

## **SHORTCUTTING POLICY: FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION FOR FAMILY-CENTRED COMMUNITIES**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes a project that aims to ensure the needs of families are taken into account during policy and planning processes within local bodies. By this means, communities will become more family-centred. The project involves a partnership among the Families Commission, Local Government New Zealand and local bodies. Standard policy development approaches have been abandoned in favour of learning through doing. This involves local body representatives finding a way to bring a greater focus on the needs of families, which will be appropriate for their district. The solutions to this challenge might vary from district to district. The Families Commission and Local Government New Zealand are facilitating shared learning among the local body participants. The article also presents the results of a review of the literature on family-centred communities. The review set out to identify the key elements in these communities. It found that while there is a reasonable amount of material on child-friendly communities, healthy cities, safe cities, sustainable communities, and various other types of communities, there is very little specifically written from the point of view of families. Instead, the literature relevant to families is more focused on the planning process. The main finding of the literature review was that during planning, the priorities of families should be identified by engaging with families themselves, because each community is unique and will have different needs.

### **INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

Shortly after the Families Commission was established in July 2004, it embarked on a large-scale consultation to find out what issues most concerned New Zealand families. By the time we had completed this exercise, almost 4,000 families had given us their views, either through submissions or through focus groups (Stevens et al. 2005, Seth-Purdie et al. 2006). Although families were most concerned with time pressures and financial matters, many of the issues they raised related to their communities; for example, housing, the local environment, transport, services, schools and crime. The Commission gave some thought to how it could assist families to have communities with the features they sought. In early 2007 the Commission began to plan a project that would adopt an innovative approach to community development. This project is now underway, and involves the Families Commission, in association with Local Government New Zealand, working with a number of local authorities to ensure the voices of families are heard and actioned during local government projects.

Councils are well placed to influence the development of family-centred communities and to enhance family wellbeing. They have a role in planning and helping to provide the services that families' everyday activities are dependent on. They also have a role in influencing the activities of other agencies. For example, councils undertake district-wide consultation with

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<sup>1</sup> This article rests heavily on the report *Family-Centred Communities, 2008*, written by Mary Richardson for the Families Commission.

residents and organisations about the community outcomes people want. This is a statutory responsibility, against which councils are audited, and is generally a significant exercise for them. These desired outcomes guide council planning and inform government agencies and others about community needs.

Early in the project we decided to commission a literature review on family-centred communities, which we had hoped would give us a picture of what such a community would look like. What are the characteristics of a family-centred community? In the event we discovered that the literature points in a different direction: it suggests that providing a checklist of elements of a family-centred community is the wrong approach. Every community has unique needs, and these should be identified through consultation with families themselves. Accordingly, the literature is about the process of engaging with families, rather than giving a prescription of what should be found in a family-centred community.

This article presents a brief review of this literature. During our search for material on family-centred communities we came across an extensive literature on other models for communities, such as child-friendly and aged-friendly communities, communities for the disabled, sustainable communities, and safe communities, to name just a few, and these are covered briefly. Further information is also provided about the Families Commission and Local Authority New Zealand project.

This project involves direct action with local authorities to improve the focus on families when planning for any significant development, short-cutting the policy development process, hence the title of this article. There is, therefore, a brief discussion of the theoretical underpinnings for this approach.

## WHAT IS A FAMILY-CENTRED COMMUNITY?

### Family

Deciding what constitutes a family-centred community is fraught with difficulties, not least of which is the lack of a common understanding of the terms “family” and “community”. Despite national policy statements and initiatives regarding “family strength”, “family resilience” and “strong communities”, the concepts remain highly abstract. The “family” in the Families Commission Act 2003 includes “a group of people related by marriage [or civil union], blood or adoption, an extended family, two or more persons living together as a family, and a whānau or other culturally recognised family group”. On the basis of the definition in its Act, the Families Commission has adopted a broad and inclusive approach to families that considers the full range of families and their roles and functions (Families Commission 2006). The Commission also recognises that families might extend over a number of households.

This broad definition creates a complication for the concept of family-centred communities. Some families have all their members living in a single locality or neighbourhood, while others can have members spread across many neighbourhoods, districts or nations. Some families comprise people who have little or no interest in being in contact with children and may prefer child-free settings or, in some extreme cases, a child-free gated community, as Freeman (2006) identified in her critique of gated communities. Others want child-friendly

settings. In practice, however, most of the literature ignores this complication and treats family as meaning adults with children.

### Community and Neighbourhood

A neighbourhood can be defined as a small, localised area around the home (Forrest and Kearns 2001), whereas a community may be thought of as a network of people and organisations linked by various factors such as shared identity, culture and whakapapa, similar interests, or common places where they interact. This definition can encompass a wide variety of forms, including a virtual community (Blakeley 1995 and 1996, Bowles 1999, Loomis 2005, Richardson 1998, Royal Commission on Social Policy 1988). In this article “community” has a more restricted meaning: it is place-based, and made up of a neighbourhood, a group of neighbourhoods, or a territorial authority district.

### Family-Centred Community

Local authorities and newspapers from time to time claim that their city is “family-friendly”. Sometimes the claim is made without supporting evidence, and other times some limited justification is given in the form of extolling the virtues of the city in terms of a small number of attributes (Ogden 2007:1, North Shore City Council 2007:8). Newspapers and magazines have ranked cities on the basis of their family-friendliness and use for this purpose indicators such as economic opportunity; income levels; childcare and education availability; educational outcomes; quality of life (such as access to parks, commuting times and crime); access to health care; and access to services, shopping and entertainment (Garrard 2005, “Best places to live” 2008). Occasionally, “family-friendly” also appears in local authority policy documents as something to aspire to, usually without stating what this means (Auckland City Council 2005 and 2007).

Beyond these references to “family-friendly”, we discovered that very little appears to have been written specifically on the subjects of family-centred communities and family-centred urban development. In particular, no articles on family-centred planning were found within urban planning, architectural or civic design literature. In contrast, there is a great deal written about the related area of child-friendly environments.

A rare exception is a checklist for a family-friendly community that has been developed by the Premier’s Council in Support of Alberta Families (1994). This has 12 categories and 162 items. The checklist was designed to review the family-friendliness of all or parts of the community, such as a shopping mall, or any facility providing services to families. It was for town councils, boards, neighbours or any group within the community. It was also unique in that it recognised various family forms and various family members (e.g. children, older people, youth and adults) rather than simply regarding families as units consisting of children and parents.

The 12 categories it uses are:

- neighbourhood
- schools
- playgrounds, parks and public spaces
- security
- health and wellness

- family-serving agencies
- parenting
- children
- teenagers and young adults
- seniors
- workplaces
- public involvement and support.

However, this checklist is at variance with the general thrust of the literature, where consultation with communities to determine their needs is the preferred approach. Nevertheless, this checklist would be very useful in some circumstances. It includes facilities and services, and describes the attributes that makes them family-friendly. It also includes behavioural and social capital features. Features needed by various family members are described (e.g. children, youth, older people and parents) rather than assuming that family-friendly equates to child- or parent-friendly. No indication was found of whether and how this checklist had been used. Ideally, a checklist of this nature should be modified to suit the New Zealand environment and circumstances – if it were to be used here. For one thing, consideration may need to be given to families' abilities to maintain their cultural identity, and the impact of policies on cultural groups, particularly Māori.

#### Families are the Key, Family Participation is the Key

As already mentioned, the literature emphasised family participation as a core attribute of family-friendly communities. This was particularly noticeable in British literature, possibly reflecting the importance placed on community engagement in the UK local government sector (Office of Deputy Prime Minister 2000 and 2002). The Alberta provincial government's checklist also included family participation and involvement as one of its 12 characteristics of a family-friendly community. In contrast, the articles in the popular press in English speaking countries did not identify family participation or involvement in decision-making as important components of a family-friendly environment.

Over the last decade the concept of family-centred community building has reportedly gained growing acceptance. Those involved in community development have started to integrate this concept into their practice (Rogers 2000, Bailey 2006, Center for the Study of Social Policy 2000). Despite this claimed growing acceptance of family-centred community building, limited literature is available and there are few explanations of how it differs from traditional community development practice.

The Family Strengthening Policy Center of the National Human Services Assembly (USA), an association of non-profit organisations, has published the most comprehensive literature on family-centred community building. They say that this includes both structural improvements – housing, parks, schools, childcare, services, job opportunities, financial investment in the community – and social capital development, which includes the extent to which residents feel part of the community and participate in the community. It also includes connectedness among the organisations in the community or servicing the community (Family Strengthening Policy Center 2005:4, Kingsley et al. 1997).

Unsurprisingly, given the approach that is being suggested here, the outcomes for family-centred community building initiatives have been found to be best achieved where social networks are strong (Bailey 2006, Jordan 2006, National League of Cities 2005, Rogers 2000).

Family-centred community building takes many shapes and forms because no two communities are alike. Each community's population, history, troubles, resources, goals and expectations are unique. Accordingly, strategies should be tailored to the individual community or neighbourhood (Chaskin 1992, Chaskin et al. 1997, Kingsley et al. 1997, Landau 2007, Meezan 1999, Rogers 2000). This is consistent with the almost complete absence of checklists in the literature. A checklist approach implies that all communities would be seeking the same things, and this runs counter to the concept that each community is unique.

All the literature on a family-centred approach suggests that families should be engaged in planning and decision-making processes. For example, Rogers (2000) argues that families need to participate in setting the agenda from the very beginning rather than being brought in later to react to a preconceived agenda:

If families are not allowed to define their own goals, set their own agendas, or decide upon the changes needed in their neighborhood, the work of outsiders may well be irrelevant. In the past, too many community initiatives have presumed that a particular neighborhood needed a specific service (more affordable child care or an after-school program, for example), without involving residents in the decisions, only to discover later that something else ... would have been more helpful. (Rogers 2000:15)

Similarly, the National League of Cities in the US published a report entitled *A City Platform for Strengthening Families and Improving Outcomes for Children and Youth* (2005), which outlines a platform or agenda for municipal action and leadership on behalf of families. A key component of the platform is a series of processes for engaging families. This approach has been widely adopted across US states and cities.

A family-centred approach views families as experts on their challenges and what they desire. Fraenkel (2007) has argued that this approach is particularly useful in developing initiatives for families who have experienced social oppression and who have been reluctant to participate in activities created for them by professionals without consultation. Landau (2007) points out that the approach assumes that families and communities are inherently competent.

There has been some attention paid in the literature to the role that can or should be played by non-government organisations. They can assist in family-centred development by facilitating family and community involvement. They can also help with expertise to resolve conflict, facilitate processes, assist with communications, foster co-operation among diverse stakeholders, negotiate, and provide technical guidance and training (Family Strengthening Policy Center 2005, Kingsley et al. 1997). Respected community leaders could be engaged to act as "community links", providing a bridge between outside professionals and families (Landau 2007). On the other hand, it has been suggested that some NGOs may not understand the needs of the communities in which they work, or may have a different perspective on those needs (Kissane and Gingerich 2004), reinforcing the need for direct engagement with families.

## Other Community Models

When we realised that very little had been written about what constitutes a family-centred community, we examined the literature on other community models. There is a range of these models, some of which would overlap with concepts of family-centred communities. In particular, we looked closely at child-friendly cities, healthy cities, age-friendly cities, liveable communities and safe communities. There are common threads that run across these models, such as the need for engagement with the community, taking account of diversity, building coalitions among community agencies, addressing inequalities, and taking a holistic approach. These models share many features, with perhaps the exception of the safe communities model, where the focus is more specifically on the prevention of crime. The other four models cover much the same ground, but each has a slightly different emphasis. They are complementary rather than substitutes for one another.

## CURRENT LOCAL BODY POLICIES AND PLANS FOR FAMILIES

Under the Local Government Act 2002 councils have a responsibility to promote the wellbeing of their communities. Wellbeing is, however, not defined in the Act. Most councils have adopted definitions of wellbeing developed by relevant government agencies (the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry for the Environment, and the Ministry of Economic Development). These definitions tend to describe wellbeing from an individual or community perspective. For example, the Ministry of Social Development described the term “social wellbeing” as “comprising individual happiness, quality of life, and the aspects of community, environmental, and economic functioning that are important to a person’s welfare” (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

A family-centred approach involves considering the impact (intended and unintended) that decisions have on family wellbeing. Such an approach would require a wellbeing model that captures the collective wellbeing of family members and the wellbeing of the entity itself. For example, it would need to include assessments of inter-family relationships and such factors as closeness, happiness and security.<sup>2</sup> Milligan et al. (2006) stated that

... analysing wellbeing at the family level involves more than merely aggregating the individual living conditions of individual family members. It requires judgements about how the conditions of such members may affect the family unit as a whole (Milligan et al. 2006:26).

The Local Government Act 2002 also requires all councils to facilitate a process to determine community outcomes at least once every six years. A scan of council documents for this research suggests that councils have focused on outcomes for individuals or community-wide outcomes – not family outcomes. There are currently no council outcomes regarding family resilience or family functioning, nor is there evidence that councils have directly targeted families or consulted them about what is important for families and family functioning in their communities. Currently, only Auckland City Council and Hamilton City Council have child and family policies. Auckland develops and reports on actions annually. Although these policies tend to focus on children, they are a positive starting point. They are a statement that the council recognises and values families in the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Methods for assessing these factors are outlined in a report by the Ministry of Social Development *Stepfamilies and Resilience* (Pryor 2004).

The absence of policies specifically focused on families should not be taken to mean that families are ignored in local authority planning. Families undoubtedly benefit from approaches that are designed to improve or maintain individual wellbeing. Equally, there is likely to be considerable implicit consideration of families' needs during planning processes. Notwithstanding this, without explicit policies and outcomes for families there is a risk that the collective needs of families may be overlooked.

The focus in this article is largely on local authorities. It needs to be pointed out, however, that, as with any form of community development, the best chance of success is provided when all relevant bodies work together, including community-based organisations, businesses, schools, religious institutions, iwi and Māori agencies, and central government agencies. The literature suggests that a family-centred approach would not only require collaboration between councils and other external parties, but also collaboration across council function areas. Traditionally, council efforts have tended to separate the "bricks and mortar" projects from those that help families and develop social and human capital. A family-centred approach would involve integrating asset and urban planning with social service planning, and collaboration among professional groupings within councils (Reid 2002).

#### FROM CONCEPT TO ACTION

The Families Commission is fortunate to have a commissioner, Lyn Campbell, who is vastly experienced in working in and with local bodies. In conceiving this project, she realised that the standard model of policy development (that is, problem definition, investigation, identification of a range of options, applying criteria to select one, followed by implementation and review, with consultation at various points along the way) would probably not work well, if at all. Our first consultations with local body personnel confirmed this view. They impressed on us the need to have people working on this project who are thoroughly conversant with local body practices so that the outcomes would be both practical and accepted by local bodies. This ruled out Families Commission staff carrying out this project and promoting the results to local bodies. It was imperative that the work be done in partnership with local body personnel. Further, these people were clearly very busy, and would not be able to take time out to work on a project of our devising. This in turn suggested that the project would have to involve utilising the normal work procedures of local bodies to identify solutions that would benefit families.

As stated earlier, the aim of this project is to provide families with communities that come closer to what they want. We decided that this could best be accomplished through the planning and policy development processes within local bodies. Beyond that, the project design was initially left open, to be finalised in consultation with the local bodies themselves. Our first step, however, was to enlist the assistance of Local Government New Zealand, whose advice, support, and assistance in working with local bodies would be crucial to the project. Early discussions with local body representatives produced the framework of a project plan.

To keep the project manageable, we would seek to involve around eight local bodies. Representatives from each of these local bodies would choose a project within their district that was going through their planning or policy procedures. They would then separately investigate and implement ways of improving the focus on families during these procedures. The Families Commission would monitor progress, and facilitate shared learning among the

representatives by bringing them together from time to time to discuss what they were doing. At the end of this process, the success or otherwise of the project would be reviewed. If successful with the first group of local bodies, we would seek to snowball the project to include other local bodies.

Although this project is essentially pragmatic in design, there is a body of theory that relates to this approach. John Friedmann (1987) has written the classic text on this, *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*.<sup>3</sup> Our approach comes under the heading of “social learning”, of which Friedmann wrote:

Social Learning ... begins and ends with action, that is with purposeful activity. ... It is the essential wisdom of the social learning tradition that practice and learning are construed as correlative processes, so that one process necessarily implies the other. (1987:181)

The project has passed the first hurdle. As mentioned above, a meeting was first held with members of local bodies to think through the project in broad terms. Then mayors were signed up. Eight local bodies have agreed to participate, and their representatives have come together for a meeting with the Families Commission and Local Government New Zealand. The representatives first drew up criteria by which they selected the projects on which they would focus, which are:

- has the potential to succeed
- is underway, or is sufficiently resourced and has momentum
- is discrete and contained
- the outcomes are measurable, either by qualitative accounts or by quantitative data
- involves engagement with families
- will generate transferable knowledge.

Each representative has identified a project in their district for which they hope to ensure there will be a conscious focus on the needs of families. Some of these are urban development projects, others are policy projects or the provision of social services, and they range from small neighbourhood projects to district-wide initiatives.

The local body representatives are now set to implement the project in each of their districts. The Families Commission role has been confirmed as providing overall project management, facilitating information sharing and learning among the representatives, and showcasing success stories.

## CONCLUSION

A number of ingredients are necessary if this project is to be successful: we need to work in partnership with local bodies; we need a process that local body personnel can work with; and we need to engage with families. The first two ingredients are satisfied. Mayors and local body personnel have endorsed the project, and with them we have devised a process that looks promising and practical. This is not the standard policy development process; rather, it is learning by doing, with the possibility of different solutions being found for each of the local bodies involved. This approach looks promising, and particularly appropriate given that every community will have unique needs or will be at a different stage of development.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Burchell 1988, who summarises Friedmann’s four types of planning activity.



Engagement with families will be an essential part of the process. If we are to develop communities that satisfy families, we must make families central to the process of getting there.

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