



The Stronger Families Alliance

Strong, healthy families are the building blocks of strong, healthy communities

The Stronger Families Alliance is a groundbreaking network that fosters community collaboration to build the resilience of children and families in the Blue Mountains.

The Alliance was formed in 2006 and has 46 members and partners from community and business groups, child and family organisations, universities, council and government.

Members are influenced by international thinking about the best ways to tackle complex problems such as child abuse and neglect, social isolation, obesity and the literacy divide, which often have their roots in poor early childhood experiences. The Alliance has responded to evidence about brain development and the need for early intervention and service coordination by forming dynamic local networks based on collaboration and prevention. Ultimately, the Alliance aspires to involve every Blue Mountains organisation with a stake in seeing children and young people grow into healthy adults.

Translating the Alliance’s vision and intention into a plan was a significant challenge that required a new way of thinking, using consensus and shared language. The result – the Child and Family Plan – was launched in 2010 and is the genesis for a collaborative service system based on shared, measurable goals.

Collective impact in action

The Alliance is one of the most established examples of a structured collaborative network in Australia, propelling social change from deep within Blue Mountains communities. From its earliest days, the Alliance was guided by some of the ideas that later emerged as collective impact theory. The five conditions of collective impact – a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support – lie at the heart of Alliance philosophy.

Like other successful collective impact projects, the Alliance has a “backbone” – a dedicated convener employed by the Blue Mountains City Council to implement the Child and Family Plan and coordinate strategic planning.



Collective impact gives us a map for the future which brings peace of mind.

Tanya James, Alliance Convener



The Alliance: on track with collective impact

| Components for success | PHASE I Initiate action | PHASE II Organise for impact | PHASE III Sustain action & impact |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Governance and infrastructure | Identify champions and form cross-sector group | Create infrastructure (backbone and processes) | Facilitate and refine |
| Strategic planning | Map the landscape and use data to make case | Create common agenda (goals and strategy) | Support implementation (alignment to goals and strategies) |
| Community involvement | Facilitate community outreach | Engage community and build public will | Continue engagement and conduct advocacy |
| Evaluation and improvement | Analyse baseline data to identify key issues and gaps | Establish shared metrics (indicators, measurement and approach) | Collect, track and report progress (process to learn and improve) |

Alliance progress: ■ Completed and maintaining ■ Currently being worked on



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The Alliance has expanded substantially in eight years, through three stages of growth:

1. Create the Alliance

- Engage leaders
- Review scientific evidence in child development and systems change
- Develop a shared view of the problem and potential solutions

2. Set the direction

- Analyse local data and national trends
- Test solutions in prototype projects
- Develop policy and outcomes, write Child and Family Plan

3. Formalise roles and responsibilities

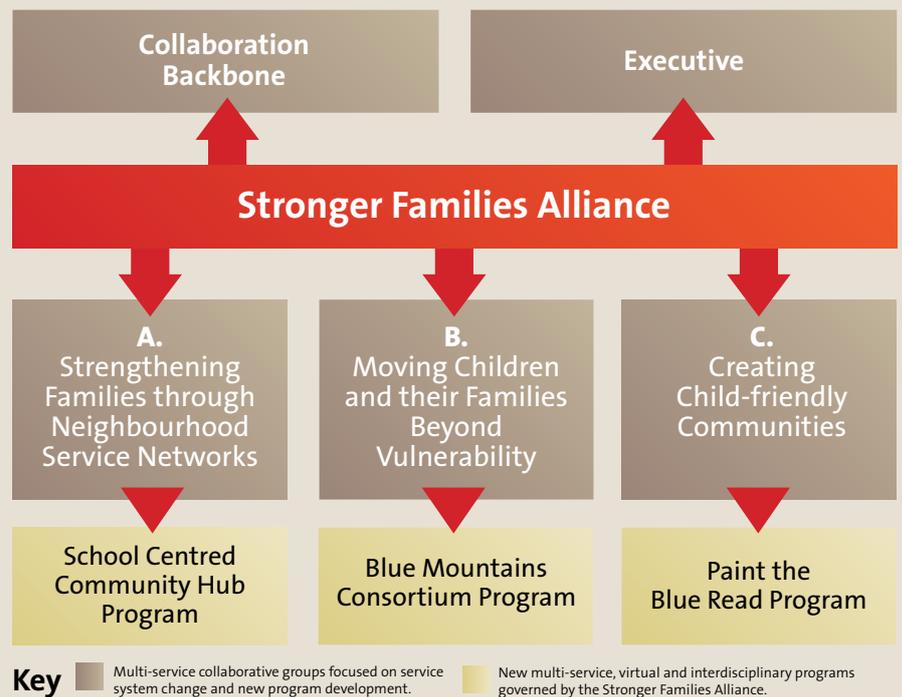
- Support implementation of the Child and Family Plan
- Create governance structure, define roles and responsibilities
- Collect data, evaluate implementation of the Child and Family Plan

Drivers of change

Collective impact is put into practice using positive organisational development to unite members from disparate organisations. Strengths-based theory and other large-group processes are used to deepen understanding and create robust relationships.

Appreciative inquiry cements new professional affiliations, taking into account each person's outlook, skills and knowledge, as well as the group's need for a common culture and structure. The Alliance uses appreciative inquiry to explore the strengths of members and build momentum for change.

Stronger Families Alliance governance model



Leadership is also essential to change, especially in networks that become more complex over time. Because networks lack a hierarchy, new methods of leadership are needed. Facilitative leadership moves the Alliance partners forward, and collaborative leadership generates strong bonds and shared attitudes between people from diverse organisations. Adaptive leadership promotes flexible thinking to achieve fast, lasting results.

An important shift came with the move from consensus to governance. At first, decision making occurred through network relationships. However, Alliance leaders recognised the need for greater resilience and designed a network structure with formal responsibilities.

Where to next

The Stronger Families Alliance started working with children aged 0-3, then expanded to children aged 12. Now, programs are being planned for young people up to age 18. Each phase starts in the same way – Alliance leaders talk with schools, family agencies and community groups, discussing the needs of children and young people.

The next priorities are to develop an evaluation method for a complex system, and secure funding for data collection and external communication to deepen community understanding and involvement.