

**Report on an exploratory study of  
the experiences of Strengthening  
Families clients in six selected  
regions**

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### **Disclaimer**

This report represents the views of the authors and does not necessarily represent the views of the Ministry of Social Policy.

## ***Executive summary***

### **Background and approach to the research**

Strengthening Families (SF) is a process set up to promote interagency collaboration in the provision of social services within a community. The objective of the interagency collaborative model (IACM) of working with at risk families is to get all agencies involved with individual families working together in a more cohesive, co-operative and co-ordinated manner with the goal of improved family outcomes. Working with a family via Strengthening Families interagency case management specifies three factors to be met before the case proceeds:

- That there be multiple agency<sup>1</sup> involvement
- That the family consents to being involved
- That there is a belief by agency workers involved that a better outcome for the family through interagency case management is possible

Ideally, an initial case meeting is held between agency representatives and the family after the family has consented to being a part of the interagency process. A case plan is developed by consensus at this first meeting and a lead agency is identified to continue working in a case management role with the family. Over time the goals of the case plan are worked on and reviewed until completion of the goals has been reached and the case is concluded.

The main purpose of this exploratory research was to ascertain the views and experiences of families regarding their involvement with the SF interagency case management process. The key objectives were to explore:

- The range of experience across clients of the SF Process
- The clients' level of satisfaction with the SF Process
- What has gone well and what could be improved

The main topics covered in the interviews were:

- Awareness and understanding of the name "Strengthening Families"
- Awareness of the SF Process
- The SF Process experienced by clients
- Outcomes of the SF Process for clients
- Appropriateness of the SF Process, including cultural appropriateness
- Level of satisfaction with the SF Process
- Complaints and issues
- Suggestions for improvement

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<sup>1</sup> The term "agency" is used in this report to refer to any organisation or group working with children or families, including schools, medical practitioners, legal practitioners and community/voluntary organisations.

A total of 35 in-depth interviews were held with SF clients in six sites across the country - Whangarei, South Auckland, Waitakere, Rotorua, Christchurch and Timaru. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1). Some interviews were held with individuals, while others were with pairs or groups of three.

It should be noted that this was an exploratory study rather than a comprehensive evaluation. The purpose was to identify issues that could be the focus of a fuller evaluation of the SF Process.

## **Main research findings**

### ***Best aspects of the SF Process***

- The SF IACM concept received strong approval<sup>2</sup>. Parents<sup>3</sup> felt that it was, at least in principle, an excellent idea for all agencies involved with a family to meet to plan effectively for their needs
- It provided some hope and a boost in morale to families who were frustrated in trying to find a service to meet their needs
- It enhanced the likelihood of agencies cooperating with one another
- Parents became more confident in approaching agencies once they had met a representative in person
- It provided a greater likelihood of identifying a family's actual problems and needs accurately
- It provided a forum where an agency who had not previously acknowledged a problem could be encouraged to do so
- The SF meetings provided families with a sense of optimism, as long as some essential services were being delivered
- It had the potential for keeping agencies accountable to their offers of service delivery

### ***Issues in the SF Process***

The main issues in the SF Process were:

- Lack of clarity amongst parents as to the terms of reference and boundaries of the SF Process
- Lack of adequate consultation with parents about the purpose of the SF Process, the purpose of the initial meeting, its goals, and who would attend

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<sup>2</sup> A similar conclusion was found in a postal survey of health, education and welfare sector employees who had received some Strengthening Families training. Almost all respondents were, in principal, supportive of inter-agency collaboration. The great majority agreed that as agencies work together more closely, the outcomes for children in families at risk will improve (*Strengthening Families. Views on Inter-agency Collaboration and Collaborative Case Management: A Report on the Results of a Survey. Prepared by Heleen Visser, Ministry of Education. June 2000.*)

<sup>3</sup> In this report the term "parent" is used generically to include all those in loco parentis.

- Lack of opportunity for parents to bring more than one support person to the meeting
- Lack of awareness amongst agency workers as to the fragility and anxiety levels of parents attending meetings and facing a large number of professionals at once
- Poor facilitation of initial SF meetings
- Failure to provide minutes of the meetings to parents
- Lack of follow-up by lead agents
- Lack of follow-through by agencies agreeing to provide services
- A negative association of the SF Process with the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services (Child, Youth and Family), which operated as a disincentive and source of significant anxiety for many people in their participation in the SF Process<sup>4</sup>

### *Success factors*

The main factors contributing to the success of the SF Process are:

- The skills of the SF Coordinator in each region and their effectiveness in promoting the SF Process, facilitating meetings, training others to facilitate, and communicating with agencies
- Appropriate usage of the SF Process by initiating agencies
- Effective promotion of the SF Process to agencies in the region and to the general public
- Adequate briefing and consultation with parents prior to meetings
- Effective facilitation of meetings
- Effective follow-up by both lead agents and agencies agreeing to provide services
- The availability of services identified as needed in SF meetings
- Whether some resolution of the family's issues occurred

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<sup>4</sup> Amongst the people who had heard of Strengthening Families, many believed that it had "something to do with" Child, Youth and Family. The main reasons for this were one or more of the following:

- The SF Process was housed in or close to Child, Youth and Family offices
- The Coordinator was working together with a Child, Youth and Family worker
- A Child, Youth and Family worker had initiated the meeting
- A Child, Youth and Family worker was involved in the meeting

Even where there was no Child, Youth and Family involvement, people frequently thought that there was a Child, Youth and Family connection with SF, because of the office location, or even because "it's about children". While this apparent connection was not of concern to some people, for many it had been, in varying degrees, an initial obstacle to their using the SF Process. And for some, it had remained a significant barrier to feeling comfortable with the SF Process.

Several people commented explicitly that they had been and still were reluctant to use the SF Process because of the apparent association with Child, Youth and Family, which was perceived as an agency which is not delivering an adequate or appropriate service.

## **Families' suggestions for improvements to the SF Process**

Families who took part in this study suggested that the SF Process could be improved by:

- Clarifying bona fide uses of the SF Process for agencies
- Ensuring that the SF Process is initiated with the willing participation of parents
- Briefing parents thoroughly and consulting them appropriately about the SF Process and the goals of the meeting
- Offering parents the opportunity to bring more than one support person to the meeting
- Minuting meetings in as much detail as necessary to clarify exactly what was agreed to in the meeting, in language that parents can understand, and disseminating minutes to parents within two weeks of the meeting taking place
- Advising (in writing) all parents and their support people who participate in the SF Process of a complaints procedure
- Providing interpreters for parents who are not fluent in English, and including those interpreters in the consultative planning of the meeting
- Catering for the cultural needs of the parents
- Having the SF meeting facilitated by a person who is independent of the agencies involved in the meeting
- Having facilitators who are appropriately trained and skilled specifically in the SF Process, so that they can facilitate effectively
- Giving parents a genuine opportunity to comment on the selection of lead agent, and clearly explaining that role to them before they suggest a preference
- Ensuring, where possible, that the lead agent has the agreement of those present at the meeting that the lead agent has the authority to request accountability from agencies agreeing in that meeting to provide services
- Providing a "back-up" system for parents to cover situations where the lead agent does not fulfill the requirements of their role

## **Possible areas for further research or review**

- Reviewing aspects of the SF Process structure and management
  - training of SF Coordinators
  - training of SF facilitators in regions
  - relationships amongst agencies involved in SF cases
- Scoping the introduction of family advocates to support families in the SF Process
- Examining the appropriateness of the SF Process to Maori, and to other cultures
  - use of SF Process with people who have limited English language
- Examining the ways in which initiating agencies are using the SF Process
  - motivations for initiating SF Process
  - criteria used for deciding to initiated SF Process

- Exploring the reasons why clients decline the SF Process, or why they drop out of the SF Process after one meeting
- Identifying issues for SF Coordinators
- Examining the reasons for lack of follow-through of agreed services by agencies participating in SF meetings
- Assessing what difference the SF Process makes to outcomes for families over time

## ***1. Background to the research***

### **The Strengthening Families initiative**

Strengthening Families (SF) is a programme set up to promote interagency collaboration in the provision of social services within a community, and is the title given to a range of strategies and initiatives at both central government and local community level. The overall goal of Strengthening Families is to improve, through collaborative service delivery, life outcomes for children and young people whose social and family circumstances put good health and welfare outcomes at risk. The following have been defined as desired outcomes of Strengthening Families:

- Better health
- Improved educational attainment
- Better job prospects
- Improved ability to form positive relationships

Families at risk have been defined in Strengthening Families documentation as –

*“Families who are experiencing multiple and persistent disadvantages which compromise family functioning and increase the chances that their children may have poor long-term outcomes”* (Strengthening Families Strategy: Report on Outcome Measures and Targets, 1998, p 1)

The Ministries of Health, Education and Social Policy started working collaboratively on the Strengthening Families strategy in 1997 to improve life outcomes for children in at risk families. All other government agency Chief Executive Officers, where staff work with at risk families, have since made a commitment to the Strengthening Families strategy.

A number of community components now comprise the Strengthening Families strategy. These include: Interagency Case Management (IACM) for families at risk; Family Start; Social Workers in Schools and regionally developed and driven preventative initiatives. The Chief Executives of the Ministries of Health, Education and Social Policy have made a commitment to implement, monitor and report on the progress of the Strengthening Families strategy within their sectors.

### **Strengthening Families Interagency Case Management (IACM)**

The objective of the interagency collaborative model (IACM) of working with at risk families is to get all agencies involved with individual families working together in a more cohesive, co-operative and co-ordinated manner with the goal of improved family outcomes.

Working with a family via Strengthening Families interagency case management specifies three factors to be met before the case proceeds:

- That there be multiple agency<sup>5</sup> involvement
- That the family consents to being involved
- That there is a belief by agency workers involved that a better outcome for the family through interagency case management is possible

Ideally, an initial case meeting is held between agency representatives and the family after the family has consented to being a part of the interagency process. A case plan is developed by consensus at this first meeting and a lead agency is identified to continue working in a case management role with the family. Over time the goals of the case plan are worked on and reviewed until completion of the goals has been reached and agreed upon and the case is concluded.

## **Local Coordination and Interagency Case Management**

Coordinated, collaborative service delivery to families is an idea which promotes:

- Effective use of existing services and resources that are currently being delivered to at risk families in the community
- Local identification of gaps in services and dialogue with government funding agencies on how the most critical gaps may be filled.

Local Coordination is based on two assumptions:

- That family functioning has a profound impact on outcomes for children
- That a collaborative approach across sectors – involving families and agencies together in support systems – is more effective than unilateral, separate interventions

At each SF site, interagency case management is managed by a Local Management Group which sets out the processes and procedures that are intended to help identify and meet the needs of at risk families. There are five features of the IACM Process delivery function of Strengthening Families that differentiate the process from previous practice. These include:

- The use of a formal interagency protocol
- Family involvement in the process, with their explicit consent
- A lead agency is identified in each case
- A single case plan is developed for each case
- A formal review is conducted for each case

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<sup>5</sup> The term “agency” is used in this report to refer to any organisation or group working with children or families, including schools, medical practitioners, legal practitioners and community/voluntary organisations.

SF Site Coordinators have been appointed at twenty-five sites across the country and their role includes facilitating the coordination and collaborative aspects of the interagency case management process. Each Strengthening Families site operates slightly differently, as do the Coordinators. Some Coordinators facilitate family case management meetings themselves, while others coordinate facilitators to do that particular work. However, the primary work with families is conducted by the frontline workers, or lead agents, who manage the family case.

## **Purpose of the research**

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to ascertain the views and experiences of families regarding their involvement with the SF interagency case management process.

### ***Key research objectives***

The key objectives were to explore:

- The range of experience across clients of the SF Process
- Clients' level of satisfaction with the SF Process
- What has gone well and what could be improved

Specific objectives for Maori were to explore:

- Any differences in the experience of Maori compared with those of non-Maori
- Maori clients' level of satisfaction with the SF Process
- What has gone well and what could be improved for Maori families involved in the SF Process

### ***Key question areas***

The main topics covered in the interviews were:

- Awareness and understanding of the name "Strengthening Families"
- Awareness of the SF Process
- The SF Process experienced by clients
- Outcomes of the SF Process for clients
- Appropriateness of the SF Process, including cultural appropriateness
- Level of satisfaction with the SF Process
- Complaints and issues
- Suggestions for improvement

## ***2. Approach to the research***

### **Design**

In-depth interviews were held with SF clients in six sites across the country - Whangarei, South Auckland, Waitakere, Rotorua, Christchurch and Timaru. Criteria for site selection were the:

- Number of families going through the SF IACM Process per month
- Proportion of Maori families going through the SF IACM Process
- Presence/ absence of a SF site Coordinator

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1). Some interviews were held with individuals, while others were with pairs or groups of three clients who either knew one another or were willing to join in a group discussion. When offered the option, several people voiced a preference to speak with the researcher one-to-one.

### **Sample**

#### ***Clients***

A total of 38 people were interviewed, 29 of those face-to-face and nine by telephone. Most were women; only five were men. Approximately half were sole parents, and these were all women.

Of the total, the majority (23) were Pakeha. Of the nine who identified as Maori, only three were in areas other than Whangarei. In addition, one Samoan, one Niuean and one Iraqi were included. Ethnicity is unknown for three of the participants.

The majority of those interviewed were aged 30-40. Approximately six were in their 20s, six in their 40s and two were grandparents in their mid-late 60s. The majority were urban dwellers, with six living in rural or semi-rural areas.

### **Data collection approach**

#### ***Recruitment***

Clients were recruited for interview by SF Coordinators or the lead agents who had been involved with them. Selection was left to the discretion of the Coordinators in each site.

An attempt was made to recruit families according to the following criteria for each site - to include at least:

- One Maori family
- One Pacific family
- Two families who had had more than one SF meeting
- Two families who had not had more than one SF meeting
- Two parents under age 35
- Two sole parents
- One family with more than three children

While people recruiting attempted to meet these criteria, many families approached either did not wish to participate or, having at first agreed, then declined due to family problems which had arisen over the Christmas holiday period. The main issue for recruitment became to find enough families who were willing and able to participate.

### ***Interviews***

Interviews were informal, following a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1). They were approximately one to one and a half hours in length, and were held mostly in offices within government departmental buildings. The majority of interviews were held during the day, but some were held in the evenings.

### ***Recording of data***

Clients were asked for permission to tape record interviews. Comprehensive interview notes were also made during or immediately following the interviews, as appropriate.

### ***Koha***

All clients were given an appropriate koha in appreciation of their time and information, to the value of \$30.

### ***Interviewers***

The interviewers were two women (one Maori, one Pakeha) and one man (Maori) experienced in interviewing women and families.

### ***Confidentiality and other ethical issues***

Informed consent was obtained from all research participants.

## **Limitations of the methodology**

The research was intended to be exploratory rather than comprehensive. The intention was to identify issues that could inform the design of a future evaluation of the SF Process.

### ***Recruitment***

Clients were not recruited consistently across sites, so it is not valid to draw comparisons across those sites' service provision. Nor were they recruited according to any particular set of criteria (e.g. range of age, sex, ethnicity, number of children, relationship of caregiver to child/ren, etc.). In addition, recruitment was undertaken by SF Coordinators and lead agents, rather than by an independent person. As a result, recruitment may be biased towards the inclusion of those people who were feeling sufficiently positive towards the lead agent or SF Coordinator to agree with that person's request that they consent to an interview.

In addition, most people recruiting selected only people who had stayed with the SF Process for a considerable period, so the data may be skewed towards those people who felt sufficiently satisfied with the SF Process to remain with it.

### ***Sample***

The sample included only clients of the SF Process. While the researchers did meet briefly with several Coordinators and some lead agents, they were not interviewed as such in any systematic way. As a result, only the clients' perspectives are included in this report, without complementary information from others involved in their respective SF Process experiences. It should be noted, therefore, that the report presents the views of some members of only one group of stakeholders in the SF Process.

## ***Research findings***

### ***3. The clients and their reasons for being involved with Strengthening Families***

#### **The clients**

The clients interviewed for this research included both women and men, a wide range of ages, and people of divergent socioeconomic status. However there were some patterns apparent in the people interviewed. The majority were women, Pakeha, and on limited incomes. Many of the women were on benefits, but a significant number were also working either part-time or full-time.

For the most part the person interviewed was the child's parent; two were grandparents and two others were informal foster parents. While slightly fewer than half were sole parents, many of the women who did have partners felt that their partners were relatively uninvolved in caring for their children and in some cases contributed actively to the problems they were facing.

These parents and caregivers were dealing on a daily basis with a range of problems which often took hours of each day to manage and frequently exhausted and depressed them. While these situations were acute for a few people, most had been dealing with chronic or escalating problems for a number of years.

#### **Reasons for involvement in Strengthening Families**

##### ***The referral***

In the majority of cases, the suggestion for a Strengthening Families (SF) meeting had come from an agency worker. Agencies referring most frequently appeared to be schools, community organisations (e.g. Birthright, Barnardos), health workers and the Department of Child Youth and Family Services (Child, Youth and Family).

A few people had self-referred, having heard of SF either through a local newspaper article or through a friend who had been involved in the process. These people felt that the SF initiative should be better advertised to both the public and to other agencies, since the agencies that they had been working with had either not known of or not suggested the opportunity to them.

Parents' interviewed had clear perceptions of the motives that agencies had for proposing a SF meeting. The majority believed that the agencies were well motivated, and saw their motives as being to:

- Assist the parent to find a service when none was being offered
- Assist the family to streamline the services they were receiving
- Help agencies involved with one family to work more effectively together

Most often the agency workers initiating SF meetings were people who were relatively new to working with the particular family and had identified a clear service gap or need for a more appropriate service.

However others felt that the SF Process had been used to force them into:

- accepting services that they did not want and believed were unnecessary or inappropriate; or
- working with agencies whom they believed were offering an inadequate or inappropriate service.

In several instances parents believed that agency workers who had been working with a family for some time had used the SF Process as a strategy to get them to participate in a service which the family saw as inappropriate for them.

Two separate parents felt that an agency worker had arranged a SF meeting in order to “*offload us*” onto another service.

### ***The presenting issues***

From the parents’<sup>6</sup> perspectives, the problems for which they became involved in the SF Process were:

- Gaps in service availability
- Inappropriate service delivery
- The unwillingness of an agency to continue providing services to them
- Pressure from an agency (most often Child, Youth and Family)

The family problems affecting the people interviewed covered a wide range, including medical/health, legal, behavioural and social problems. The difficulties reported most frequently were:

- Children with ADHD or autism
- Sexual, physical or emotional abuse or neglect of children
- Behavioural problems with children, especially in relation to school contexts (e.g. truancy, marijuana use, bullying)
- Medical problems (e.g. cerebral palsy, epilepsy)
- Mental health problems, amongst both parents and children

In the majority of families there were multiple issues, for example:

- Families with more than one disabled child
- Custodial as well as abuse issues
- Behavioural problems compounding medical/health problems

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<sup>6</sup> In this report the term “parent” is used generically to include all those in loco parentis.

- Behavioural issues as well as parent's mental health issues or inability to manage

For many parents, these various problems were exacerbated by poverty and substantial difficulties managing on a benefit. Many parents spoke of their own difficulties in averting depression, especially when services were denied to them or became unavailable (often apparently because of lack of funding), or when their supports failed.

## ***4. Awareness and understanding of the Strengthening Families Process***

### **Awareness**

The majority of parents interviewed were familiar with the term “Strengthening Families”, and where they had had contact with a SF Coordinator they were aware that that person worked for Strengthening Families.

In one site, however, none of the people interviewed had heard the name Strengthening Families, nor did they know the SF Process by any other name. In this site the parents were confused about what the organisation was that was contacting them and why, or what authority they had.

Amongst the people who had heard of Strengthening Families, many believed that it had “*something to do with*” Child, Youth and Family. The main reasons for this were one or more of the following, that:

- The SF Process was housed in or close to Child, Youth and Family offices
- The Coordinator was working together with a Child, Youth and Family worker
- A Child, Youth and Family worker had initiated the meeting
- A Child, Youth and Family worker was involved in the meeting

Even where there was no Child, Youth and Family involvement, people frequently thought that there was a Child, Youth and Family connection with SF, because of the office location, or even because “*it’s about children*”. While this apparent connection was not of concern to some people, for many it had been, in varying degrees, an initial obstacle to their using the SF Process. And for some it had remained a significant barrier to feeling comfortable with the SF Process. One parent confided to the researchers that she had initially thought the request by her lead agent to attend an interview with us (which was to be held in the Child, Youth and Family building), might be an attempt to get her to another SF meeting where she would be threatened with having her children removed.

Several people commented explicitly that they had been and still were reluctant to use the SF Process because of the apparent association with Child, Youth and Family, which was perceived as an agency which is not delivering an adequate or appropriate service.

Several people pointed out that they had received no written information about the SF Process. Only two of the parents interviewed had seen a SF brochure, and no one else had been provided with any written information about the SF Process. All of those asked said that they would have liked something in writing to provide them with details of the SF Process, including information about “*who’s in charge*”, as an accountability measure.

## Understanding of the aims of the SF Process

Parents were mostly quite vague about the formal purpose or terms of reference for Strengthening Families. Most believed that it was “*about helping families*”, or about “*getting families back to a normal life*”.

Some people thought that it was designed to help agencies to “*get the whole picture*” about their family’s situation by getting the various agencies together. Others thought that it was a mechanism by which agencies were made to be accountable to deliver their services. This interpretation had been deduced from meetings where the relevant SF Coordinator had been instrumental in encouraging some agency to provide a service to a family which had hitherto been trying without success to obtain such a service.

Parents in one site had no idea what the origin was of the SF Process they were involved with, but figured that someone was simply organising the agencies to get together.

People’s level of understanding of the aims of the SF Process depended on several factors, including:

- Whether they had had contact with a SF Coordinator
- How empowered they felt through the SF Process to ask questions about the process and their rights
- The degree to which they had been included in decisions, such as who was invited to the meetings
- Whether they had received the minutes of the meetings
- Whether they had seen a SF brochure
- Their competence in the English language
- Whether they had been involved in other inter-agency meetings (e.g. Family Group Conferences [FGCs]) with which SF meetings could be confused

Ultimately many of these factors also depended on whether the person had had contact with the local SF Coordinator and whether the Coordinator had been personally involved in setting up or coordinating the SF meeting.

## ***5. Strengthening Families Process: the initial meeting***

### **Extent to which parents were consulted about the meeting**

There were several aspects of the meeting on which people felt, in retrospect, that they should have been consulted, including:

- The purpose of the meeting, its agenda, goals, and whether it was needed
- What would be discussed
- Who should attend
- The most appropriate venue
- A suitable time

The majority of parents said they had agreed to the initial SF meeting. However typically this had been an implied consent, by simply agreeing to the suggestions of the person organising the meeting. Few people had been given any detailed information about what the meeting would involve, so that they had not given a consent that was informed. Many people felt that they were vague about the purposes of the meeting from the agencies' point of view, but they had attended so that they could "*get something better for my kids*" or "*get some help*". This lack of clarity about the purpose of the meeting sometimes resulted in discontent and misunderstandings.

As mentioned previously, some people felt they had been coerced into attending meetings when they did not feel that a meeting was either necessary, or in the best interests of themselves or their children.

In particular, few people had been consulted about the type of information that might be shared about them in the meeting or given their specific consent to that. A few people had been surprised and in some cases upset when information was shared in the meeting which they felt was personal and should not have been divulged to the entire group.

Most people had been consulted about the time, and for the majority it was reasonably suitable. Where it was not suitable, most people made arrangements so that they could attend rather than ask for another time, because they felt that they ought to make themselves available to a meeting which they believed would be to the benefit of their children. For a few people who had full-time jobs, the coordinator of the meeting had usually attempted to set the meeting for a lunch hour, since this also worked well for most others attending. Where meetings were set for other times during the day, this timing sometimes prevented both parents from attending a meeting.

None of the parents had been actually consulted about the venue, which had invariably been determined by the person initiating the meeting. Only two people had been sufficiently assertive to ask for a particular venue - one Maori woman had asked for the meeting to be held at the local marae so that she could feel *"like I had a little bit of control"*, and another woman had asked for the follow-up meetings to be held in her own home, for the same reason. In both cases these people experienced a much greater level of satisfaction than had others with the SF Process.

Several others commented that they had felt intimidated by being in a Child, Youth and Family office for the meeting or in other offices where the environment was fairly sterile. In a very few cases the meeting coordinator had made specific arrangements for a small play space and facilities for children accompanying the parent, but for the most part this had not occurred.

Only a few people interviewed had been consulted on the actual agenda and content of discussion for the meeting. These people also experienced a higher level of satisfaction compared with others interviewed. Most felt that they had little control over what was going to be discussed.

All parents felt that they should have had a choice over who attended the meeting. However just less than half of parents had been consulted about the choice of who should, and should not, attend the meeting. Amongst the remainder were several people who had arrived at the meeting to find people present in whose company they felt uncomfortable or even intimidated, including previous spouses and agency workers with whom they had poor relationship. In these situations, these people felt unable to contribute freely to the discussion for fear that they would be criticised, put down or ridiculed.

The extent to which parents were consulted about these aspects of the initial meeting, or subsequent meetings, appeared to depend on the following factors:

- Whether the local SF Coordinator was involved in the setting up of the meeting, rather than another meeting coordinator; SF Coordinators were more likely to consult with parents
- Whether the parent had an existing, constructive relationship with the person setting up the meeting, such that they felt confident enough to ask for consultation
- Whether the initiating agency worker had coercive motives for arranging the meeting, in which case consultation was unlikely
- The personal assertiveness of the parent

All of the people interviewed had been invited to attend the meeting. However this is not a clear indication that parents have always been invited to SF meetings, as recruitment was at the discretion of the SF Coordinator in each site. One parent commented that she was told that the meeting would go ahead without her if they chose not to attend.

## Support people

Parents in three sites said that they had not been invited to bring family or other support people with them to the meeting. Without exception, these people would have liked to bring someone with them, “*just to balance it up*”, but did not believe that they were “*allowed*” to bring others. As a result, none of them had asked to bring someone.

In the other three sites, people said they had been invited to bring family, whanau or friends to support them. Typically, however, people had been invited to bring “a” person, rather than one or more. One person commented that she was told that she should limit her supports to one because space was limited due to the number of agencies who would be present. Others who wanted to bring a support person were unable to because the time conflicted with that person’s availability.

Only a very few who felt reasonably assertive were confident to invite more than one family member or friend.

Satisfaction with the process of the meeting was much higher in the sites where people were given the opportunity to bring a support person, and particularly high amongst those who brought more than one support person.

## Parents’ understanding of how the meeting would proceed

Most parents had only a vague idea of what the meeting would be like before they attended. People who had previously been involved in a FGC thought that the SF meeting would be similar to that, and were concerned that they would not be heard and that the decisions would be out of their control. Parents who had a good relationship with the person who was organising the meeting placed their trust in that person. Because of that relationship, such parents were likely to be consulted on most aspects of the meeting in advance.

However, the majority of parents had little idea of what the meeting would be like and experienced a good deal of anxiety about how they would cope with being together with a large number of professionals at the same time. People’s anxiety came from:

- Not knowing what to expect
- Not knowing who would be there
- A scepticism that it would amount to “*just another meeting*” with no useful outcome for them

And from a fear that:

- They would not understand what was happening and would be too shy to ask for explanations
- They would be attacked, accused, put down or laughed at by the agency workers

- Information about them or their family might be divulged, and cause them embarrassment or shame
- They or their family would “*look bad*”
- They would have no one to support them if the meeting “*turned against*” them
- They “*might look dumb*”

Each of these fears was grounded in some previous experience that these parents had had with individual agency workers, and often with more than one agency, so that their anxiety was heightened at the thought of being confronted by several agencies at the same time. For some, these kinds of anxieties became reality at some stage of the meeting.

Factors which assuaged these anxieties were:

- Significant consultation with them before the meeting by the person setting up the meeting
- Being invited to bring, or feeling sufficiently assertive to ask for, more than one support person to the meeting
- Having the venue of their own choice, so that they felt in control of the proceedings

At the same time, the majority of parents had raised hopes and expectations that at last “*something would happen*”. Many had been lacking essential services and were hoping that this meeting would resolve that gap and provide them with help which they needed to be able to “*live an ordinary life, like other people*”.

As a result, they managed their anxieties and went along with the hopes “*that something good would come out of it for my kids*”.

## **Parents’ experience of the meetings**

### ***Number of people who attended***

The number of people at the initial SF meetings ranged from five to 12, with an average of 8-10 agency representatives. Less than half of the parents had a support person with them.

### ***Length of meetings***

Meetings were typically one to one and a half hours long. They were often held in school lunch hours so that school staff could attend, but also because this time suited other agencies. Parents felt that meetings of this length were manageable, even for those with small children either with them or being cared for by others.

Two parents had been involved in meetings which had taken two and a half to three hours and had found these exhausting and beyond their ability to participate in fully after the first two hours. Nonetheless they had stayed because they were anxious to make sure that no decisions were made without their input, and also because they “*didn’t want to look like I wasn’t interested*” to the agency workers on whom they were relying for services.

### ***Extent to which parents felt listened to***

The extent to which parents felt that they had been offered an opportunity to speak and be listened to appropriately depended on the skills and attitudes of the person facilitating the meeting. Where the person facilitating was a SF Coordinator, or someone with good facilitation skills and a positive attitude towards the parent, on the whole parents felt that they had been treated with respect and had been heard properly.

Some people, however, felt that they had not been listened to carefully or that their needs had not been taken into account in the decision-making. Several people commented that one or more agency representatives at their meeting had been either reluctant to attend, disinterested in the discussion, defensive, or even hostile in some cases. In these contexts parents felt that they had not been properly heard by such people, and some felt that their viewpoints had been overlooked in the decisions ultimately made.

### ***Parents' satisfaction with the discussion and process of the meeting***

Parents' satisfaction with the process of the meetings varied depending on how well the meeting had been facilitated. Where the facilitator was skilled in consultative and democratic process, parents usually felt that the meeting had been constructive, even if they did not necessarily get precisely the service or result they were seeking. This kind of process was more likely to occur where a SF Coordinator facilitated the meeting, and less likely where the facilitation was undertaken by another agency worker or by someone delegated by the SF Coordinator.

With a skilled facilitator, parents felt invited and confident to say what they needed to say. Parents noted that good facilitators kept people on task and avoided tangents. These facilitators were also protective of the parents, apparently recognising their vulnerability and making sure that they were not the butt of criticism within the context of the meeting. In particular parents appreciated it when facilitators recorded the process on a whiteboard, so that the parents could reflect on what had been said and remind the group of important points which had been made and were in danger of being lost in the ensuing discussion. They also appreciated the role of the facilitator in making sure that they understood what was being said, especially when agency workers used professional terms and phrases which they did not understand well. In these meetings, parents generally felt valued and respected, and believed that their opinions and knowledge were being validated. These parents felt committed to the decisions made in the meetings and left feeling optimistic and positive, and determined to put effort into the tasks that they had been allocated.

In contrast, some parents had less satisfactory experiences in the initial meetings, and the critical factor was the lack of facilitation skills, or the attitude towards the parent, of the person facilitating the meeting. While some of these parents simply felt that the meeting had been a waste of time, two parents interviewed had felt so insulted that they had left the meeting.

The main problems encountered by parents within the SF meetings were as follows:

- Most people said they felt to some extent anxious, or intimidated, at the sheer number of professionals present at the meeting

- Many people had felt embarrassed at some stage of their SF meeting because of information about them and their family being shared in ways which were insensitive. At best, these parents felt embarrassed that such information was divulged without them having been consulted first, and without anyone asking them to describe the events, rather than having someone else's interpretation being presented. At worst, several people felt that they had been attacked, accused and criticised.
- Several people felt that the meetings had been a waste of time because the discussion was not focused and the ultimate decisions had been based on inadequate information or insufficient service options. Some people felt that the facilitator was "*out of her depth*" and unable to manage the other agency workers in the meeting.
- Several parents had been unable to understand much of the discussion because of the professional jargon used by agency workers which was not explained to them by anyone. They also interpreted this behaviour by the agency workers as rude or patronising.
- Some parents had been upset by clearly argumentative discussion amongst agency workers over who would pay for essential services.
- Two people had been unable to understand the vast majority of the process because they did not have sufficient competence in the English language. In one case no interpreter had been arranged to assist, while in the other, although an interpreter was present, they had not been consulted or briefed about the purpose of the meeting. Both of these parents felt that these oversights were the responsibility of the meeting coordinator.
- One person had been laughed at by several of the professionals present, and another had been shouted at by one agency worker.
- One person commented that the layout of chairs for the meeting had been such that she was unable to make real eye contact with some of the agency workers, because they were seated so far away from her and faced obliquely to her.

For parents who were already suffering from feelings of helplessness and depression, such experiences made them feel even more helpless and depressed. Where these kinds of problems occurred within the SF meetings, parents felt disenchanted, disrespected and alienated, and accordingly felt less motivated to carry out what they had been asked to do, as they were disinclined to believe that the agency workers would follow through with the decisions.

***Parents' satisfaction with the decisions made***

The majority of parents were either quite or very happy with the decisions made in the meetings. Most people were simply relieved that “*something was happening*” and hoped that whatever the outcome, it would help to resolve their problem situation. They also felt a sense of optimism that things were going to improve for them.

A minority were plainly dissatisfied with the outcomes of the meetings. For two people, no decision about services could be reached and the decision was to have another meeting. Both of these parents decided initially that they would not attend the second meeting, but in the event both did, rather than not be included in decisions about their family, and also to ensure that private information was not shared in their absence.

Even where parents did not feel they had been really listened to or did not feel that the decision made was the best for their children, they generally accepted the decisions which were made because they were too shy to ask for something different, or because they felt so relieved to be receiving a service that they “*didn't want to rock the boat*” by asking for something different.

In general, parents had relatively low expectations of being consulted or involved, so that most simply accepted that they would not be consulted on most aspects of the decision-making, even though they would like to have been.

## ***6. Strengthening Families Process: follow-up and review meetings***

### **Lead agent**

#### ***Selection of lead agent***

Most parents had had little choice over who was appointed as lead agent. The typical process described was that a person either volunteered or, more commonly, was nominated as lead agent and agreed to undertake the role. The parent was then asked, in that forum, if they were happy with that decision. A number of parents indicated that they felt unable to say if they were not happy with the suggestion in that context.

Most parents were unaware of what the lead agent role was, and several were unaware that this was a role emanating from the SF Process, since they were simply being followed up by one of the agencies that they had had contact with. This created confusion for some parents.

Few parents could recall any significant discussion in the SF meeting about what the role of the lead agent was, other than to “*keep in touch*” with the family, and so were not well equipped at the time to know who would be the most appropriate person. Often it appeared that there was only one person willing to undertake the role, so little choice was available.

#### ***Parents’ relationship with lead agents***

Parents’ experience of lead agents varied considerably. Many had had excellent experiences, where the lead agent kept frequent contact and worked to ensure that services were delivered as agreed. This appeared most likely to occur where the lead agent was either the person who had initiated the SF meeting, where they were the agency delivering relevant services to the family, or where the individual was particularly committed to the role.

The best relationships between parents and lead agents often occurred where the two parties already had an existing, positive relationship, because they had established a connection where they felt respected and trusted. As a result, they were strongly committed to working together in a partnership. Similarly, some individuals who appeared to be particularly committed to Strengthening Families were more likely to initiate SF processes and then volunteer to be the lead agent. These SF “champions” occurred in most sites, and their involvement usually led to good outcomes for the families concerned.

In contrast, some people did not feel that their lead agent was effective. While they might have been “*a nice person*” and well intended, this did not guarantee effectiveness in the role. Several parents believed that this was because the person had no actual authority to require other agencies to provide a service.

Where the relationship between parent and lead agent was poor, it added extra stresses to the parent’s life. In a few cases, parents had felt intimidated by lead agents.

### **Minutes of meetings**

Whether minutes of the meetings were made available to parents appeared to depend on who facilitated the meeting. Some facilitators were highly effective in this recording and information role, recording process, issues and decisions on a whiteboard so that all present could affirm those minutes, and then ensuring distribution to all parties. When this occurred, the minutes acted as a source of accountability and parents were able to use those minutes to hold agencies to services promised. However only a minority of parents had received minutes of SF meetings.

In contrast, where the facilitator either did not make comprehensive minutes detailing decision, or did not disseminate those minutes, follow-up was less likely to occur.

### **Follow-up service delivery**

For some families, follow-up occurred as promised by the agencies who had committed themselves at the SF meeting. In these cases, the families' needs were often met and the situation improved for the family. Effective follow-up was most likely to occur when:

- The lead agent was from the agency providing actual services to the family
- The lead agent had a pre-existing relationship with the agency or agencies who were to provide services to the family, and could make contact easily with the relevant contact people; this appeared more likely in smaller cities (e.g. Timaru, Rotorua and Whangarei) than in the larger ones
- The parents were relatively confident and assertive people
- The family had received written minutes of the SF meeting outlining clearly what had been promised by which agencies

The majority of parents, however, said that either some or all of the services promised in the SF meeting had not been delivered. For these parents, this was the major shortcoming with the SF system - that it had "*no teeth*" to ensure service delivery.

Parents who did not receive the services promised found it extremely difficult and often impossible to follow up on those promises themselves. The problems encountered by parents most frequently in follow-up were:

- Agencies not responding to telephone calls and messages
- Being told that the agency had not guaranteed any service, or that the service was no longer available for some reason (usually funding deficit)
- Being told repeatedly that the service would be available "soon"
- Not feeling assertive enough to contact the agencies directly, or not knowing how to do it
- Having a lead agent who was either unavailable to them or not effective in following up on their tasks as lead agent, resulting in parents having to pursue services themselves

Each of these situations meant that parents felt they had gained no benefit from the SF Process. Eventually many parents in this situation decided to give up, seeing no point in chasing agencies which were apparently not interested in cooperating with them.

## **Review meetings**

Most parents interviewed had been involved in SF for several months or longer, and the majority had experienced at least one review meeting. Their satisfaction with those meetings was a direct function of:

- What services they had received in the interim
- The extent to which those services had been effective
- How satisfied or not they had been with the outcomes of the initial meeting
- Whether the review meeting was able to affirm appropriate service action for the family

Parents viewed the review meetings as a forum for accountability, to check whether services were actually being provided. Where parents were satisfied with review meetings, it was usually because they had begun to receive a needed service and that service was making a difference to their lives. Where they were dissatisfied, it was typically because:

- They were still chasing services which were not being provided
- A planned review meeting did not occur
- The lead agent was failing to keep contact with the family, check on service follow-through or arrange meetings

People in different regions appeared to have somewhat different understandings of how often review meetings should occur. Whereas some regions were arranging review meetings as early as a month following the initial meeting, others were waiting up to three months before the review meeting was held. For parents, such a long period was too long, especially if no actual progress was being made in the service delivery. Parents appeared to be unaware that they could ask for a review meeting to be held if they felt it was necessary.

## ***7. Satisfaction with the Strengthening Families Process***

### **Best aspects of the SF Process**

Parents identified the following as the aspects of the SF Process that they appreciated most:

- The SF IACM concept received strong approval<sup>7</sup>. Parents felt that it was, at least in principle, an excellent idea for all agencies involved with a family to meet so that:
  - Everyone could receive the same, and full, information about the family, and do so without the parents having to tell their story repeatedly
  - The agencies could formulate a plan with parents for interventions which would be consistent with one another
  - The agencies could see how complex it was for parents to liaise with so many people with different perspectives and viewpoints
- They could all identify others they knew who were having problems with agencies who they felt might benefit from the SF Process.
- It provided some hope and a boost in morale to families who were frustrated in trying to find a service to meet their needs
- It enhanced the likelihood of agencies cooperating
- Parents became more confident to approach agencies once they had met a representative in person
- It provided a greater likelihood of identifying a family's actual problems and needs accurately
- It provided a forum where an agency who had been reluctant to acknowledge a problem could be encouraged to do so
- The SF meetings provided families with a sense of optimism, as long as some essential services were being delivered
- It had the potential for keeping agencies accountable to their offers of service delivery

### **Level of satisfaction**

There was a clear distinction between parents' satisfaction with the SF Process, on the one hand, and outcomes, on the other.

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<sup>7</sup> A similar conclusion was found in a postal survey of health, education and welfare sector employees who had received some Strengthening Families training. Almost all respondents were, in principal, supportive of inter-agency collaboration. The great majority agreed that as agencies work together more closely, the outcomes for children in families at risk will improve (*Strengthening Families. Views on Inter-agency Collaboration and Collaborative Case Management: A Report on the Results of a Survey. Prepared by Heleen Visser, Ministry of Education. June 2000.*)

### ***Satisfaction with the SF Process***

Although a significant number of parents did experience some issues with the SF Process, particularly the initial meeting, most were at least moderately satisfied, and many were delighted, that the meeting had generated some decisions which they saw as positive assistance for their family.

The main factors in parents' satisfaction with the SF Process were:

- The kinds of services needed by the family and whether those services were available in the locality
- Whether parents were sufficiently consulted in advance about the meeting's process, especially in relation to who would or would not attend, and what the ultimate goals of the meeting were
- The degree to which parents felt anxious or confident about how the meeting would proceed
- Whether the meeting was facilitated effectively towards the desired outcome, and so that parents were respected throughout
- Whether some resolution of the family's issues occurred or not

For parents, effective facilitation meant that:

- Parents were given opportunities to speak and was genuinely listened to
- Parents felt safe to say what they wanted to, and could rely on the facilitator to prevent agency workers from criticising or blaming them
- All participants were kept on task
- The agency representatives were required to listen to and acknowledge the parent's reality
- The agencies were required to offer services as appropriate
- The meeting was succinct and did not reach beyond one and a half hours

The main dissatisfactions with initial SF meetings occurred either when the meeting was poorly facilitated, or when the agency which was the obvious service to be providing for the family's particular need declined to attend the SF meeting. Several parents, across all sites included in the research, said that their meeting was unable to resolve their difficulty because of the inability or unwillingness of an agency to become involved. In particular, some mental health services and schools had declined to attend meetings when they were, or should have been, integrally involved with the family concerned. However other community service agencies were also occasionally unwilling or unable to attend. Where a reason was given for not attending, it was usually a lack of resource in the agency.

### ***Satisfaction with SF outcomes***

A minority of parents were either reasonably or highly satisfied with the outcomes of the SF meeting. The main factors which contributed to satisfaction with outcomes were:

- A significant involvement of the SF Coordinator in both setting up and convening the initial SF meeting
- The complexity of the family's issues and how easily they could be resolved
- The attendance at the meeting of agencies providing services needed by the family
- The willingness and ability of relevant agencies to offer *and* follow through with services
- The quality of the relationship between parents and the lead agent
- The effectiveness of the lead agent in assuring actual service delivery

The majority of parents, however, felt significantly dissatisfied with the SF outcomes. The main dissatisfactions of parents in relation to outcomes were:

- Failure of service delivery, for whatever reason (apart from still not receiving a needed service, it also meant that the meeting seemed to have been a waste of time)
- Agencies failing to make contact with parents
- Lead agent failing to keep contact with parents or respond to telephone messages
- Two or more agencies conflicting with one another in service provision
- The failure of the SF meeting to make any decisions about services

The majority of parents interviewed said that, while they had made every effort to undertake the tasks which had been allocated to them in the SF meeting, one or more agencies which had agreed to provide services ultimately failed to do so. This failure ranged from agencies providing a service which was clearly inadequate, to no follow through.

In some cases, a partial service was delivered but without adequate assistance to the parent for it to be effective.

In many cases, services were promised, but weeks or months later, despite making repeated attempts to contact the relevant service, there had been no response to the parents' calls.

### **Complaints**

A number of parents had wanted to make complaints at some stage, but had not known how to go about it. No one interviewed had been advised of a formal complaints procedure, and no one had actually made a formal complaint, partly because they did not know that they could, but also because those who had a grievance felt too intimidated to seek a way to complain.

This issue was particularly problematic when the parent wished to complain about a person undertaking a key role in the process, such as a lead agent or the coordinator of a meeting. One parent who had wanted to make a complaint said that, ultimately, he had decided against it. Partly because he was concerned that doing so would result in services being withdrawn, but also because his experience of making a formal complaint several years previously had been punishing and had taken more than a year to resolve.

## **Maori clients of Strengthening Families**

In general, the responses of Maori parents interviewed did not differ substantially from those of non-Maori. What was most important to them was that they receive an effective service, regardless of who was delivering it. Nonetheless Maori parents who had worked with a Maori lead agent or Maori service providers did report higher levels of satisfaction with the SF Process.

None of the Maori clients had been asked if they wished to have their SF meeting in a more culturally appropriate environment, and on the whole they were not invited to bring more than one whanau member to the meeting. While not all Maori parents would have felt comfortable having a SF meeting at a marae, it would have been appropriate for the person setting up the SF meeting to make that offer.

Several Maori parents indicated that they would usually feel more comfortable with a Maori service provider, if a choice were available. They were also more likely than non-Maori to want to have more than one whanau member to support them at the SF meeting.

In summary, if the SF Process were consultative of parents in the way it should be - that is, consulting parents as to time, venue, agenda, goals, attendees, and so forth - then it may meet the needs of Maori parents just as well as those of non-Maori.

## **Clients from other cultures**

The main problem reported by the two parents from other cultures who were interviewed was their difficulty in understanding what was discussed in the meetings, because of their lack of competence with the English language, the lack of an interpreter, or the failure to have a briefing so that all parties knew in advance what the purpose and goals of the meeting were. Both of these parents had felt either upset or humiliated by the meeting process because of a lack of recognition and understanding of some cultural aspects of their family relationships. As with Maori parents, if the SF Process were optimally consultative in the way that it is intended, it may work for parents of any culture.

## ***8. Conclusions and suggestions for improvements to the Strengthening Families Process***

### **Conclusions**

#### ***Client satisfaction***

The SF Process is evidently needed and the concept is strongly approved of by parents and caregivers who have experienced it in the six sites selected for this research. Parents felt that it had provided them with optimism, an opportunity to be heard and consulted appropriately by agencies, and, in some cases, with needed services.

#### ***Success factors***

The main factors contributing to the success of the SF Process are:

- Presenting problems which are relatively simple, and for which services are available locally
- The skills of the SF Coordinator in each region and their effectiveness in promoting the SF Process, facilitating meetings, training others to facilitate, and communicating with agencies
- Appropriate usage of the SF Process by initiating agencies
- Effective promotion of the SF Process to agencies in the region and to the general public
- Adequate briefing and consultation with parents prior to meetings
- Effective facilitation of meetings
- Effective follow-up by both lead agents and agencies agreeing to provide services
- The availability of services identified as needed in the SF meeting
- Whether some resolution of the family's issues has occurred

#### ***Issues in the SF Process***

The main issues in the SF Process were:

- Lack of clarity amongst parents as to the terms of reference and boundaries of the SF Process
- Lack of adequate consultation with parents about the purpose of the SF Process, the purpose of the initial meeting, its goals, and who would attend
- A failure to empower parents as to their role in the SF Process
- Lack of opportunity for parents to bring more than one support person to the meeting
- Lack of awareness amongst agency workers as to the fragility and anxiety levels of parents attending meetings and facing a large number of professionals at once
- Poor facilitation of initial SF meetings
- Failure to provide minutes of the meetings to parents

- Lack of follow-up by lead agents
- Lack of follow-through by agencies agreeing to provide services

## **Families' suggestions for improvements to the SF Process**

Families who took part in this exploratory study suggested that the SF Process could be improved by:

- Using the SF Process for the purposes it was intended and not to coerce parents into a meeting with agencies or into accepting decisions with which they do not agree. SF meetings should be held with the willing participation of the parents.
- Briefing parents appropriately prior to a SF meeting so that they are clear about and have agreed to a set of processes and goals. It would be helpful for a written agenda to be provided to parents at least two to three days prior to the meeting.
- Offering parents the opportunity to bring more than one support person to the meeting, and a time made to suit the parent wherever possible. Being offered a choice of venue would also be empowering to parents.
- Minuting meetings in as much detail as necessary to clarify exactly what was agreed to in the meeting. Minutes need to be in language that parents can understand, and be disseminated to parents within two weeks of the meeting taking place. It would also be helpful if proceedings and decisions could be recorded on a whiteboard during the meeting. Effective minuting requires a facilitator (or scribe) who can minute proceedings accurately, and can also facilitate people to provide clear undertakings.
- Advising parents, caregivers and their support people in writing of a complaints procedure. The complaints procedure would need to be user-friendly and take into account that these people often lack confidence in approaching service providers, especially government services. It could also be incorporated into the lead agent role to check with parents regularly whether they are satisfied with the service.
- Providing interpreters where people are not fluent in English, and including those interpreters in the consultative planning of the meeting.
- Catering for the cultural needs of the parents in planning for the meeting.
- Having a person facilitate the SF meeting who is independent of the agencies involved in the meeting. Such facilitators would need to be appropriately trained and skilled specifically in the SF Process, so that they can facilitate effectively.
- Giving parents a genuine opportunity to comment on the selection of lead agent and clearly explaining that role to them before they suggest a preference.

- Ensuring, where possible, that the lead agent has the agreement of those present at the meeting that they have the authority to request accountability from agencies agreeing in that meeting to provide services.
- Having as lead agent someone who is not providing other services to the family, so that parents have an independent person to consult with if they are unhappy with service provision. Alternately, the SF Coordinator could be nominated to all parents as a “back-up” person to the lead agent, so that there is always someone whom they can approach with issues. Or the SF Coordinator could canvas all current SF clients on a regular basis (e.g. 6-8 weeks) to check that services are being delivered or that the SF Process is on track.

### **Possible areas for further research or review**

- Reviewing aspects of the SF Process structure and management
  - training of SF Coordinators
  - training of SF facilitators in regions
  - relationships amongst agencies involved in SF cases
- Scoping the introduction of family advocates to support families in the SF Process
- Examining the appropriateness of the SF Process to Maori, and to other cultures
  - use of SF Process with people who have limited English language
- Examining the ways in which initiating agencies are using the SF Process
  - motivations for initiating SF Process
  - criteria used for deciding to initiated SF Process
- Exploring the reasons why clients decline the SF Process, or why they drop out of the SF Process after one meeting
- Identifying issues for SF Coordinators
- Examining the reasons for lack of follow-through of agreed services by agencies participating in SF meetings
- Assessing what difference the SF Process makes to outcomes for families over time

*Appendix 1*

*Strengthening Families Interview Guide*  
*November 2000*

## ***Strengthening Families Interview Guide November 2000***

### **Introduction**

- Mihimihi/personal introductions
- Purpose of the discussion / uses of the information
- Confidentiality / independent researcher
- Tape-recording

### **Awareness of Strengthening Families (or local name) service**

- Have they heard of “Strengthening Families” (or local name)?
- What does that name mean to them?

### **SF service**

- How has the service worked with them?
  - who did they deal with?
  - how did that come about?
  - do they understand what the purpose of the service is and what’s going on?
- What has the outcome been so far?
  - are they getting the service/s they need now?
  - are they happy with the person they’re dealing with (lead agent)?
  - are they getting a better service now than they were before?

### **SF process**

- Tell me about what’s happened for you through SF (or local name)
  - who first contacted you? what about? did you understand what the reason was? were you consulted, or “told”?
  - what kinds of contacts have you had with (lead agent)? how often? what about? what were the results of those contacts?

- Tell me about the meetings you've had to figure out your services?

*First meeting*

- who set it up?
  - did you know what it was for and what was going to happen at the meeting?
  - were you invited? how did you feel about going?
  - did the time suit for you?
  - what was the meeting like?
  - who was at the meeting?
  - what did they all talk about?
  - what was the discussion like? (e.g. cooperation/conflict amongst participants)
  - did you understand what was going on?
  - did you get a chance to say what you really wanted to?
  - did people listen to you?
  - what was the decision?
  - did that suit you?
  - how much input did you have into that decision?
  - was there anything you didn't feel OK about?
- Has there been a review meeting? What happened at it?
  - What was the follow-up after the meeting?
    - who contacted you?
    - how long did it take for them to get in touch?
    - is it someone you liked?
  - Were you told about a complaints procedure for Strengthening Families?
    - was there any point at which you considered whether you needed to make any complaint about the service?
    - (if yes) did you feel confident to do that?

### **Satisfaction with the SF service**

- What's been the best things about the SF service for you?
- Has it actually improved things for you and your family?
- What have been the difficult things about the SF service?
- How could the whole thing have been done better for you and your family?
- How appropriate was it to Maori clients?