



Australian Government

Department of Social Services

Families and Communities Programme

***Stronger Relationships* trial
Operational Guidelines**

August 2014

Preface

Operational Guidelines for the *Stronger Relationships* trial, funded by the Department of Social Services (DSS), have been developed for service providers to work in a nationally-consistent, coordinated and cooperative way. They outline the key elements of service delivery, and seek to clarify policy and process questions that may arise during the implementation and delivery of the *Stronger Relationships* trial.

The Operational Guidelines are a living document. As additional issues arise and policy clarifications are developed, they will be circulated via email to all DSS *Stronger Relationships* trial service providers. All clarifications will be included in an updated version of these operational guidelines that will then be circulated to all service providers.

The Operational Guidelines should be read in conjunction with the:

- Families and Communities Programme, Families and Children Activity Guidelines Overview;
- *Stronger Relationships* trial Grant Agreement; and
- Terms and Conditions *Stronger Relationships* trial Grant Agreement.

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1 ***Stronger Relationships* trial**

1.1 **Overview**

The *Stronger Relationships* trial is part of the DSS's Families and Communities Programme. The Families and Communities Programme aims to support families, improve children's wellbeing and increase participation of vulnerable people in community life to enhance family and community functioning.

The Programme encompasses seven activities that support the Australian Government's priorities and responsibilities, one of which is the Families and Children activity. The *Stronger Relationships* trial is a component under the Family and Relationship Services sub-activity that sits under the Families and Children Activity.

The *Stronger Relationships* trial is the implementation of the 2013 election commitment to a one year trial of providing \$200 vouchers to 100,000 couples to assist them to access relationship education and/or counselling including components of parenting education, conflict resolution or financial education.

The *Stronger Relationships* trial is expected to operate from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015 and will provide grants to family and relationship services and non-profit organisations to provide subsidised relationship education and counselling services to up to 100,000 couples. These organisations will provide couples with a \$200 reduction in the total cost of their relationship education and counselling services, which may include components of parent education, conflict resolution and/or financial education.

1.2 **Objectives**

The objective of the *Stronger Relationships* trial is to increase the number of couples who participate in education and/or counselling in order to strengthen their marriage or relationship. The trial is intended to provide incentives for Eligible Couples to seek support from service providers to strengthen their relationships, especially at crucial life transition points such as moving in together, getting married and the birth of children.

1.3 **Principles**

1.3.1 **Networking/Collaboration**

Eligible providers must network and collaborate in accordance with Section 2.7 of the Families and Communities Programme Guidelines Overview.

1.3.2 **Access Strategy for Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Clients**

Stronger Relationships trial services must provide flexible, culturally sensitive and accessible service delivery models and practices that ensure accessibility to any people who face a real or perceived barrier to receiving assistance, and have in place an access strategy to achieve this, unless otherwise exempted by legislation.

You must be able to provide evidence of your access strategy if requested. However, you are not required to submit this regularly to DSS. *Stronger Relationships* trial services must provide services equally, without bias or prejudice about clients. Services must be accessible to all target groups, including Indigenous people and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

For more information on access strategy requirements refer to the DSS website.

1.3.3 **Registration of Eligible Couples**

Stronger Relationships trial service providers may offer trial services to Eligible Couples that book into services between 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015, unless otherwise advised by DSS. Eligible service providers may offer assistance to couples to complete the eligibility assessment, register and receive a valid Reference Number on the *Stronger Relationships* trial website at: www.dss.gov.au/StrongerRelationships.

Registration must be completed prior to the commencement of service provision. For additional information on screening and assessment refer to section 2.7.2 of the Operational Guidelines.

Service providers cannot ask couples who are already receiving a counselling or relationship education service prior to 1 July 2014 to register for the *Stronger Relationships* trial. Couples who have previously attended a service in the period prior to 1 July 2014 and who are no longer receiving the service may register for the *Stronger Relationships* trial. All *Stronger Relationships* trial services must be delivered between 1 July 2014 and 30 June 2015.

1.3.4 Professional membership

Stronger Relationships trial service providers not currently funded by DSS to provide Family and Relationship Services must ensure that personnel providing counselling and education services possess current membership to a recognised professional association.

Organisations must disclose the membership, registration or accreditation of personnel during the application process and must notify DSS in writing if there are changes to personnel providing *Stronger Relationships* trial services. DSS may request evidence of professional membership for personnel at any time during the *Stronger Relationships* trial period.

Recognised professional associations include, but are not limited to the following:

- the Australian Association of Family Therapy;
- the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). For the AASW, personnel need only show evidence of eligibility for membership;
- the Australian Counselling Association;
- the Australian Psychological Society;
- the Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists;
- the Catholic Society for Marriage Education;
- the Marriage and Relationship Educators' Association of Australia; and
- the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia.

1.4 Promotion of Services

Service providers must raise awareness of their service availability to couples, including through their networks.

DSS will provide approved providers with an information pack containing *Stronger Relationships* trial promotional materials that can be used to promote trial services. Any promotional materials produced by the service provider, must be submitted for DSS approval, prior to production, via the *Stronger Relationships* mailbox (StrongerRelationships@dss.gov.au). The following acknowledgement should be used on any promotional materials developed by service providers: The *Stronger Relationships* trial is funded by the Australian Government.

1.5 Safety

The safety of all adults who visit or work for the service is paramount.

Service providers should adopt the following:

- Services should give their personnel clear safety policies and procedures in writing and provide personnel with adequate support, training and resources to comply with those policies and procedures.
- Reporting critical incidents to the Commonwealth.

2 Service Delivery

2.1 *Stronger Relationships* trial

These services provide relationship education and/or counselling services, including components of parenting education, conflict resolution, or financial management education, which support and strengthen couple relationships.

2.2 Relationship Education

A relationship education service is one where the provider identifies couple-relationship skills attainment as the principal focus of the activity. Such a service may include elements of parenting skills training, financial counselling or other family services so long as the central goal of the service is to develop skills relevant to couple-relationship formation and maintenance.

2.3 Relationship Counselling

A relationship counselling service is one where the provider intends to provide a direct therapeutic intervention with the central goal of improving, maintaining or amicably dissolving a couple-relationship (as directed by the clients).

2.4 Minimum requirements for service provision

Stronger Relationships trial service providers are required to provide one of the following Funded Services to Eligible Couples in accordance with the Grant Agreement and Guidelines as and when the eligible couple requests you to do so:

- Relationship education comprising:
 - pre-marriage education;
 - marriage education; and/or
 - relationship education services.
- Relationship counselling comprising:
 - marriage counselling; and/or
 - relationship counselling services.

Each of the following Funded Services must be provided to an eligible couple for the following minimum number of contact hours:

- two contact hours for all relationship or marriage counselling services;
- four contact hours for inventory style relationship or marriage education services; and
- five contact hours for all other relationship or marriage education services.

2.5 Couple Eligibility

In order to be eligible to participate in the *Stronger Relationships* trial, both members of a couple must be:

- in a committed relationship;
- Australian citizens, permanent residents or otherwise eligible to receive social security payments in Australia; and
- 18 years or older.

Couples who are not eligible are encouraged to contact the Family Relationships Advice Line on 1800 050 321 or visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au for information on other available services.

2.6 Premises

Stronger Relationships trial services must be accessible to all potential clients. Disability access must be provided.

2.6.1 Outlet information

Stronger Relationships trial service providers disclose the names and locations of outlets during the application process. As every claim is attributed to a specific outlet (including outreach and online services) service providers are required to ensure that the outlet information in FOFMS is current and accurate. Service providers can notify DSS of any changes to the outlet information by contacting their Grant Agreement Manager (GAM) or notifying the *Stronger Relationships* mailbox: StrongerRelationships@dss.gov.au.

2.7 Administrative Requirements

2.7.1 Service Provider Portal Access - FOFMS

FOFMS is a web based system that assists in the management of DSS funding agreements. This system is used to enter information about clients and the services they receive, and to claim payments from DSS. Given the very sensitive nature of the data contained in FOFMS, the connection is secured and security, privacy and confidentiality of information and data are essential. FOFMS is accessed by a portal that interacts with DSS IT systems. When entering the portal providers will need to use a DSS generated logon and password.

Stronger Relationships trial service providers are required to access, use and upload information to FOFMS for the purpose of performing trial activities and you may only do so in accordance with the Guidelines.

FOFMS Users

At least two people within your organisation must be nominated (it is recommended to also nominate a suitable back-up) to use FOFMS. Each person will be a registered user with DSS.

After completing and returning the Grant Agreement, providers will be sent via email information on how to access FOFMS. The email will provide information on accessing the FOFMS portal, and a FOFMS System Access Request Form will also be attached. This form must be completed for each personnel who requires access to FOFMS and returned to DSS via the FOFMS Helpdesk (fofms.helpdesk@dss.gov.au) to enable logon details and access to the system.

FOFMS user requirements

You must ensure nominated FOFMS users within your organisation:

- only access FOFMS using a secure internet connection;
- keep their FOFMS log-on information confidential and do not disclose it to any other person (include another member of your personnel); and
- use FOFMS, and the information contained in it, in accordance with the *FOFMS System User Responsibilities*, which is available from FOFMS.

Confidentiality of Passwords

All FOFMS users have a responsibility to ensure that passwords are confidential and not shared. Personal passwords are regarded as sensitive and must be protected from disclosure and compromise. Logons and passwords are not transferable between personnel due to the sensitive information on the system and the different roles that users may have on the system.

Passwords must meet the DSS password standards and must be changed by the user immediately following a password reset. Users will be prompted to change their password every three months. If the password is not updated, the user account will be suspended.

FOFMS users requiring assistance with their password will need to contact FOFMS support on:

✉ fofms.helpdesk@dss.gov.au

☎ 1800 020 283

New employees requiring access to FOFMS will need to send completed FOFMS System Access Request forms to fofms.helpdesk@dss.gov.au.

Sharing Logons

Each FOFMS user must have an individual FOFMS logon. A user must not logon to FOFMS using another user's password.

Reporting Lapses of Security

Any known or suspected attempts to obtain unauthorised access to DSS computing facilities or other attempts to bypass or defeat security must be reported immediately to the FOFMS Support Helpdesk.

Reporting Personnel Changes

If a member of your personnel who has FOFMS access ceases to require that access for the purpose of the *Stronger Relationships* trial, you must notify DSS within two business days of that cessation occurring. Notification must be directed to the FOFMS Support Helpdesk: fofms.helpdesk@dss.gov.au.

Ethical use of IT Resources

Use of Commonwealth computing facilities for unauthorised purposes including illegally accessing a computing service, downloading or distribution of material may result in court prosecution. When using a laptop computer or a computer in a public place, the Provider must ensure that they use a secure network and maintain the privacy of all records.

2.7.2 Screening and Assessment

Prior to providing a Funded Service to an Eligible Couples, *Stronger Relationships* trial service providers must:

- meet with both member of the Eligible Couple and obtain their verbal Consent to claim payment. You may wish to record this consent for your own business purposes;
- enter the date of birth of each member of the Eligible Couple in FOFMS and check the Reference Number provided by the Eligible Couple on FOFMS to ensure that it is valid; and
- advise the Eligible Couples of the Total Value of the Funded Service as well as the Service Fee and the Reduced Fees that you will charge the Eligible Couple for the Funded Service.

Verification of an eligible Reference Number does not equate with entitlement of the service provider to claim the \$200 subsidy. Verbal consent must be given by the couple to claim reimbursement and claims cannot be made until the minimum service contact hours have been satisfied.

2.7.3 Claiming Payment

Stronger Relationships trial service providers claim \$200 reimbursement for each couple after the completion of service provision through the Department's online financial management system (FOFMS). A Claim Number will be issued after a successful claim has been submitted.

Payment will be issued at such time as the following information has been submitted through the claim form on FOFMS:

- The service provider has obtained verbal consent from the Eligible Couple to claim a subsidy for services provided. You may wish to record this consent for your own business purposes;
- Verification of a valid Reference Number and date of birth of either member of the couple;
- Reporting basic information on services rendered and session information; and
- Confirmation that the services provided comply with Programme and Operational Guidelines, including the minimum contact hours.

DSS will be regularly monitoring the numbers of Eligible Couples participating in the *Stronger Relationship* trial and the number of claims made to ensure that the cap of 100,000 couples is not exceeded. The *Stronger Relationships* trial will end on 30 June 2015 or when the cap of 100,000 is reached, whichever comes sooner. DSS will communicate with service providers as necessary to inform them whether the cap is being reached or whether it is undersubscribed and ask the service providers to take appropriate action.

Due to the limit of 100,000 claims, it is in the interest of the service providers to submit claims for reimbursement as soon as possible after service provision as no claims will be paid once 100,000 couples have been reached.

In the case of too few Eligible Couples participating in the trial services, DSS may request service providers to increase their promotion of the trial to couples.

For additional information on claim requirements refer to your Grant Agreement.

2.7.4 Finding and Cancelling Previous Claims and Payments

Stronger Relationships trial service providers are able to find, monitor and cancel claims and payments through the Service Provider Portal.

Previous claims and payments can be found by providing any of the following information:

- The Reference Number provided by the couple
- The Claim ID Number issued when the claim was originally submitted
- Date of the original claim
- Dates services were provided
- The name of either member of the couple

2.7.5 Trial evaluation

Stronger Relationships trial service providers are required to participate in the evaluation and contribute relevant information as requested, such as completing evaluation surveys and interviews. Information requested by the evaluator must be provided in a timely manner.

3 Working with Clients

3.1 Involvement of children

Stronger Relationships trial services focus on committed adult relationships and should not directly involve children in education or counselling, unless otherwise directed by DSS. However, counselling and education may include components of parenting skills education and counselling on co-parenting behaviour.

3.2 Vulnerable Persons

Prior to engaging or deploying any person (whether as an officer, employee, contractor or volunteer) in relation to any part of the *Stronger Relationships* trial, you must:

- conduct a police check for that person or where relevant, confirm a similar check by appropriate authorities has occurred;
- confirm that no Commonwealth, State or Territory law prohibits that person from being engaged in a capacity where they may have contact with Vulnerable Persons; and
- comply with all other legal requirements of the place where the trial activity, or any part of the trial activity, is being conducted in relation to engaging or deploying persons in a capacity where they may have contact with Vulnerable Persons.

Refer to your Grant Agreement for more information on working with Vulnerable Persons.

3.3 Fees Policy

All *Stronger Relationships* trial services must be at least \$200 in value to the Eligible Couples regardless of any further fee payable by the couple. The Department will check fees against pre-trial fee structures submitted by service providers as part of the selection process. Service providers may choose to add value to existing services by creating specific packages for the trial that include additional services or supporting information for participating Eligible Couples.

Stronger Relationships trial service providers may charge Eligible Couples a co-contribution fee to recover any costs associated with service provision that exceeds the \$200 subsidy. Any fee payable by the couple must reflect the service provider's normal fee structure for provision of a relationship education or counselling service and the fee should be reduced by the \$200 subsidy.

Prior to the commencement of service provision, *Stronger Relationships* trial service providers must disclose to the couple the fee charged before the \$200 subsidy is applied, the fee payable after the \$200 subsidy is applied and any remaining immediate or anticipated fees. At the time of booking into a service, Eligible Couples must have a clear understanding of the services they are entitled to attend under the trial and be aware of any associated co-contribution fees they will be required to pay. Where Eligible Couples are not able to make a co-contribution (or the required contribution is too high) service providers will be required to refer couples to appropriate low- or no-cost services. In appropriate cases covered by the Operational Guidelines, service providers may also waive the fee.

Examples of application of the fee policy to single services are provided in the table below:

Service fee before \$200 subsidy	Service fee once \$200 subsidy is applied	Couple pays	Value to couple
\$350	\$150	\$150	Service is of greater value than \$200 to the couple
\$260	\$60	\$60	Service is of greater value than \$200 to the couple
\$150	\$0	\$0	Further goods or services must be delivered as part of the trial to provide \$200 in total value. For example, a workbook on relationships could be provided.

Examples of application of the fee policy to a series of counselling services are provided in the table below:

Service fee for ongoing services before \$200 subsidy	Service fee once \$200 subsidy is applied	Couple pays	Value to couple
Counselling at \$120 per hour	Minimum of 2 hours received equalling \$240	\$40	Service is of greater value than \$200 to the couple
Counselling at \$75 per hour	Minimum of 2 hours received equalling \$150	\$0	Further goods or services must be delivered as part of the trial to provide \$200 in total value. For example, a book on relationships could be provided.
Counselling at \$75 per hour	5 hours received equalling \$375	\$175	Service is of greater value than \$200 to the couple

3.4 Refusal of Service

Stronger Relationships trial service providers may refuse to provide services to a couple where there are safety concerns, there is evidence to suggest that the couple is not eligible for the trial, or the couple is believed to have received services at the same or another service provider under the trial.

3.5 Referrals

Stronger Relationships trial service providers are required to have a network of referral pathways and to refer Eligible Couples to other appropriate support services when issues arise that cannot be addressed by the Funded Services, for example drug and alcohol services or mental health services.

If a couple does not meet the age or other eligibility requirements, you must refer them to another appropriate service. If couples are unable to meet the co-contribution requirements of the trial, you must refer them to a concessional service where practicable. Details of other services may be obtained through the Family Relationship Advice Line on 1800 050 321 or at Family Relationships Online www.familyrelationships.gov.au.

3.6 Distance or outreach services

Service providers may deliver distance or outreach services. Examples are videoconferencing (e.g. Skype) or telephone counselling, outreach visits to small communities, or inventory style education via email. Service providers will include those services on the *Stronger Relationships* trial panel application form. The availability of distance or outreach services may be indicated on the panel list or elsewhere on the DSS website.

4 Reporting

4.1 Data Reporting

Service providers must meet their data collection and reporting obligations and work in accordance with the requirements described in their grant agreement.

4.2 Hot Issues and Media

Demand for, and increased public, media or political interest/scrutiny will periodically spike due to Hot Issues, including:

- something that is of interest to the target group;
- launches of new initiatives; and
- parliamentary proceedings, including senate estimate hearings and question time.

Identifying these Hot Issues and sharing the information with DSS will enable more proactive service delivery responses.

Service providers must also alert DSS of any less urgent issues, particularly where they affect services to clients.

DSS must be informed if service providers are planning to engage with the media. It is important that DSS is made aware in advance of what issues will be raised as this will allow DSS time to prepare for any follow-up enquiries and/or to brief relevant stakeholders as necessary.

4.3 Critical Incidents and Service Delivery Issues

Aside from the standard reporting, *Stronger Relationships* trial service providers must report critical incidents to DSS. DSS is also interested in hearing about any issues relating to the delivery of the *Stronger Relationships* trial and maintains an Issues Register to track, collate, consider and assist to resolve, where possible, service issues. This provides a system to understand where there are similar issues across the jurisdictions.

5 Complaints

Service providers must have an 'internal complaints procedure' in place and it must be prominently displayed. The 'internal complaints procedure' can include the complaint being handled by the organisation running the service.

Section 6 of the Families and Communities Programme, Families and Children Guidelines Overview further outlines the process for dealing with complaints and escalation, including to DSS.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman can also investigate complaints about the actions and decisions of Australian Government agencies to see if they are wrong, unjust, unlawful, discriminatory or just plain unfair.

6 Grant Administration

Grant Agreement Managers are the first point of call for contact with the Department. They will provide assistance with queries relating to planning, data and reporting, or any new issues that arise under these Operational Guidelines.

7 Glossary

Clients – see Eligible Couples.

DSS – The Commonwealth Department of Social Services.

Eligible Couples – two people who are in a committed intimate relationship (including engaged, marriage, de facto and same-sex couples) who have registered and received a Reference Number and who meet the eligibility requirements specified in the Guidelines.

Eligible Provider – a service provider who meets all of the eligibility requirements specified in the Guidelines to become a member of the Provider Panel for the *Stronger Relationships* trial. The publishing of an Eligible Provider on the Provider Panel does not equate with endorsement from the Commonwealth of Australia.

Families and Communities Programme – The Families and Communities Programme supports families, improves children’s wellbeing and increases the participation of vulnerable people in the community to strengthen family and community functioning. The Programme provides a range of services, predominantly focussed on early intervention, prevention and support, including assistance for relationship breakdown.

Family Relationships Online – Family Relationships Online is a resource for all families (whether together or separated) with access to information online about family relationship issues, ranging from building better relationships to dispute resolution.

FOFMS – the Department’s online funding management system, which approved *Stronger Relationships* trial service providers use to record performance of and claim grant payments for Funded Services.

Funded Services – services specified in Item B of the Grant Agreement Schedule that DSS has approved to be provided to Eligible Couples as part of the *Stronger Relationships* trial.

Inventory style relationship education –services that include evidence-based questionnaires and inventory resources in assessing couple functioning and building relationship skills, such as PREPARE/ENRICH and FOCUS.

NGO – Non-Government Organisation.

Reference number – the reference number that Eligible Couples receive when they register to receive a *Stronger Relationships* trial service.

Vulnerable Persons – a child or an individual aged 18 years and above who is or may be unable to take care of themselves, or is unable to protect themselves against harm of exploitation by reason of age, illness, trauma or disability, or any other reason.

8 Version Control

Version	Changes	Date
1.0	Approved Operational Guidelines	13 June 2014
1.1	Corrections to Approved Operational Guidelines	1 August 2014