



Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth

COLLABORATION CASE STUDY No. 4

The Blue Mountains Stronger Families Alliance

The Stronger Families Alliance is a unique network that fosters collaboration between Blue Mountains organisations and networks to better support children, their families and their communities.

By promoting new evidence about brain development, the need for early intervention and better coordination to prevent problems attributed to poor early childhood experiences, the Alliance has engaged local service providers in collectively planning a response. It has created sustainable networks of organisations, groups and individuals that are committed to a new service system structure, based on collaboration and prevention.

In late 2010 the Alliance launched its *Child and Family Plan*, a 10-year road map for coordinated action by child, family and community organisations to improve support and services for children and families in the Blue Mountains region.



Introduction

The Stronger Families Alliance is a collaboration of leaders from government, academia, business and community in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, working together to improve the wellbeing of children and families in the local community. It is convened and resourced by the Blue Mountains City Council.

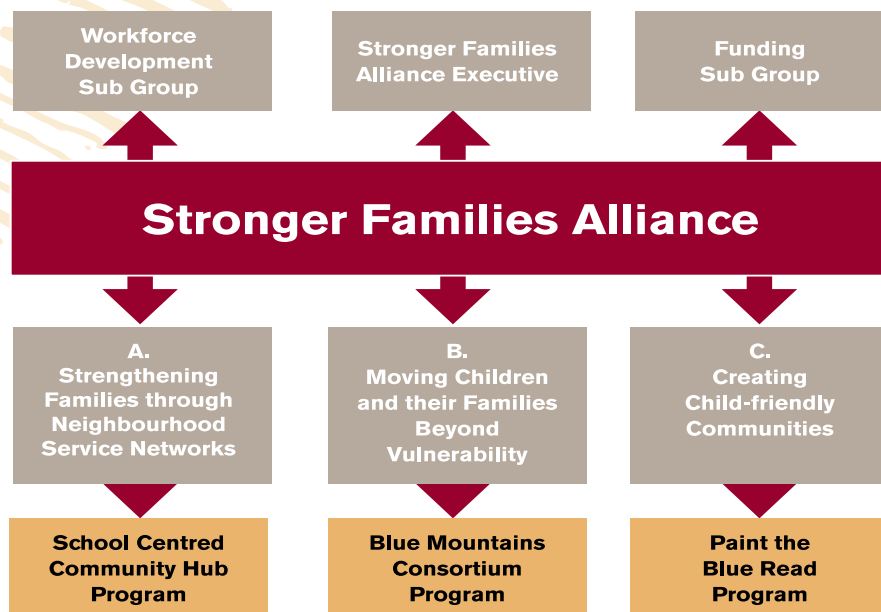
Alliance members include all levels of government, business networks, NSW child and family organisations, recreational services and the community and university sectors. The Alliance aspires to involve all organisations and groups in the region working directly or indirectly with children and their families.

The Alliance evolved in response to growing international research about children’s brain development from conception to age three. In 2006, the City Council, with Families NSW and the Mountains Community Resource Network, convened a meeting to consider this neurobiological evidence and research supporting new ways in which communities, government and business could work together to counter seemingly intractable problems — such as rising rates of child abuse, social isolation

and the literacy divide — which often are attributed to poor early childhood experiences.

In 2006 the Alliance began a five year process of multi-organisation strategic partnering and planning: scoping needs and opportunities to work collaboratively, and using an ‘appreciative inquiry’ process (described below) to engage and consult with key stakeholders. The outcome was the launch in late 2010 of the Stronger Families Alliance’s *Child and Family Plan*, a 10-year roadmap for the coordinated development of government, community and voluntary organisations working with children and families in the Blue Mountains.

The *Child and Family Plan* outlines a governance structure that has evolved over time to fit the Alliance’s needs as it has grown in membership and complexity. As well as an Executive committee, the Alliance is forming strategic committees responsible for Workforce Development and Funding. Another three committees are responsible for each of the three parts of the Plan, with the Blue Mountains City Council responsible for overall coordination.



Key Multi-service collaborative groups focused on service system change and new program development. New multi-service, virtual and interdisciplinary programs governed by the Stronger Families Alliance.

Why collaboration?

Several factors prompted the founders of the Stronger Families Alliance to develop a collaboration to drive change:

- the compelling nature of the international evidence about the development of the brain from conception to age three
- the inadequacy of the existing siloed approach to service delivery to optimise early childhood experiences
- the capacity of the 'appreciative inquiry' facilitation method to build awareness and commitment of other stakeholders across the region
- the long-term commitment of the Blue Mountains City Council to coordinate a network and collaborative actions.

Collaborative practices lend themselves to complex problems and situations in which participants have a shared and compelling vision to which they are committed ([ARACY Fact Sheet 2: Why collaborate, and why now?](#)). The Alliance's vision is '*strong vibrant communities where child, family and community services work together with one aim – maximising the wellbeing and resilience of children and their families*'. Such a vision can be realised only through effective collaboration between strategic stakeholders to:

- identify emerging issues for children and families in the Blue Mountains
- collectively plan a proactive and shared response to these issues.

Relationships and governance

The word collaboration is often loosely used to describe people working together, but true and effective collaboration requires specific effort and commitment. [ARACY Fact Sheet 1: What is collaboration?](#) describes models of joint working on a relationship continuum increasing in intensity, from cooperation, focused primarily on sharing

information and expertise; to coordination, which is a more interdependent style, evidenced by the members' need to work together towards common goals; and, at the far end of the continuum, collaboration.

The Stronger Families Alliance encourages its members and stakeholders to take the widest possible view of their sector – operating beyond the boundaries of their disciplines to share information with other professionals, make referrals and run joint programs. To support its vision of a truly integrated service system, the Alliance has made strategic use of the different types of networking relationships. To begin with only collaboration was used. However, in implementing some parts of the *Child and Family Plan* the Alliance has found it more appropriate and effective to use coordination or cooperation to link stakeholders.

Collaboration is essential to the strategic development and planning required to achieve the Alliance's goal of optimising children's and family wellbeing. The Alliance meets a number of the characteristics of collaboration. There is a high level of trust between members and the development of a shared philosophy, worldview and language to discuss the work across multiple disciplines. Members met and communicated intensively to frame and reframe the *Child and Family Plan* and the programs rolled out as part of the Plan. They shared information and resources with network members and other stakeholders via regular meetings to progress each of the three parts of the Plan identified in the governance structure.

Some have altered strategic plans and individual work plans, often aligning up to 20 per cent of their work to support the Child and Family Plan strategic direction.

The relationship between Alliance members has evolved since 2006; they have pooled individual



resources and developed a long-term timeframe to 2020. Each member has ensured that his or her parent organisation has embedded Alliance work in its core business. Some have altered strategic plans and individual work plans, often aligning up to 20 per cent of their work to support the *Child and Family Plan* strategic direction. Families NSW (Community Services), for instance, have renegotiated the use of funding to drive the Plan's implementation.

Implementing the School Centred Community Hub Program of the Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks (Part A) involves both **coordination** and **collaboration** of different neighbourhood-level stakeholders including schools, early childhood services and family support and civic organisations like Lions, Rotary and Chambers of Commerce. Participants coordinate multi-agency services to families with multiple needs, as well as broad parent support and community development activities, but continue to operate independently. For example, the Blue Mountains GP Network's immunisation project officer visits playgroups within the Hubs to increase parents' awareness about immunisation, simultaneously meeting the objectives of the project and supporting the *Child and Family Plan* through information sharing.

The Blue Mountains Consortium Program (Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability) demonstrates a range of networking relationships with stakeholders. Primarily however the core eight services demonstrate a deep level of **collaboration**. They have co-designed financial, administrative, practice, training and supervision systems and standards to operate as an integrated family support service.

New collaborations can be formed within the network structure if members commit to be governed by the Stronger Families Alliance and implement their part of the *Child and Family Plan*. An example is the evolution of the four School Centred Hubs in Part A of the *Child and Family Plan*. Each is described as a virtual hub — a network of stand-alone services gravitating around a local primary school.

Each hub offers different activities, unique to their particular context, and is governed by a local steering committee, which may have members from the Alliance involved. Principals are key stakeholders in the hub and commit to communicate with each other and their staff and encourage school-based activities to engage local families such as playgroups, family fun days or the 'Paint the Blue Read' program. The Department of Education facilitates meetings of principals to share information and provides facilities and professional development for school teachers and staff to support implementation of the *Child and Family Plan* across the region.

Engaging stakeholders

The Stronger Families Alliance used the 'appreciative inquiry' process to engage stakeholders across the community and agree on priorities and directions. The initial leaders of the Alliance (the Council, Mountains Community Resource Network and Families NSW) convened a series of appreciative inquiry workshops to emphasise the importance of each stakeholder's potential contribution and explain the Alliance's mission from each stakeholder's point of view. They observed that potential members need to take time to absorb the history of the Alliance to develop an understanding of what is possible and consider the potential impact of participating on their practice and organisation.

The Alliance worked to include the largest possible range of stakeholders, identifying all organisations and networks that contribute, directly and indirectly, to raising a child from the prenatal stage to age 12.

The stakeholder groups involved in, and contributing to the Alliance include:

- Departmental officers, from departments of education, communities and health and the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Centrelink – provide strategic planning expertise and staff for projects



- academics – provide international neurobiological research, inspiration and facilitative processes
- service providers – provide strategic planning expertise and multi-service, multidisciplinary teams
- interagency networks – provide coordination across contracted community services
- early childhood educators, school principals, teachers, support staff – provide facilities and forge links across the early years and primary system
- parent associations – provide links with families and schools
- civic associations – provide resources through links with business leaders and community fundraising
- business organisations – provide support to Part C of the *Child and Family Plan: Creating Child-friendly Communities*.

a roadmap for future collective and committed activity, after two years of development.

- the launch of new and innovative programs at child, family and community levels (the Blue Mountains Consortium, School Hub Program and Paint the Blue Read)
- innovative multidisciplinary training models that test and trial coordinated and collaborative practice.

As one stakeholder declared, ‘a slow burn has been found to be better than a quick fix’.

The *Child and Family Plan* is a resource for all Alliance members and other stakeholders. It outlines in detail the result of five years of facilitated discussion and collective reflection. Some contributors would have become impatient, however many members see this lengthy development process as a strength. The Plan has acquired authority through contributions offered collectively and visibly and communicated intensively. As one stakeholder declared, ‘a slow burn has been found to be better than a quick fix’.

Achievements

So far the greatest achievement of the Stronger Families Alliance is that it has introduced a process of collective decision-making and priority setting that is respectful and deliberate. It has created sustainable networks of education and community services that understand their organisation’s role in protecting and optimising the experiences of children in the first three years of life and are committed to a new service system structure that will better support children and families.

Other key achievements are:

- an innovative model of collaborative engagement that enables members to participate when the time is right for them
- a set of principles for establishing collaborations within the governance structures
- the 2010 launch of the *Child and Family Plan* as

Building relationships and trust

As discussed in [ARACY Fact Sheet 6: Collaboration – Getting going](#), the first step in establishing a collaboration is choosing partners who are ready or have the potential to be involved. This means that potential members have the appropriate resources (skills, knowledge and infrastructures) and can commit to the additional work that the collaboration will entail.

Alliance members described the confidence provided by such a stable workforce, particularly in sharing the risk regarded as essential to managing a collaborative initiative.



Since its foundation, the Alliance's network leader has been Tanya James, Blue Mountain City Council's Child and Family Services Development Officer. Over the past five years Tanya has facilitated a series of workshops to expose stakeholders to the wide range of relevant evidence bases and discuss the need to create a joined up, multidisciplinary service system involving other relevant sectors in the region. As a result of these workshops the Alliance has gained members and engaged new players in the system. A communication strategy ensured that stakeholders were kept informed about the emerging research and the Alliance's activities, and they in turn promoted the findings in their own agencies.

Most stakeholders knew each other informally; such is the nature of village life in the Blue Mountains. As parents, many of the current Alliance leaders know well the school principals and the education systems as well as local medical services, even if their professional roles are in different levels of government or in the service system.

The workforce is very stable and though individuals may move jobs it is usual that they do so within the region and the same sector. This is very positive for building relationships that can be maintained over long periods of time. Alliance members described the confidence provided by such a stable workforce, particularly in sharing the risk regarded as essential to managing a collaborative initiative ([ARACY Fact Sheet 8: Managing Collaborations](#)).

In most of the literature 'fence sitters' are not tolerated and those potential members that join for surveillance purposes are to be discouraged from participation. In contrast to this, Tanya suggests that this collaboration tolerate reticence in potential members. This is in recognition that both appreciative inquiry and collaboration are not the usual way of approaching challenging issues and can be confronting. This creates a culture that may not be 'natural', so time to learn how to participate is fundamental to a sense of belonging and cannot be assumed as innate.

Most participants reported how effective appreciative inquiry facilitation was as a unifying force. As a form of discussion it is focused on the strengths of the participating individuals and organisations — what they may bring to the collaboration and how they may commit. It is not rushed and allows newcomers to reflect and understand what is expected and how to be positive about change. It becomes a mindset, which is discernable through the language used to reframe challenges as opportunities and describe members' involvement.

The first step in using appreciative inquiry facilitation is choosing a positive topic for discussion — in this case, 'collaboration'. The process then comprises four stages.¹

1. The first stage of *Inquire/Appreciating* is initiated with the question 'What are our strengths?'
2. The group moves to *Imagine/Envisioning* outcomes with the questions 'What are our visions and values?' and 'What would the best collaborative service system look like?'
3. This conversation leads to the next stage: *Innovate/Co-constructing*. Participants design new plans, structures and programs.
4. The last stage is *Implement/Sustaining*. The collaboration needs to 'inspire learning, commitment and sustainability'.

The level of trust is evidenced in the way members frame challenges as opportunities and the way they talk about the Alliance's vision.

Members of the Stronger Families Alliance trust this process, which was reprised many times, especially as situations changed. The level of trust is evidenced in the way members frame challenges as opportunities and the way they talk about the Alliance's vision. This high degree of trust, which is a feature of successful collaborative efforts, has been augmented by the participation of academic 'inspirers' who emphasise the potential impact on children's wellbeing of implementing the Alliance's Plan.



Leadership

Tanya James of the Blue Mountains City Council coordinates the Stronger Families Alliance network and the *Child and Family Plan*. Tanya is regarded as the network driver ([ARACY Fact Sheet 8: Managing collaborations](#)), necessary not only to initiate, but also to sustain, relationships in and around the collaboration. But she is not alone, with a number of committed leaders supporting her methods.

With a combination of skills and knowledge in organisational psychology and change management, Tanya leveraged her role in Child and Family Services Development at the Blue Mountains City Council, as the Council was perceived as a neutral broker across the stakeholders.

Holding focus for over five years is testament to the capacity of the Stronger Families Alliance's facilitative leadership approach. Tanya has exercised facilitative leadership (as described in [ARACY Fact Sheet 9: Collaborative leadership](#)) and approached inspiring academics, as well as leaders across education, health, business and civic groups, to in turn demonstrate facilitative leadership to enable the collaboration to develop the *Child and Family Plan*.

Resources

Contributing agencies and organisations — both funded and volunteer — influence, impact and determine the Alliance's validity. They can easily withhold resources and so need to be affirmed and apprised of the collaboration's successes to encourage continued participation of their employees and volunteers.

Often the network driver takes up the role of managing these pivotal communication flows between the collaboration and the various parent organisations of its members (See [ARACY Fact Sheet 8: Managing Collaborations](#)). Right from the outset, the relevant state government agencies were invited to the table and continue to do what they can to resource reform. With time, other

groups could see that attaching their projects to the Alliance and its Plan would be beneficial and gain greater effectiveness and more visibility within the service system. Some agencies have still to fully explore how implementing new projects that are aligned with the Plan can mutually benefit their agencies and young families.

The 'slow burn' approach means that resources have gradually accrued. While the Alliance has gained funding from the Sidney Myer Foundation to employ facilitators in Part A of the Plan, most of its activities rely on redirection of existing resources within the system and public servants reforming their programs through the usual processes. It is rare that government agencies do this kind of recasting of resources, but international evidence has been a powerful argument for reform.

Challenges and working through them

The biggest challenge to the collaboration is succession planning for the current leaders and developing their collaborative leadership capabilities. The combination of skills and commitment demonstrated by Tanya and other leaders is rare. Tanya suggests that the kinds of multidisciplinary teams and multi-service organisations needed for joined up service delivery to realise the Alliance's vision require a new generation of professionals, not yet supported by the tertiary education system in Australia. Managers of these future services will need new capabilities to operate across the increasingly complex maze of programs and systems. Unless collaborative skills and knowledge of organisational psychology and change management are developed in the next generation of professionals and practitioners, capacity to achieve the Alliance's vision will be diminished.



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The tasks that the Stronger Families Alliance undertakes within its collaborative process to resolve challenges are:

- identify that progress is not occurring or that working relationships are strained
- use strengths-based facilitation processes to identify the barriers and gain a new consensus that takes account of the current situation and the available resources
- reframe person-to-person or service-to-service working relationships if necessary to address the sticking points
- view all challenges and failures as an opportunity to learn and redesign systems.

Keys to success

One key to success is having compelling evidence for change presented by experts who continue to inspire participants. Alliance members attribute some of the success of the Alliance to the leadership and support of the academics: their new research informed a cohesive message that grabbed stakeholders' attention and prompted action.

Another contributor to the collaboration's success is the way that 'appreciative inquiry' as a facilitation methodology created layers of consensus, commitment to change and willingness to take risks. Another is the willingness of stakeholders to commit to the Alliance's vision and Plan: individual organisations seeing that through collaboration their programs can be more effective.

Lessons learnt

Given her experiences facilitating the development of a large multi-organisational strategic plan, Tanya said that the areas of the Plan that began with presenting well articulated and compelling research to the Alliance as the first strategic planning step, took less time.

However, other members said a Plan of such vast dimensions has evolved and is much more realistic because of the time committed to bringing stakeholders on the journey together.

Conclusion

Some stakeholders think the real work is yet to be done by the many organisations and groups working directly or indirectly with families in the Blue Mountains. But the Stronger Families Alliance has demonstrated that promoting new knowledge, providing opportunities to collaboratively design new child and family programs, and engaging stakeholders in a strategic planning process, can drive change among the willing. The *Child and Family Plan* will be the catalyst for further collaborative activity if services commit and can implement it.

For a copy of the Alliance Plan please visit the website www.strongerfamilies.co

Stronger Families Alliance members are listed on page 3 of the Plan.



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References

1. Cooperrider D. And Whitney D. (2005) Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change – outlines the process in detail.



Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ARACY is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people. Despite Australia being a wealthy, developed country, many aspects of the health and wellbeing of our young people have been declining. ARACY was formed to reverse these trends, by preventing and addressing the major problems affecting our children and young people. ARACY tackles these complex issues through building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. We share knowledge and foster evidence-based solutions.

About the author of this case study

Carolyn Ovens is a researcher who has worked with several universities in Victoria, NSW and Queensland over the past decade. Her work includes projects in areas as diverse as the community services and health workforce, literacy and numeracy programs for young people, sustainability education, apprenticeships in children's services including child care, and transitions from school to work for young people including refugees. Currently she is researching successful partnerships in Queensland between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and mainstream agencies. She has a great interest in establishing and maintaining ecosystems that support families, children and young people through networks of safety.

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The **Advancing Collaboration Practice** program has been established to support ARACY's work building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia. The program builds stakeholder capabilities to establish and manage long-term joint working relationships and collaborative efforts.

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