Local Management Groups, facilitators are integral to the effective delivery of Strengthening Families, with one Group having up to 30 facilitators. Several more-experienced Coordinators reported that facilitator training used to be done by Family and Community Services, but has since been withdrawn. For one Coordinator, such regular training events also helped to more broadly raise awareness about Strengthening Families and so encourage referrals:

We used to have a lady from MSD going around training for us and that just took a lot off our workload. And the referrals were coming in quite regularly. She was doing the facilitation training and also…Introduction to Strengthening Families; and it was always very popular. I found over the last year our numbers have dropped off and I've been kind of doing one-on-one training myself, and I've got so much to do already. When I went into this job it wasn't to be a trainer also, it was coordination.

Coordinators are either organising or delivering facilitator training themselves, or it is just not happening. Another Coordinator stated that their large pool of facilitators is trained with the

support of two other colleagues from the Coordination Provider organisation. Coordinators who are organising or delivering facilitator training using the nationally developed facilitator training manual said the material was very out-of-date and had not been updated since being developed by Family and Community Services in 2006.

Strategy

While interviewees were perhaps more focused on wanting national support and additional resourcing, than a stronger national direction in how they should locally deliver Strengthening Families, they nonetheless were keen to see a clearer future pathway, greater certainty, and a stronger national profile for the programme.

Several wanted to see a clearer sense of direction in relation to other government agencies. This took two forms. Firstly, while some practitioners and their managers from individual government agencies might support Strengthening Families locally, interviewees did not believe that there was any meaningful national engagement with their respective organisations. Secondly, with the ever-growing number of interagency collaborative initiatives that individual and groups of ministries have now put in place, opportunities to better integrate Strengthening Families did not yet appear to have been taken up. Examples cited by interviewees included:

– Whangaia Ngā Pā Harakeke (NZ Police)
– Whānau ora (TPK)
– Intensive wraparound (MOE)
– Communities of Learning (MOE)
– Intensive support workers (WINZ), and
– Intensive support workers (HNZ).

Document analysis

Contracts: No analysis of Coordinator provider contracts was undertaken.

Systems: The introduction of *SF Reporter* in 2014 (MSD, 2014) was a major development.

Training: No internal documentation on training was identified.

Strategy: Aside from the Strengthening Families review published by MSD (2015), the last strategy document identified was the interagency *Strategic Framework: Key Action Areas* (MSD, 2006) which was produced on behalf of, and signed by each of the chief executives from the original 11 participating agencies.

Literature scan

Reference was found to a two-day event for Local Management Groups held in 2003 (Maharey, 2003).

3: Nationally and locally there is ambiguity about who Strengthening Families is meant to serve

> **Key points:**
>
> – Elsewhere government has increasingly focused on providing services for vulnerable populations, with a plethora of related interagency initiatives now in place.
> – There is an ambiguity on the levels of needs that Strengthening Families should be addressing, as an early intervention and prevention service.
> – Collaborative case conferencing is recognised as a useful way of delivering more intensive support to those with complex needs.
> – There was a consensus that referred families have needs that are seriously affecting the wellbeing of tamariki.

Summary

There is meant to be some variation in delivery so that Strengthening Families meets local needs and circumstances. However, while many interviewees talked about cases becoming more complex, some areas see themselves as clearly delivering early intervention, while others were more focused on either less or more intensive cases.

These differences were also reflected in the survey, with Coordinators indicating that a typical case in their area could range from under two months, to over 12 months. Similarly, respondents indicated that in some areas it was rare for families to return to the programme, whereas in others it was more routine.

While the possibility that some areas are more effective and efficient than others cannot be discounted, the more likely explanation for these differences is that they are working with families with different levels of need.

Evidence

Documents

The national Strengthening Families referral criteria are as follows:

The Strengthening Families process is appropriate if:

> *a Strengthening Families approach will provide added value to family's desired outcomes, and is in the best interests of the child, young person or family/whānau.*

> *the child, young person or family/whānau has multiple needs that would benefit from coordinated multi-agency support, but do not require a statutory response or intensive intervention.*

more than one agency is required (or should be involved) with the child, or young person and their family/whānau (Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

Interviews

Early intervention?: Almost every interviewee raised that cases were more 'complex' than they had been in the past, whether that be in comparison to 20, 10 or even five years ago; most even used that specific word. This is how one Coordinator described the families that they now worked with:

> *Complex. Some of the families have a lot of issues going on for them – social as well as a lot of families that are blended and not together; so families that are apart; where there communication is struggling. Yeah, very complex. A lot of the children seem to have mental health issues.*

Other reasons suggested to explain this complexity included: the thresholds for accessing services from most government agencies have risen over recent years and this has had a flow-on effect on Strengthening Families; a growing acceptance across government, NGO and Iwi organisations that more complex cases benefit from a collaborative approach such as that provided by Strengthening Families; families with either a parent or a child with a significant disability, which are usually by definition complex, particularly benefitting from this model; and success with more complex cases or particular subpopulations giving rise to similar referrals. As well as impacting on the length of the time families were in the process, the number of agencies involved, and the amount of coordination required, one interviewee commented that more complex cases also called for skilled facilitation.

> *I think we've always been lucky that the Coordinators here have always been very strong facilitators, which with the increasing complexity that we're seeing in recent years with our family situations, is very, very important; it's not just chairing a meeting, it's often mediation conflict resolution.*

While there was a consensus that cases were *generally* more complex, for some this had resulted in a change of focus. As another interviewee stated:

> *Historically, it used to be quite an early intervention model. I think it's lost that focus…The families that are being worked with are more complex. So, Strengthening Families used to come in and it was easy – and that sounds terrible – but the complexity of what people were experiencing was nothing like the multiple issues that they've got now.*

Another interviewee echoed this point:

> *When I started five years ago I think we then definitely still spoke of Strengthening Families being an early intervention model and tool within the community… So, over those years while we've still been here there's a definite increase in need and complexity.*

However, responses to some individual high needs cases differed. One interviewee stated that they were:

> *[We are]…careful not to take extremely high needs cases… If…[my manager] feels Oranga Tamariki actually do need to do more work, and it is quite a high need case, and it wouldn't be appropriate for Strengthening Families, then she will not accept the referral.*

Others drew attention to the national threshold exclusion requirement on 'intensive intervention'. However, for some there was more acceptance that much of their work needed to be more 'intensive' than conventional 'early intervention'.

Process length: While some variation in the time that each Strengthening Families process takes is expected, some of the differences were marked. This was further complicated in some areas where longer-term cases could be re-categorised as new referrals. One interviewee reported that "most [Strengthening Families cases] are one meeting and a follow up", while another interviewee stated that while "The idea of it [Strengthening Families] was a very short-term intervention of three to six months, now two years is normal". While it is possible that the first of these areas is more efficient or effective than the second, another possibility is that each area is working with different types of cases and levels of need. A third possibility is that, in the first situation, agencies are continuing to collaborate outside of the structure of Strengthening Families.

While interviewees were clear on the referral thresholds in their area, there was less clarity on when some cases should be closed. As one interviewee stated:

> *We had a big discussion about do we close after a year, [as] we've achieved the goals from our initial referral? However, in that year of course a multitude of other issues have cropped up and are just as concerning…we are doing preventative early intervention stuff because if we went away for six months we'd probably come back in and we'd have to really put in some emergency stuff* (Chair interviewee).

Related to this, another interviewee stated that they welcomed re-referrals:

> *We have a number of new referrals that come back. That could be seen as a negative but I actually don't see it as a negative. Some families that come back to us are as a result of being successful the first time and they come back with other issues or problems. They trust in the Strengthening Families process…they come back and go through a process again.* (Local Management Group Proxy interviewee)

Survey

Coordinators were asked about their perception of **typical** case length. As shown in Figure 2, there was a wide range of responses ranging from less than two months to 12 months or more. These are marked differences.

Figure 2: Coordinator's perception of typical Strengthening Families case length in their area
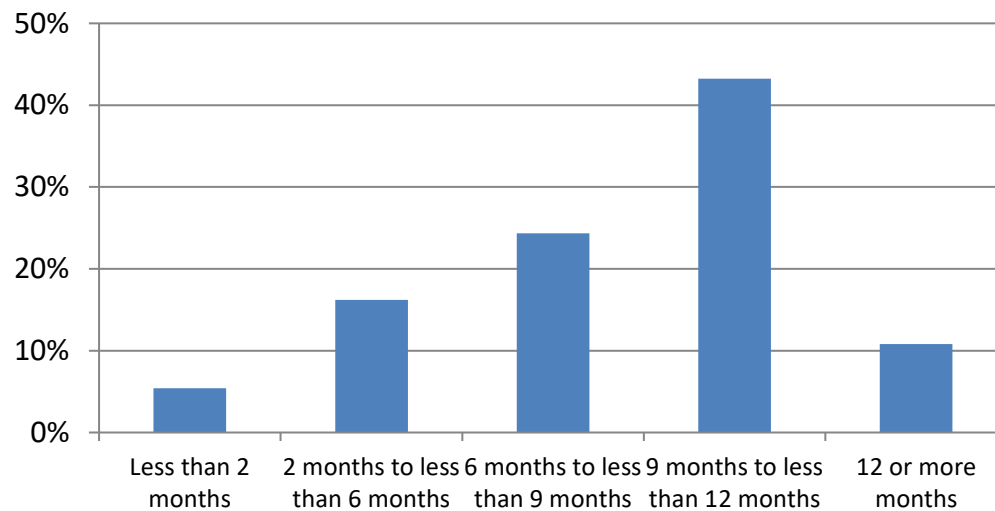
Coordinators were also asked an open-ended question about the extent to which families/whānau might return to Strengthening Families and there was a wide range of responses. For some Coordinators it was rare:

> *I only have had one case come back round* (Coordinator respondent)

> *Perhaps I have 3 families who have come back* (Coordinator respondent)

> *Relatively uncommon thing here* (Coordinator respondent)

> *This will happen occasionally, often when the whānau/family have new goals* (Coordinator respondent).

For others it was a regular occurrence:

> *Strengthening Families can be used 2-3 times for family/whānau* (Coordinator respondent)

> *I have one family who have returned to Strengthening Families 6 times and others who return 4-5 times* (Coordinator respondent)

> *10-15%* (Coordinator respondent)

> *Probably about 20%* (Coordinator respondent).

However, there was a clear consensus across Coordinators that at the time of referral the family/ whānau needs were affecting children. As shown in Figure 3 below, 11 percent of Coordinators reported that whānau needs were moderately affecting children, while 89 percent reported that those effects were more serious.

Figure 3: Coordinator views on whānau needs and impact at time of referral

Moderately affecting tamariki 11%

Seriously affecting tamariki 89%
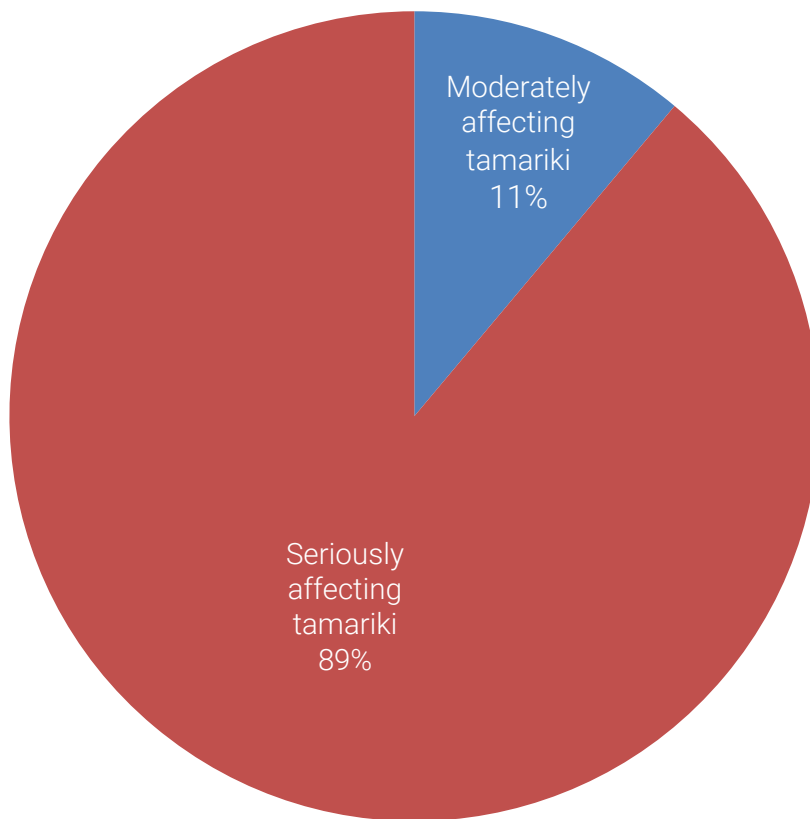
4: Many Local Management Groups are struggling – some no longer exist

> Key points:
>
> – Founding agencies no longer consistently provide support to Local Management Groups.
> – Some resources are out-of-date and consequently there is uncertainty about the purpose, role and function of Local Management Groups.
> – Strengthening Families providers find ways to co-operate with other local services and are often well-viewed locally.

Summary

Some Local Management Groups appear to be meeting both national and local expectations and providing strong governance. They also present as collaborative, well-led and supported locally by both government and non-government agencies; some of these also had a strong strategic orientation. However, this is not the norm, with most struggling, and seven or more areas no longer have a Local Management Group at all.

A central challenge for many areas was an apparent lack of Local Management Group (and operational) support and engagement from the three agencies or their predecessors that originally co-developed Strengthening Families, i.e. Oranga Tamariki, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health through District Health Boards. Similarly, involvement by most of the other eight signatory government agencies was generally low. While this study's research interviews and the survey were limited to those with a Strengthening Families role, the overall picture that emerges from the data is that Strengthening Families is no longer sufficiently relevant to some of these agencies.

Another challenge was uncertainty among some chairs and Coordinators about the purpose, role, and function of Local Management Groups, and their associated accountabilities.

Evidence

Documents

While "Membership and the way Local Management Groups run is decided locally" (Strengthening Families, n.d.) there is a range of material to support the role of such groups (Oranga Tamariki, 2018; Strengthening Families, 2010; c).

However, some of this material is:

1. **Out-of-date:** For example, the *Strengthening Families Guidelines F18* (Oranga Tamariki, 2018) still refers to Regional Governance Groups and the website says there are 60 Local Management Groups in existence; this number is believed to now be 32.
2. **Inconsistent:** There are a few explicit contradictions across current documentation on the role and function of Local Management Groups, with those identified in the *Strengthening Families Guidelines F18* are significantly more onerous than those on the Strengthening Families website.

The current guidelines also indicate that there is no requirement for Strengthening Families areas to have a specific Local Management Group at all, and they can instead choose to incorporate programme governance into a "broader inter-sectorial response" (p. 14). However, whether through Local Management Groups or not, "central to the development of any interagency service system is inter-sectorial governance" (p. 13).

These guidelines for contracted Coordinator provider agencies go on to state that the *"purpose of this governance is to:*

– *identify and determine vulnerable children or young people whose families/whānau have multiple needs and require an intervention from more than one agency*
– *determine how to get people in the region working together more affectively*
– *to remove any 'road blocks' in communities that may hinder families/whānau getting access to the services they need in an integrated approach*
– *identify and determine what services are being delivered or funded in the region and how they affect each other and how they can be better used by families/whānau with vulnerable children*
– *champion the use of SF [Strengthening Families] interagency process and the transdisciplinary practice in their agencies and networks*
– *work with the providers of the SF [Strengthening Families] process to ensure the employment of suitable and appropriate staff to support the process"* (Oranga Tamariki, 2018, pp. 13-14).

Four other functions identified in these guidelines are to: set Coordinator priorities in conjunction with their employer; identify and nominate any 'lead agencies'; develop information-informed services and strategies; and assist in the selection of Coordinators.

Interviews

As stated previously, the interviews covered 18 Strengthening Families areas. Some interviewees reported that there had been recent Local Management Group changes in their areas, with two Local Management Groups disbanded (one of which may at the time of writing have been re-established as an advisory group), and five amalgamating with others to form larger Strengthening Families areas (it was not clear whether one further Local Management Group had been disbanded or amalgamated). Notably, none of these 18 areas had taken up the option to provide governance through an existing or new "group developed to achieve a broader inter-sectorial response" (Oranga Tamariki, n.d., p. 14).

Communication, cooperation or collaboration?: From the interviews, and as shown in Figure 4 below, Local Management Groups could be differentiated by the extent to which they had cumulatively moved beyond 'communicating' with each other, to 'cooperate', or even 'collaborate', for the betterment of Strengthening Families, and children and families/whānau in the locality.

Figure 4: Local Management Group focus

Interviews revealed that most Local Management Groups appeared to have a 'cooperate' focus'. As well as sharing statistical and other information on how Strengthening Families was operating locally, taking information back to their own agencies, updating each other on developments, and acknowledging support for the Coordinator at these meetings (a communication focus), they might also:

– more stridently champion Strengthening Families and the power of collaborative interagency working,
– address referral or other system blockages, and
– agree local changes on how the programme should operate.

Local Management Groups did not necessarily have a strong strategic focus, although several chairs indicated that this was something they wanted to move towards. One chair expressed this as: "I am trying to get us to move away from looking back over our shoulder, to looking forward".

There were some Local Management Groups and members that had moved beyond 'cooperating'. They were actively 'collaborating', and in doing so were also meeting more of the nationally determined local governance role expectations and more clearly operating as entities in their own right. Collaboration took a variety of forms including: stronger strategic planning or the development of a regular Local Management Group strategy; provision of associated practice or other forums; network development and training; addressing gaps in, and any issues with, the provision of services; developing and implementing projects; and/or taking a stronger role in the management of Strengthening Families-related personnel and their priorities (e.g. one Local Management Group has an operations group that manages day-to-day matters).

There were some other Local Management Groups that only had a communications-focus:

> *There used to be anything up to 20 people would turn up to a meeting giving a bunch of statistics. We went around the room and said what was happening in our organisations, had a coffee and went home. A waste of time.*

Uncertainty about purpose, role, function, and accountabilities: Several interviewees indicated that they were uncertain about the Local Management Group's purpose, role, function, and accountabilities; this included some more recently appointed chairs. Most said that they had had little or no contact with Partnering for Outcomes at National Office and few had had any contact with regional Partnering for Outcomes advisors either. While there was a joint meeting of Coordinators and Local Management Group chairs in one region in 2018, there have been few if any opportunities for chairs to meet and discuss their roles since the demise of the Regional Governance Groups. As one Local Management Group chair put it:

> *I think the Regional Governance Groups were a good thing too…because that was often a place where the chairs could get to meet up and talk with the other chairs as well.*

It would also seem that the Regional Governance Groups were a means by which Family and Community Services was able to recognise the value of the Local Management Group chairs, giving the role more visibility and "a bit of status" (Chair interviewee); issues could be escalated; and a shared understanding of strategy and accountability could be developed.

A minority of chairs were however clear on the purpose, role and function of their particular Local Management Group; these tended to have experienced Strengthening Families in its various forms over the years. While some chairs were more strategic than others, a critical difference was in the extent to which they saw themselves as the 'group' that 'managed' Strengthening Families 'locally', as reflected in the term 'Local Management Group'. One interviewee was particularly clear that the Coordinator was accountable to the Local Management Group (as well as supported through mentoring from them as well):

> *[The contracted Coordination provider agency] provide the employment services of having an office space, providing a home base for them and payroll and all that sort of thing. But, the Coordinator works for and supports the Local Management Group, which can get a bit confusing for people at times* (Chair interviewee).

However, in another area, a Coordinator provider manager reported that they saw no purpose, role, or function for Local Management Groups. They had, in agreement with their Partnering for Outcomes Advisor, 'dispensed' with the Local Management Group altogether and were in the process of establishing an advisory group instead. The rationale was that:

> *Local Management Groups didn't have any real control over what was happening. I employ the worker; they report to me and they don't report to a Local Management Group. Therefore, what is the role of the Local Management Group?*

This tension, ambiguity, or arguably 'patch protection', was sometimes apparent in other Local Management Groups too. Another chair stated:

> *I had a push for a bit more [Coordinator] accountability. But I got the word that I was probably pushing into [other people's] territory…which was fair enough. They have their accountability, so I'm trying to find that halfway place.*

Agency commitment, meeting frequency, and attendance: Interviewees reported that Local Management Groups variously met monthly, six-weekly, two-monthly, or quarterly. While some had a clearly defined membership (and one chair described having had a formal induction process), the membership of many other Local Management Groups seemed to be more fluid.

Some Local Management Groups were able to regularly attract significant numbers of committed members with sufficient seniority from a range of appropriate agencies. One Coordinator stated that her Local Management Group had "excellent attendance…20 to 25 people; people love coming to that, it's a great networking opportunity". There seemed to be a perceived value in attending these Local Management Group meetings, that went beyond any sense of duty.

However, other Local Management Groups were struggling in terms of whether:

– the appropriate range of agencies was regularly represented
– those attending could or would meaningfully contribute towards the governance or development of Strengthening Families, and/or
– whether people would turn up for meetings at all.

One interviewee stated that:

> *The Local Management Group numbers have been dwindling for a while. Everyone gets the emails, gets the reports, and then three people turn up… I entice them with morning tea sometimes, and still they don't come. They come at Christmas time to have mince pies, but it's hard to get them there during the year. In fact, the last three meetings have been cancelled, because we had so many apologies* (Coordinator Interviewee).

On the one hand, in some areas either the District Health Boards, the Ministry of Education or Oranga Tamariki were cited as agencies who were not engaging with Local Management Groups. Some interviewees also commented that this was somewhat ironic given that

Strengthening Families was launched by these ministries, but overall involvement by the other eight signatory government agencies was also reported to be low.

As one of the Local Management Group chairs put it:

> *This is where the government can actually be one of the worst offenders for undermining Strengthening Families…It really depends on who's managing where; who's been restructured and how. Probably the one that seems to cause the most problems for Strengthening Families is because of the constant restructuring as well.*

On the other hand, in other parts of the country representatives from these same agencies could be leading members. Sometimes the issue seemed to be a high turnover of managers and loss of continuity rather than necessarily a lack of agency support. However, one Local Management Group chair reported that even when their agency representatives attended, they were increasingly non-managerial and/or secondees.

Survey

Seven areas with no Local Management Group: According to the Coordinators' survey responses, 20 percent (7) of the current 32 Strengthening Families areas do not have a Local Management Group. A Coordinator respondent in one such area wrote:

> *Our organisation is involved in [and leads] the whole process – Lead Agency, coordination and facilitation. My issue is that we do not have a Local Management Group to support and advise from a governance perspective. Admittedly it can be considered less bureaucratic as we can make decisions at an agency level.*

Chairing Local Management Groups: Somewhat surprisingly, there was some disagreement between Coordinators and chairs on whether or not their Local Management Group had a permanent chair, with Coordinators reporting that less than 50 percent of areas had one, while chairs reporting that 80 percent were permanent. Given the survey's very high response rate, it would appear that several Coordinators and their respective chairs had a different perception of what was happening in their area.

Attendance: One Coordinator survey responder made a point of advising that attendance at their Local Management Group was very good:

> *We have a long-established Strengthening Families history in the area, lots of schools and agencies refer to Strengthening Families and trust in the service. The Local Management Group meetings and general Government/NGO meetings I attend are well supported.*

Meeting frequency: Another significant difference that emerged from the survey was in relation to meeting frequency, with groups variously meeting between one and four or more times over the first half of 2019 (6 months) as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Scheduled Local Management Group meetings

Strengthening Families: Research on how the programme operates
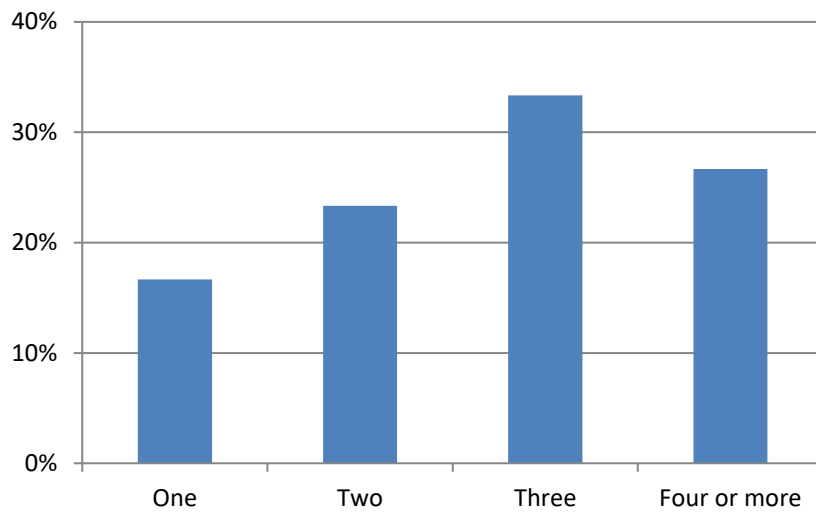
5: Significant variation in Coordinator role and functions

> ### Key points:
>
> – The focus of Coordinators can vary by person and circumstance – with some spending much of their time on family-focused tasks, some on administrative activities, and others focused on facilitation.
> – The top three reported tasks were: (1) meet families/whānau before first Strengthening Families meeting; (2) organise the initial Strengthening Families meetings; and (3) organise subsequent Strengthening Families meetings and any reviews.
> – A wide variation in salaries was also reported.

Summary

Coordinator roles vary considerably and some roles are quite different from others in practice. The role has five key dimensions as follows:

– engaging with families/whānau at the beginning of the Strengthening Families process
– formally or informally facilitating family/whānau meetings
– developing the Strengthening Families professional network
– promoting Strengthening Families in the community
– undertaking administrative tasks.

While Coordinators operate across all of these dimensions, for reasons that may include history, job design, local circumstances of lead agencies and independent facilitators, and/or Coordinator preferences, individual roles focus more on one or two of these dimensions than others. Perhaps related to this, there is also appears to be a wide variation in qualifications and salaries.

Figure 6: Approaches to Strengthening Families Coordinator role
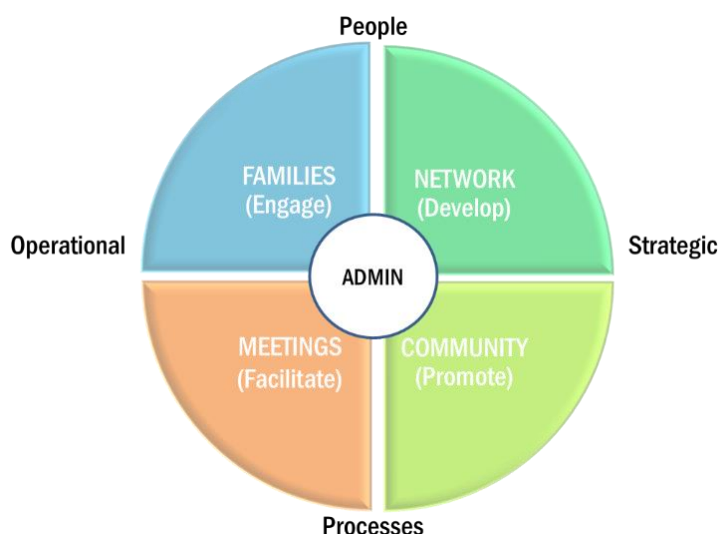
Evidence

Interviews

Role orientation: While all Strengthening Families Coordinators do a broadly similar job, there are some significant differences in either emphasis or substance. From the interviews, and as presented in Figure 6 above, two key dimensions emerged: the extent to which Coordinator roles are:
- operational versus strategic, and
- people or process focussed.

For each Coordinator interviewed, two of the above four quadrants tended to be dominant. While all Coordinators had to do administrative tasks, for some this was a more central part of their role.

Families: A Coordinator with a focus in the Families area is likely to carry out early home visits to most or all families, to help more fully engage them in the process. They will also clarify and augment any information on the wider family's strengths and issues. These Coordinators are likely to have a strong focus on assessment, and determining whether Strengthening Families is the best pathway for a particular family at this time. They may instead negotiate with other agencies on the family's behalf for the provision of a direct service, or an alternative formal or informal case management pathway.

Meetings: A role with a strong meeting focus, will convene most or all initial, review and final family meetings, and negotiate dates and venues with the family and key agencies. The aim here is to get as many of the 'right' people around the table as possible, and give the initial plan the best chance of success. Invitees who cannot attend but may have an important contribution to make, may be encouraged to submit written material or join part of a meeting by phone.

Network: A network-focused Coordinator will focus on the quality of professional relationships with, and between, contributing agencies and professionals. These Coordinators may also 'recruit' specific agencies or individuals to fill gaps in provision, convene a local practice network, and/or organise or lead training events.

Community: Those whose role has a strong focus on promoting Strengthening Families in the community and ensuring good knowledge and understanding of how it operates, will spend a lot of time in meetings with prospective referrers and potential Strengthening Families network members, or organising promotional events for them.

Range of Coordinator circumstances: From the interviews, it was obvious that there was also a wide variation in Coordinator circumstances. Two of the Coordinators were employed by Oranga Tamariki, while all of the others were employed by NGOs. Some had only been in post for six months, compared to another who had 15+ years' experience in Strengthening Families. Most were in sole posts, with only a few placed in a team. A few had social work or similar qualifications. Some roles were more autonomous than others and so had more control over their role parameters.

Salaries: While some Coordinators were clearly on 'professional' salaries, it was reported that some others were not. Coordinator salaries are negotiated individually by Coordination Providers, one interviewee stated that it was her understanding that Coordinator salaries

ranged from over $60,000 a year for employed by Oranga Tamariki to under $20,000 a year for some of those employed part-time by a Coordinator provider. Several interviewees talked about this as an equity or pay parity issue.

Several interviewees reported that salaries were usually 'tied' to the Strengthening Families Coordination Provider contracts with Oranga Tamariki, and before them MSD Community Investment. Many of those employed by Coordination Providers had reportedly not received an annual salary increase for several years.

Survey

Coordinators were asked to identify tasks they undertook from a predefined list, and to select the three where they believed they spent most of their time. This demonstrated that most of the tasks were identified by most Coordinators, but it is important to recognise that none of the activities were selected by all Coordinators. For example, from the first five entries in Figure 7 we see that:

– 8 percent of Coordinators do not meet whānau before the initial Strengthening Families meeting.
– 12 percent of Coordinators do not organise initial Strengthening Families meetings.
– 16 percent of Coordinators do not organise subsequent Strengthening Families meetings.
– 22 percent of Coordinators do not provide immediate support and services.
– 24 percent of Coordinators do not undertake the facilitator role at reviews.

Figure 7: Coordinator activities – top 3 and all[3]

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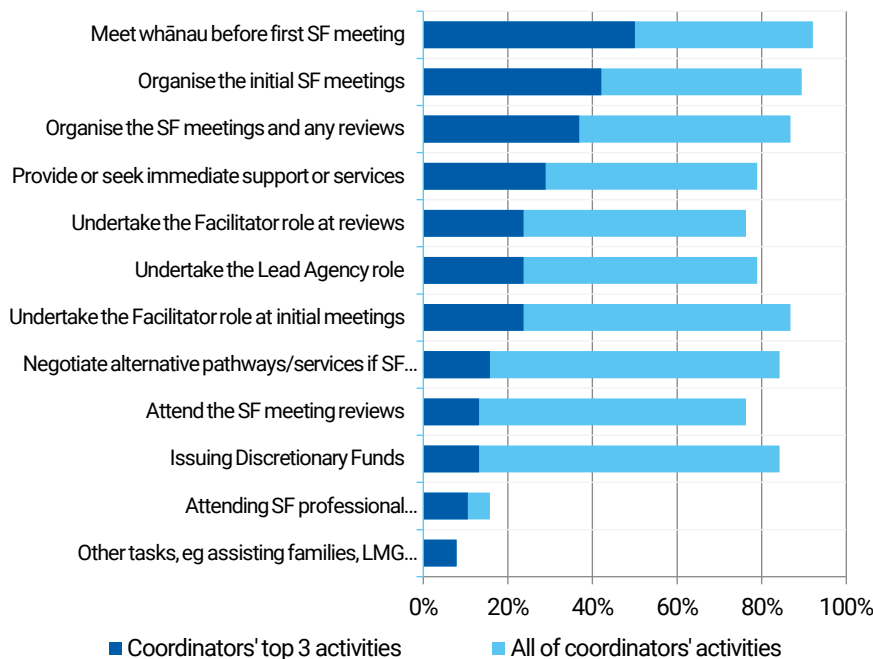
[3] *For the last category ('Other tasks, eg…') in Figure 7, the proportion for both 'Coordinators' top 3 activities' and 'All of coordinators' activities' is the same, i.e. 8 percent.*

These differences become more apparent when we look at the range of activities in Table 2 that Coordinators indicated they spent most of their time on. Further analysis identified three Coordinators whose top three, largely related, activities were entirely different from each other. The first of these Coordinators appears to be strongly family-focused, the second administration-focused and the third facilitation-focused.

Table 2: Three Coordinators and the three activities where most time spent

Coordinator A (Family-focused)	Coordinator B (Administration-focused)	Coordinator C (Facilitation-focused)
– Meet referred families/whānau ahead of any first Strengthening Families meetings – When referrals aren't accepted, negotiate alternative pathways or services – Provide or seek immediate support or services (for families/whānau in crisis)	– Organise initial Strengthening Families meetings – Organise Strengthening Families meetings and any reviews – Issue Discretionary Funds	– Undertake the Facilitator role at initial meetings – Undertake the Facilitator role at reviews – Attend Strengthening Families professional meetings/ supervision/training

6: Variation in local delivery

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Key points:

– There is considerable local variation in how Strengthening Families operates, in terms of both supply and demand.
– The introduction of the Children's Teams created doubt about the continuation of Strengthening Families.
– Government agency involvement is variable and limited in some locations.

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Summary

As well as previously discussed issues in relation to the existence of a Local Management Group and Coordinator role and function, there are other variations across areas in terms of:

– how referrals are dealt with
– managing too many or too few referrals
– cover arrangements when Coordinators are ill or leave
– some agencies not being willing to act as Lead Agencies
– levels of support from agencies, and system gaps.

Evidence

Interviews

Dealing with referrals: From the interviews, the Strengthening Families referral process appears to be either managed by Coordinators alone, or jointly with their Coordination Provider manager. Only one area reported operating a referrals panel system involving other network members.

Too many or too few referrals: In some areas demand for Strengthening Families can exceed supply. High numbers of referrals might reflect: normal or seasonal variations; organisational or community changes; trends; promotional activity; or even success. In such instances Coordinators may: establish a waiting list; prioritise cases; negotiate alternative services/pathways; temporarily undertake more or all of the client-facing work themselves; and/or seek additional further (unfunded) support from their agency, lead agency contract holders, or wider Strengthening Families network.

For some areas, the opposite problem can occur, with supply exceeding demand; here getting sufficient referrals was described as a struggle. Some interviewees reported particular challenges when the Children's Teams were introduced, which they saw as leading to widespread doubt about the continuation of the Strengthening Families programme. A number of different responses to the challenge of low referrals have been put in place: Coordinators can step up their promotional activity or target a particular agency; and/or Local Management Group members can check their own agencies' referral pathways.

Another interviewee said that when they were below contracted volumes recently they considered that the actual number of cases was in fact a fair and reasonable reflection of

their complexity. They successfully negotiated with Partnering for Outcomes for their volumes to be reduced by almost half for the following year, for the same funding.

Coordinator cover: While Coordination Provider agencies can usually provide continuity when a Coordinator leaves, sometimes other measures need to be put in place, e.g. temporarily employing an ex-Coordinator, or passing referrals directly to lead agents. However, one instance was reported where there was no Coordinator in place in an area for six to eight months, and in another area a gap was cited when there was a change in Coordinator Provider. In both instances many families/whānau were reported to have missed out on receiving a Strengthening Families service.

Unwillingness to become a Lead Agent: Another reported challenge, requiring a more system-specific response, was that some agencies would not refer to Strengthening Families if there was an expectation that they would have to contribute to the Strengthening Families Network as a Lead Agency:

> *They like Strengthening Families but then they don't; they don't want to…do some other person's work as they might see it as. They've got their own work to do…and they haven't got time to run Strengthening Families. That's kind of one of the areas that I think need certainty to improve on and be quite open, and a bit more transparent.*

In other instances, professionals misunderstood the purpose of Strengthening Families, assuming that they could refer families to it with little or no ongoing involvement from them (what one Coordinator colloquially referred to as "dump and run"). Local examples included the Family Court, paediatricians and Oranga Tamariki.

Funded lead agency roles are undertaken by some NGOs organisations who are paid on a fixed-fee basis per case to perform the case coordination function (as opposed to any casework). In other instances, the role may be undertaken by a Coordinator or by an NGO on an unfunded basis. Staff from government agencies have never been paid to take on a lead agency role, and some individuals were reported to have been barred from doing so by their individual agencies. Whether funded or not, there is often a reluctance to take on this role.

Extent of involvement from agencies: The involvement of government agencies in Strengthening Families meetings was variable, and some areas reported it as being very limited. Responsibility for Strengthening Families usually, but not always, seemed to fall to the NGOs. Non-attendance was seen as most serious when District Health Boards, Oranga Tamariki, or Ministry of Education representatives were invited but did not attend. Some other 'signatory' government agencies were also reported as very difficult to engage in the Strengthening Families process.

It also appeared that engagement could be as variable within agencies as it was across agencies, with the nature of local relationships being particularly important. In one area both Oranga Tamariki and public nurses were deemed to be very effective meeting attendees and contributors, while another area had several Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour as active members of their pool of facilitators.

Some interviewees recognised that there could be a 'disconnect' between their respective 'target groups' (and sometimes referral mechanisms) and Strengthening Families, particularly for highly specialised services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Similarly,

because of the distances involved, attendance by small specialist national disability organisations could also be problematic. Some Coordinators were able to involve some of these specialists in the process by phone or with written reports.

On a different point, one interviewee suggested that Oranga Tamariki social workers should probably not participate in Strengthening Families meetings given its statutory child protection remit and responsibilities, and said that, "having Oranga Tamariki involved actually confuses things in some ways".

7: Strengthening Families does attend to needs of many families/whānau including Māori, and there is promising evidence of effectiveness

Key points:

– Where families/whānau stay engaged with Strengthening Families and attend a planned final meeting, end-of-service satisfaction surveys are positive. However, information on effectiveness is much more limited for other families/whānau
– Barriers to ongoing engagement included 'pressured' referrals and/or families/whānau in crisis or with high levels of need; these were often Oranga Tamariki referrals.
– Strengthening Families was noted to have the potential to work positively for Māori, with iwi social services involved in many networks and Kaupapa Māori approaches sometimes accommodated.
– While some family/whānau needs may be conductive to a short- to medium-term inter-agency response, others may not.

Summary

Coordinator survey respondents viewed the top presenting needs for children as education, behaviour, learning disability, and mental health, whereas for parents/caregivers they were mental health, isolation, housing, and finance.

While few of these are necessarily short-term issues, interviewees were generally very positive about the extent to which Strengthening Families benefits the wide range of families/whānau that it serves. This was also reflected in the administrative information collected from Coordinators or Lead Agents on family/whānau progress at the point of case closure, as well as the professionals involved. Most of the families/whānau who attended a planned final Strengthening Families meeting and completed their 'satisfaction' survey questionnaire were generally very positive, saying that they 'strongly agreed' with the affirmative statements about their experience of Strengthening Families (with 'agreed' being the second most popular response). Across all cases closed over 2018/19, 643 had some, most, or all of their planned actions completed, according to Coordinators' records. However, no information is collected on the outcomes of these or other families/whānau beyond their engagement with Strengthening Families.

While the majority of interviewees believed that Strengthening Families was appropriate and effective with Māori, some felt that more work was needed in this area. Asian families/whānau appear to be under-represented in the programme. It was not possible to draw any other firm conclusions from the SF Reporter ethnicity data.

Evidence

Survey

Figure 8 below shows that Coordinators consider that the needs children present with largely cluster around education, behaviour problems, learning disability or mental health.

Figure 8: Coordinator views on top five needs presented by children/tamariki
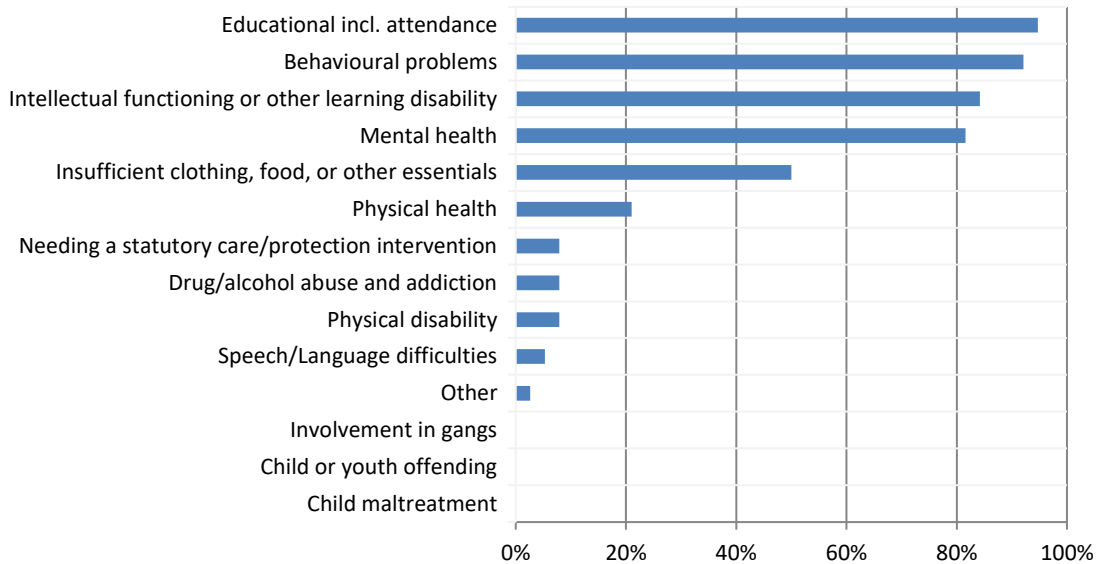
Coordinators' views on parent/caregiver needs, as shown in Figure 9 below, cover a wider spectrum in comparison to children, with mental health, lack of social connectedness, and housing, financial and employment issues being the most numerous.

Figure 9: Coordinator views on top five needs of caregivers/parents
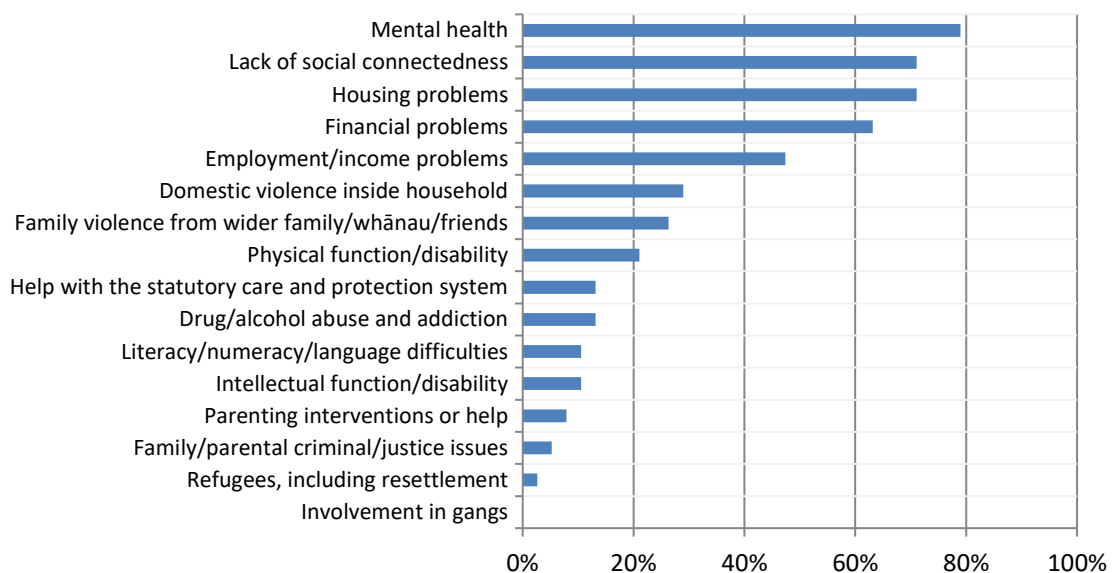
Figures 8 and 9 together highlight the importance of understanding how the presenting needs of children and those of their parents/caregivers, interact.

Interviews

Working well: Strengthening Families was widely reported by interviewees as working very well operationally, with high levels of satisfaction expressed by families.

While some commented that there was still scope for further improvement, one Local Management Group chair expressed the views of many in saying that the "feedback that we get from families is always positive and the feedback that we get from other providers has always been positive as well". Similarly, one Coordinator stated that:

> *I think it works really well. When I meet with families I talk to them about how families really enjoy the process, and they do mostly. Probably 95, 98 per cent of families really enjoy the process, and a lot of families don't want it to end…it's really lovely to reflect on where they were at the beginning, and when we're closing the case; how far they've come.*

Only two geographical areas were identified where interviewees said Strengthening Families was struggling to get sufficient referrals and buy-in from local professionals.

Engagement issues with some families/whānau: Several interviewees reported that family engagement was limited with some referrals, and this would usually impact on Strengthening Families' overall effectiveness with them. This was often said in relation to Oranga Tamariki referrals, or where families may have felt that they were being pressured to participate and/or were in crisis.

Some interviewees said that family/whānau engagement could be improved by ensuring that potential referrers had good information that they could clearly discuss with potential referees, which could in turn help to ensure the effectiveness of any subsequent contacts with Strengthening Families. However, as mentioned previously, in at least one area assessment of the family/whānau capacity to engage was one of the local eligibility criteria. In another area it was suggested that potential referees consider family/whānau engagement and their ability to meaningfully participate in Strengthening Families meetings when deciding whether to make a referral in the first place.

Deemed by some to be effective with Māori but others felt more work required here: Interviewees reported that Strengthening Families is generally working as well for Māori as for the rest of the community. Several interviewees emphasised that some Māori families, for privacy reasons, actually preferred engaging with non-Māori organisations:

> *Māori and others [including Pacific Peoples and refugee communities], often prefer to work with people that they do not know, and rightly or wrongly many fear that some confidential information about them may be shared with others in their community.*

That said, many 'mainstream' NGOs have a strong Māori focus, Māori staff, and in one or two instances Māori teams. Better engagement with Māori had been a priority for many Strengthening Families areas, and most interviewees could point to activities that they or the Local Management Group had undertaken in relation to this. Most areas had Iwi social services or other Māori organisations as part of their Strengthening Families network, and several had one or more Māori organisations as funded lead agencies. In one area it was reported that Strengthening Families can accommodate Kaupapa Māori approaches. This

area also had a three-way project underway between Strengthening Families, Oranga Tamariki and Iwi.

> *We have quite a few facilitators that work using a Māori model of practice. And we're really open, like families choose which way they want to go…So, if somebody wants to work in a Kaupapa Māori way, then we can find facilitators and agencies that do that. We've also got agencies that will walk alongside us and teach us. People might not start working in a Kaupapa Māori way, but then change their mind and want to, and we've got the capacity to do that as well.*

In another area, the Coordinator reported having almost daily contact with an Iwi social services organisation to help determine whether they or Strengthening Families (or Family Start) was better placed to help a family, as "some of the families [and referring agencies] don't know what's out there – what other supports are out there".

However, interviewees generally recognised the need for more work to be undertaken, and for closer engagement with Māori. One thought that "For Māori, I think it really does need a lead agency and a facilitator that is Māori". Another stated that:

> *I'd like to see significant change there…Historically, our Strengthening Families meetings happen on a site, and in a particular way. I'd love to see us develop some workforce capability with our local Rūnanga, and for strengthening families to be held on marae, and for there to be kai and conversation.*

Administrative data

Issues and outcomes: When Strengthening Families cases are closed, whether or not closure is planned, Coordinators or Lead Agencies assess progress of each family/whānau against 51 subcategories spanning:

- – Economic situation/Housing
- – Education and Skills
- – Employment
- – Health
- – Safety/Justice
- – Social connectedness

Figure 10 summarises case closures during 2018/19, and Coordinators or Lead Agents assessed most families/whānau as showing on average either a 'significant improvement' (41%) or a 'slight improvement' (35%), while numbers showing a 'slight deterioration' (2%) or 'significant deterioration' (2%) were both very low. While neither high nor low, a reasonable proportion of families/whānau were recorded as 'no change' (20%). Appendix 3 includes the national-level *SF Reporter* data on issues and outcomes in full.

Figure 10: 2018/19 Coordinator/Lead Agency assessment of progress when case closed

- Significant improvement
- Slight improvement
- No change
- Slight deterioration
- Significant deterioration

Strengthening Families: Research on how the programme operates
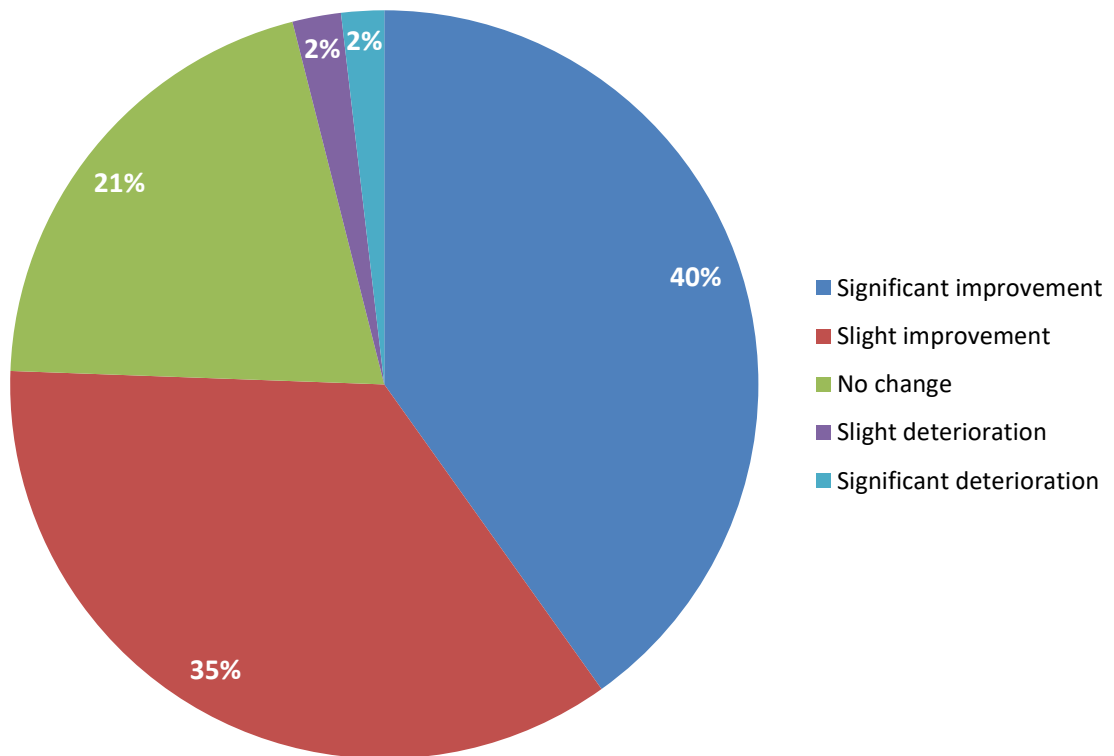
Agency process questionnaires: Professionals attending a planned final Strengthening Families meeting are invited to complete a questionnaire about the process. Based on data available from *SF Reporter* the 2018/19 (1,129 responses) results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: 2018/19 Agency process questionnaires received

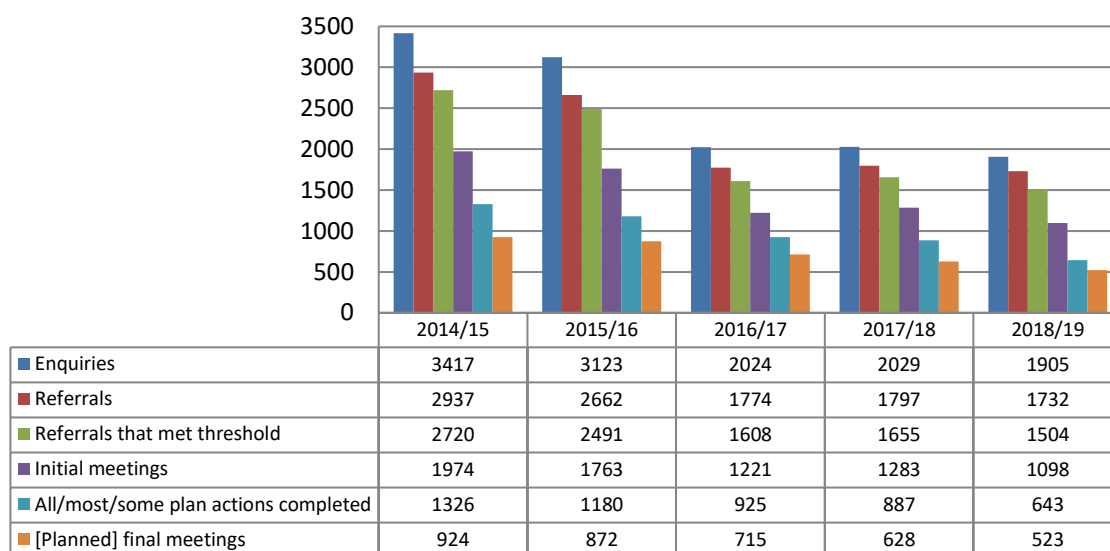|	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not answered
The lead agency's coordination of meetings	845	265	15	2	0	2
The lead agency's coordination of the plan's actions	814	285	26	2	0	2
The lead agency's communication with other agencies	814	284	24	4	0	3
Case management group's performance in identifying tasks and implementing plan	812	288	24	2	0	3
Case management group's ability to work collaboratively	824	271	29	1	0	4
Case management group's respect for family/whānau's needs and choices	893	271	16	0	0	3

The results are overwhelmingly positive, although it should be noted that the response rate appears to be low with only about two responses for each family/whānau that had a planned final meeting.

Family/whānau satisfaction questionnaires: As part of the arrangements for a planned final meeting, families/whānau are also asked to complete a short questionnaire. Arrangements appear to vary as to whether this is a single questionnaire for each family, or one for each attending family/whānau member, and so the response rate is unknown. Overall, family/whānau express very high levels of satisfaction. For example, most family/whānau members who attended a planned final Strengthening Families meeting and completed a 'satisfaction' survey questionnaire, were very positive and indicated that they 'strongly agreed' with the provided affirmative statements ('agreed' was the second most popular response).

It is important to recognise that these responses relate only to families with a planned final meeting, as this is what triggers the *SF Reporter* system to generate a questionnaire. Respondents represent a minority of family/whānau who continue with Strengthening

Strengthening Families: Research on how the programme operates

Families to a planned final meeting and figures exclude the relatively large number of families who had a final meeting that was not planned as such, for example, where those present deem that sufficient progress has been made that such that a further meeting is not required. As shown in Figure 11 below, these family/whānau satisfaction scores also exclude families/whānau who withdrew early on in the process, or where there was a Strengthening Families inquiry or referral and they chose not to engage.

Figure 11: Strengthening Families enquiries through to planned final meetings

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Enquiries	3417	3123	2024	2029	1905
Referrals	2937	2662	1774	1797	1732
Referrals that met threshold	2720	2491	1608	1655	1504
Initial meetings	1974	1763	1221	1283	1098
All/most/some plan actions completed	1326	1180	925	887	643
[Planned] final meetings	924	872	715	628	523

As part of the final report that is prepared for all cases where there was an initial Strengthening Families meeting, data is collected on whether all, most, or some planned actions were completed. Figure 11 above shows that across all cases closed in 2018/19, 643 were deemed to have some, most, or all of their planned actions completed.

Māori: While *SF Reporter* does not generate data on the extent to which Māori are represented in the programme, some limited ethnicity information is available on where an initial Strengthening Families meeting has been held. Of the 2,524 children (including young people and young adults up to the age of 25) listed as part of a family/whānau where an initial meeting was held during 2018/19, Māori was selected as one (of up to three provided) ethnicity for 1058 children. This was lower than the corresponding figures of 1255 in 2017/18 and 1291 in 2016/17. By way of comparison, and with the same caveats, NZ European/Pākehā figures were 1248 children in 2018/19, 1433 children in 2017/18 and 1375 children in 2016/17.

Due to *SF Reporter* design and reporting issues, particular caution needs to be exercised when interpreting these figures. It should be noted that while 2837 ethnicities were selected for the 2524 children in 2018/19, which would seem to suggest that a single ethnicity was selected for most children, we do not know which children had more than one ethnicity listed, how many children had no ethnicity data recorded at all, and how many children had 'other' selected (see below).

Other ethnicities: As the *SF Reporter* list of possible ethnicities is limited to 10, and the number of times that 'other' is selected (as the inputted ethnicity) is not stored for reporting purposes, all that can be suggested for 'other' ethnic groups is that those with an Asian ethnicity are

likely to be significantly under-represented. In2018/19 59 children were recorded as Indian, 32 as Chinese, and nine as Korean. Other than South African (which is one of the 10 listed ethnicities) there is no information on Africa, South America or Middle Eastern ethnicities, and in particular no information on families from Syria, Columbia, Burundi, Eritrea, Djibouti and Bhutan who may be refugees. (Beaglehole, 2013).

8: The Strengthening Families operating model

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Key points:

– While there is limited evidence on how Strengthening Families is meant to work, interviews suggested that the Strengthening Families framework fostered and supported local collaborative working with wide adoption of the seven Strengthening Families Principles.
– Formal case conferencing at the Early Intervention end of the spectrum is relatively uncommon internationally, where such approaches are largely used for higher-risk cases.
– Strengthening Families is a principles-based national framework rather than a programme: many of its key operating assumptions remain untested.

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Summary

Strengthening Families is a structured interagency case conferencing system for the coordination of services to families/whānau. While it operates differently in different areas, the current operating model has 10 core components:

– Structured interagency case conferences with an early intervention (or a prevention or intensive support) orientation.
– Seven core Strengthening Families principles.
– A variety of explicit and implicit assumptions.
– Contracts with NGOs to provide a Strengthening Families Coordinator service for an area or part thereof, with specified case volumes.
– Use of a mandatory national web-based case management and reporting system.
– A referral form, Coordinator manual and associated national information and guidance.
– A Local Management Group.
– The Strengthening Families website.
– Local networks of agencies and professionals including lead agencies and facilitators.
– The passion and commitment of the professionals involved.

However, there is limited evidence on how Strengthening Families is meant to work, and what underpins positive family/whānau change, whether assumptions are valid, the extent to which Strengthening Families is effective nationally, and whether the various ways that the programme is organised and delivered is better for families/whānau in some areas than in others.

However, the interviews would suggest that the Strengthening Families framework does foster and support local collaborative working, while the seven Strengthening Families Principles have been widely adopted.

For the purposes of this research report, a logic model has been developed as Appendix 12 on the basis of currently available documentation.

Evidence

Literature scan

Strengthening Families is unique: Three overseas programmes also called 'Strengthening Families have been identified in Australia, the UK and the US, however, they each have a very different focus to the New Zealand programme. From the scan of international literature and evidence-based websites, Strengthening Families appears to be unique, and no similar national early intervention interagency case conferencing system has been identified. Information on similar overseas programmes is included in Appendix 13.

Overseas jurisdictions, such as the four in the UK, have a history of 'early intervention' programmes, a strong interagency ethos, and the existence of formal interagency 'case conferencing' systems. However, formal interagency case conferencing in the UK tends to either be reserved for instances where a child is at risk of being, or has been, abused and/or children in care, rather than early intervention. The Hardiker model, widely used in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, is shown in Figure 12 (Owens, 2010). Pauline Hardiker and colleagues developed this model to help understand different levels of need within populations of children.

Figure 12: The Hardiker Model
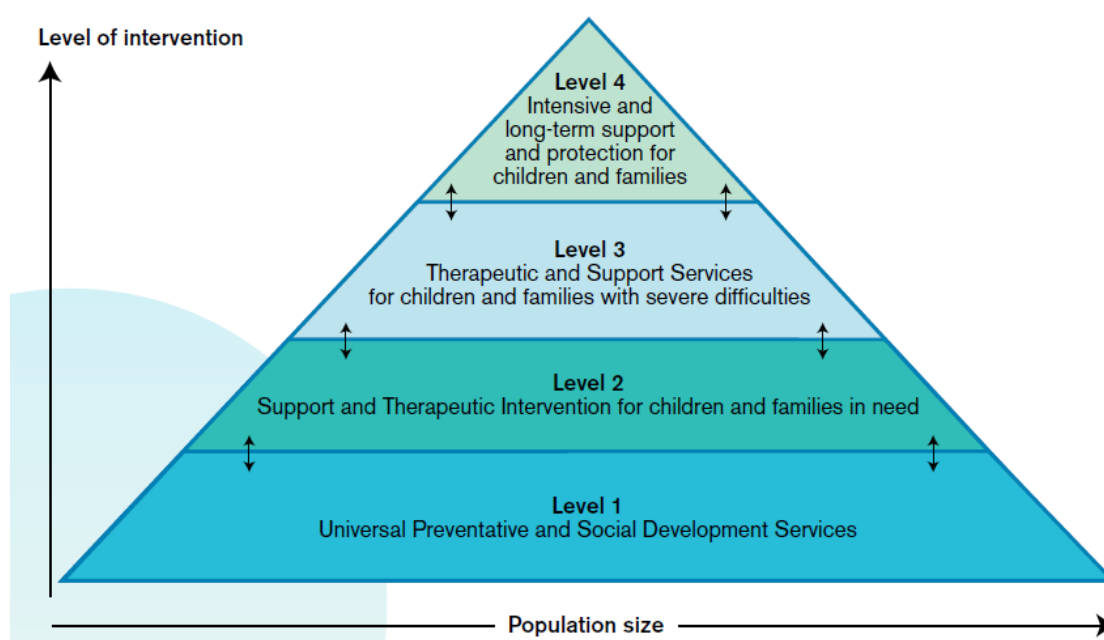
Any early intervention interagency 'case conferencing' is likely to be more informal, involve a fewer number of people that the family already know, is often attached to a service that they are already using, e.g. a family centre or school, and be for those families at levels one or two.

Formal interagency case conferencing in the UK is likely to be limited to those at levels three or four.[4]

Documents

Strengthening Families' systems and resources: Strengthening Families is supported with a range of nationally developed systems and resources, and the *SF Reporter* web-based case management and reporting system. This system is used by Coordinators (only Coordinators have access to *SF Reporter* - Coordinator provider managers and Local Management Group chairs do not have direct access to the system), and use of it and the associated forms is mandatory. Other Strengthening Families systems and resources include:

- referral form
- coordinator manual (also includes some additional resources)
- guidelines
- Strengthening Families website
- NGO contracts for the provision of Coordinator services (not sighted).

These resources have a strong focus on processes (e.g. initial case conference, one or more review case conferences and final case conference), and roles (e.g. Coordinator). There are also references to guidelines "setting a minimum standard" (for example, Oranga Tamariki, n.d., p. 5), although this does not appear to have been explicitly translated into clear minimum standards.

However, beyond the important seven *Strengthening Families Core Principles* that were outlined in the background to this report, there is very little coverage of how and why the Strengthening Families model works. Neither is there mention of either Coordinators or Local Management Group chairs requiring particular competences or specific knowledge, skills or experience.

As individual Coordinator provider organisations (not Local Management Group) are encouraged to "develop a service that reflects their philosophical base, strengths, local needs and local culture" (Oranga Tamariki, n.d.), it may be that Strengthening Families is better viewed as a national framework than a programme.

Key assumptions: The following explicit and implicit programme assumptions have been identified from the documentation reviewed.

1. Strengthening Families is an early intervention initiative.
2. There is a sufficient number (but not too many) of 'target group' families/whānau in each area who meet referral criteria, are known to professionals, and are referred at the right time (or who know about Strengthening Families and refer themselves).
3. The right professionals collaboratively engage in the right way, at the right intensity, and for the right amount of time, and complete the Strengthening Families process.
4. Strengthening Families 'actively' involves, both nationally and locally, the 11 government agencies and hundreds of community-based services across the country.

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[4] Three other models are included in the accompanying literature review – see Strengthening Families literature review, Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre, 2020.

5. Strengthening Families is effective with families/whānau in the target group, including Māori and most will:
   – want to engage with Strengthening Families;
   – benefit from such a structured inter-agency case conferencing system; and
   – be comfortable with agencies collaborating with each other and sharing information.
6. Families/whānau lead the Strengthening Families process.
7. Strengthening Families will likely be a better option for families/whānau than alternative programmes or pathways that may be available in an area.
8. Strengthening Families contributes to needs-based local solutions and service development.

While some of these assumptions are clearly valid, others may vary by area, are untested, or are not valid at all.

Neither piloted nor nationally evaluated: As previously mentioned, while based on a local Waitakere initiative, Strengthening Families was never piloted (Ministry of Social Policy, 1999) and there is no evidence that it has ever been systematically evaluated at a national level. Indeed, the only identified evaluation that has been was a one-year cohort study undertaken in 2007-2008 in which families/whānau had a follow-up interview some months after their first interaction. However, this evaluation was based in Dunedin only, and did not examine in any depth how or why Strengthening Families works.

Interviews

Enabling local collaboration: While some interviewees did believe that the structured case conferencing system was important to Strengthening Families' effectiveness, what was more important to most was that Strengthening Families provides a clear (local) structure (and permission) for professionals to routinely come together to work collaboratively for the benefit of clients. As long as they, and their managers, saw value in the process and were willing to participate, Strengthening Families provided regular opportunities to collaborate with others under the auspices of a set of supportive core principles, and could lead to a better understanding of other professionals, strengthened professional relationships, and, through the LMG, participation in opportunities to identify and address gaps in services.

Strengthening Families core principles: Without exception all interviewees, whether experienced or new coordinators, chairs or proxy chairs, discussed Strengthening Families in ways that were consistent with the programme's core principles. Professionals embodying these core principles in their work together (and in their individual work with families/whānau) is likely to be a significant factor for those many families/whānau where Strengthening Families is reported to work.

Assessing referrals: A few of the more experienced and qualified Coordinators placed a lot of emphasis on assessing new referrals and determining whether Strengthening Families was the best option for each and every family/whānau that met their referral criteria. Where necessary, they worked closely with other agencies to determine whether there were alternative programmes, services or pathways that would better meet their needs. This suggests a heightened understanding of who in their area Strengthening Families worked best for, how it worked, and in what circumstances. In some other areas, referrals were either

overseen or undertaken by a Coordinator provider manager, who presumably would also have had a good overview of local provision.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

Strengthening Families is a structured collaborative interagency case conferencing system for the coordination of services to families/whānau. Since its introduction in 1997 and the subsequent establishment of Strengthening Families Coordinator roles and Local Management Groups across the country, the model has fundamentally remained largely unchanged. However, there have since been significant national changes in the purpose and context of Strengthening Families and who it serves, the agencies involved in delivering it, its profile and importance, and how it is nationally led and supported. Over that time Local Management Groups, Coordinator provider organisations, and Coordinators have adapted to these national changes in a variety of ways.

As an early intervention model, Strengthening Families is trusted and valued by many professionals, communities, and families/whānau and, outside of any outcomes evaluation, there is promising evidence of effectiveness.

Research implications

Five implications from this research study are briefly discussed below.

Strengthening Families update, re-orientation and overhaul

The contemporary process of developing large-scale child welfare programmes and service systems, with a focus on design collaboration, the use of programme and practice evidence, and managing change, is very different to the process of 20 years ago. There is a need to update, re-orientate and overhaul Strengthening Families as a national model, strengthen its capability and capacity, and raise its profile. There is also a need for better integration, both operationally and strategically, with related interagency prevention, early intervention, and intensive support initiatives at the practitioner, local, region and national levels. Consideration might also be given to expanding Strengthening Families so that interagency case conferencing is not the only pathway available to families/whānau.

National re-engagement with other government agencies

Oranga Tamariki needs to re-engage with other government agencies on Strengthening Families and its future direction, perhaps through the Child Wellbeing Chief Executives' Group or the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan (OTAP)[5]. These organisations contribute annual funding to Strengthening Families yet appear to have little or no formal say in how the programme operates.

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[5] See the Children's Amendment Act 2018,
www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2018/0058/11.0/LMS131636.html

Strengthening Families: Research on how the programme operates

National strategy and reporting

The research findings also point to the need for an agreed and regularly updated national Strengthening Families strategy, implementation monitoring, and public annual reporting.

The Strengthening Families community

There is potential for the experience and passion of the Strengthening Families community, for both early intervention and interagency working, to be harnessed by Oranga Tamariki in the design and development of new services.

Implications for further evaluation

This research found promising evidence of effectiveness of Strengthening Families and researchers believe it constitutes sufficient evidence to inform Oranga Tamariki thinking about programme enhancements, without further evaluation of the current model and implementation. Findings also indicate that the high degree of variability in the model is not conducive to process or outcomes evaluations. However, it is recommended that any future piloting or changes to Strengthening Families be followed by implementation and process evaluations.

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APPENDICES

This report is accompanied by 12 separate Appendices and a literature scan report.

The 12 Appendices cover:

- All available SF Reporter national-level reporting data for the period 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019 (Appendices 1, 2 and 3);
- Interview participant information sheets, consent forms, interview guides and survey questions (Appendices 4 to 10);
- Strengthening Families' model characteristics 1997 to 2019 (Appendix 11); and Strengthening Families' logic model (Appendix 12).