A Guide to Reviews in Community Service Agencies

DAVID ADAMS, B.A. (Hons), B.S.W., M.A., Grad Dip. Pub. Pol., currently Executive Officer, Child Welfare and Regional Services, Deaprtment for Community Welfare, Tasmania.

1984/85 Welfare Standards Project Officer, Children's Welfare Association of Victoria

ABSTRACT

Statutory and coluntary community welfare agencies are increasingly unertaking 'reviews'. However, there is limited understanding of the wider social policy events influencing the form and function of reviews. This article focusses on reviews in voluntary agencies and suggests reasons for the increase in level of review activity and provides practical guides on achieving a successful review process.

A GUIDE TO REVIEWS IN COMMUNITY SERVICE AGENCIES

One of the rapidly growing trends in both government and non government community services agencies is towards 'reviews'. Of the 70 member agencies of the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria over 20 have initiated reviews during 1984 and 1985, and over 18 reviews were commenced in 1986.

Thesee child, adolescent and family welfare agencies provide a range of services including: family support; fostering; adoption; residential care; community development; early childhood and housing services. The agencies vary greatly in size and number of services provided. Most are managed by either traditional Boards or by community based committees. They operate on a mixture of public and private funds with an increasing tendency towards reliance on government funding. Agencies of all types are undertaking reviews.

From examination of these reviews to date it is possible to identify some of the more recent social policy trends generating reviews in community service agencies.

Firstly, increasing demands for demonstrated accountability and cost effectiveness, particularly for expenditure of public funds in a shrinking resource environment.

Secondly, shifts in the design and implementation of social policy, as evidenced by the changing roles of Commonwealth, State and Local Governments, and the non-government sector in community services. More specifically, for example, Victoria is witnessing the introduction of a 'Social Justice Strategy', 'communitarian' service delivery models and more recently, 'purchase of service contracting' with Government agencies. The increasing dependence of voluntary agencies on government funds, coupled with increasing government propensity to give policy direction to agencies, is leading to a re-examination of perceived mandates and a search for future roles. For many agencies the traditional political and financial community support structures have been eroded and this is generating the search for a new legitimacy.

Thirdly, increasing attention is being directed towards quality of service issues and the development of 'outcomes focused' service effectiveness measures.

WHAT IS A REVIEW

A review is a type of macro-evaluation with the following special characteristics. A review:

* operates over a length of time usually months;

* covers all aspects of an agency's operations;

* focuses on future options at the level of goals and policies (often referred to as "Future Directions Plan");

* provides a comprehensive description of existing arrangements;

* involves widespread consultation, using a range of methods;

* inputs a range of systemic values for assessment;

* details specific recommendations in a written report;

* usually is reported in a public document;

* has specific terms of reference and stages of activity;

* has the expectation of implementation.

Unlike program evaluation which essentially assesses effectiveness in terms of given objectives, reviews assess program effectiveness both within the context of overall agency goals, and locate program and agency goals in the context of wider systemic events eg. changing community needs, shifting resource environments, government policy initiatives etc. Reviews this incorporate and sythesize a range of planning, monitoring and evaluative functions.

WHY HAVE A REVIEW

Agencies tend to initiate reviews for one or more of the following reasons associated with the broader social policy trends noted earlier:

1. A specific crisis threatening program and/or agency existence.

2. A more general concern developing over time within and outside the agency of a need to reassess directions and relationships.

3. As a routine component of ongoing planning/ evaluation processes.

4. To give expression to accountability through a public reasoned elaboration of activities and plans.

It is from these reasons that the goals of review can usually be distilled. Where there are specific goals, it is essential that they be identified early in the process. The main reason for this is that various people may have quite different and conflicting goals which may not be apparent from the terms of reference. The phrase 'hidden agenda' is the most common expression of this situations.

A goal here is simply an expected outcome. Some reviews have expected outcomes before they commence, others do not. Most reviews have the general goal of 'updating' or 'looking at future directions' but this is quite different to a specific goal, e.g. to terminate programs or to decentralise programs.

Since many reviews do not have specific goals, they tend to rely on 'terms of reference' for guidance. These usually establish the review structure, procedural parameters and the objectives to be achieved. These objectives tend to be stated in terms of such as:

"to make recommendations on . . . ";
"to provide practical advice on . . . ";
"to suggest options for implementing . . . ";
"to develop guiding principles for . . . ".

One important 'unintended' outcome of reviews can be the increase in people's awareness, knowledge and skills developed through the educative and supportive processes associated with a review. The importance of this outcome should not be under-estimated and the review should be structured to support it.

WHY DO REVIEWS RUN INTO SO MANY PROBLEMS?

Many reasons contribute to minor or major review problems. The major problems (e.g. where the review is abandoned or recommendations shelved) tend to be associated with one or more of the following situations:

* Failure to make clear or agree upon the purpos(s) of review, reflected in lack of commitment by key stakeholders (eg. staff, clients, management), mistrust, uncertainty over ownership or responsibility for implementation.

* Inadequate resources to undertake the review, particularly time, staffing, knowledge/skills and information (eg. lack of or contradictory policies making it difficult to know what is being reviewed).

* Unrealistic expectations, particularly with regard to recommendations and the perceived time frame within which change could occur. The operational effectiveness of the recommendations must be balanced against the political feasibility of implementation.

In short, these situations reflect a failure to establish the legitimacy and feasibility of the form and content of the review with the key stakeholders.

WHEN TO CONDUCT A REVIEW

The reasons for review noted earlier (crises, general concern, routine activity, accountability) will usually determine timing. Most agencies that conduct routine reviews tend to space them 1-3 years apart.

It is very important to build reviews into mainstream agency activity and not to think of them as discrete activities at an arbitarary point in time. An agency that has ongoing planning and monitoring processes is likely to avoid the first and probably the second reasons for most existing reviews. Information will be readily accessible at the time of review and in all likelihood, the review outcomes will be less of a surprise than they tend to be for agencies without ongoing planning, monitoring and evaluation.

NEGOTIATING WITH GOVERNMENTS

For many voluntary agencies undertaking reviews, governments are playing an increasingly important role, yet many agencies are uncertain as to what issues should be negotiated. These points below are designed to promote co-operation and avoid the 'adversary' approach developing before, during, or after the review. The points to be negotiated with governments are presented here as questions to be asked of government representatives. They are not 'trick' questions!

1. Are the goals and/or terms of reference considered adequate?

2. What is the purpose of the review as seen by government?

3. How would government wish to be involved in the review?

4. Are there any particular outcomes government is expecting or would wish to see?

5. Who does the government consider should be consulted as part of the review? How should they be consulted?

6. Are the resources considered adequate to meet the terms of reference?

7. What is the government's view of current/ future priorities in the region, community etc., and how is the agency seen to fit into this view?

8. Are agency management and services considered to be appropriate to target population need?

9. What resource commitment is there liekly to be from government for any recommend-ations.

Using these nine points as a negotiating framework will enable a more collaborative approach to develop between voluntary agencies and statutory authorities.

TIMING

It is often strategically useful to involve key stakeholders (eg. resource providers; clients; staff; government) in the very early stages of a review, i.e. before the terms of reference are finalised. This will help ensure the review is seen as relevant to such groups and is also likely to result in more support for the review process and outcomes. It is important that all parties in a review understand each other's position statements.

Terms of reference can be interpreted quite widely, hence some time should be devoted to simply explaining the review process to others. Agreement may not be essential but understanding is. In particular, the status of the recommendations (likelihood and timing of implementation) and ownership of the final report should be negotiated.

ORGANISATION OF REVIEWS

Review organisation depends on a number of factors:

* purpose/terms of reference;
* resource and skills available;
* scope of tasks, in particular, scope of consultations;
* location of agency.

A very simple and common review structure is:

AGENCY

REVIEW MANAGEMENT TEAM

TASK GROUP   TASK GROUP

CONSULTATIONS   CONSULTATIONS

Review Management

This refers to the key personnel conducting the review. Agencies have tended to use one of three models, the agency director, peer reviewers or consultants. Where peer reviewers or consultants are employed, the agency director is usually the key contact person.

Key personnel conducting the review are usually supported by one or more specialist task groups or committees. On occasions, these groups merge with the review management. On others, they have quite separate functions. These groups are usually organised around one or more of the following:

* individual goals/terms of reference;
* agency programs (eg. fostering, adoption);
* agency management (eg. finances/ administration);
* consultation categories (eg. staff, clients, community);
* geographical boundaries.

The main functions of these task groups are:-
* to identify the specific tasks of the reviews;
* to organise the completion of those tasks.

Most of the 'nuts and bolts' of reviews are undertaken by task groups. The number and constitution of task groups depend primarily on the purpose of the review and size of the agency. To date, most agencies have used between one and three task groups with between 5 and 10 members each. Task groups are mostly made up of agency personnel and representatives of the key people/groups to be consulted with. Most task group time is spent on collating and structuring information to be communicated either to workshops or to the review management. This 'structuring' is most important as it involves the interpretation of review information and its synthesis into options and recommendations.

CONSULTATIONS

Whilst the task groups can be part of the general consultation process, there are usually a series of other consultations targetted at specific groups and employing a range of information gathering techniques. Many of the following techniques can

be used in combination. Some are more suited to particular circumstances than others, and it is important to consider which technique(s) is most appropriate, given knowledge of the target population; purpose of the consultation; resources and skills required. the more common techniues are:
* social surveys (eg. questionnaire);
* public submissions;
* workshops, seminars and conferences;
* public meetings;
* individual/group interviews.

All these techniques require special skills if they are to be properly implemented.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN A REVIEW

Whilst numbers will vary depending on the purpose of the review, timelines, and available resources, at a minimum the following key stakeholders should be involved, directly or indirectly:
* staff and management (including non-professional staff and unions);
* service consumers and/or their representatives;
* resource providers;
* service providers in the agency's network;
* relevant statutory authorities;
* potential resource providers;
* interested community individuals and groups.

A direct form of involvement would be to include these categories of people in the design of review goals, in the review management team, on task groups and in the decision making/implement-ation of recommendations.

Indirect involvement would be to consuslt these categories of people through an essentially agency controlled review process. Indirect involvement which maintains agency control over the review procewss or form needs to ensure that the key constituents are able to give input as to the legitimacy of the form of the review and not simply input on substantive review matters. Where this simple condition of review involvement has been met, a higher degree of understanding and support for review outcomes will be generated.

IMPLEMENTATION

It is quite common for people to believe that the outcome of a review is a report with recommendations. This is only true where the outcome is a ratification of the status quo. In most reviews however change is a recommended outcome and the achievement of that change is a critical phase of a review and not separate from it. Three related problems follow from this separation of implementation from the review report.

1. In the ongoing review process the human support necessary to ensure implementation is not developed. In particular peoples energy is directed towards the production of a report and there is little energy left for implement-ation.

2. Similarly the administrative feasibility of implementation is not assessed. For example recommendations bear no relation to available or potential resources.

3. The process of implementation is not spelt out: Who is to implement? How? When? With what?

For implementation of recommendations to be effective, those people where support is required (staff, managements, clients, (resource providers) must:

- have access to the recommendations,
- understand the recommendations,
- be committed to implementation of recommendations,
- have the capacity for implementation — basically energy, skills and material resources.

CONCLUSION

Many agencies undertake reviews only in times of crisis and a crisis is not a good time to suggest a planning framework for a review be given priority. Lack of planning however is a major contribution to both the necessity for reviews in times of crisis and a contributor to many review failures.

The following checklist contains the basic issues to be addressed in planning agency review, and suggest the practical steps to be taken in designing and implementing a review process.

BASIC STEPS IN A COMPREHENSIVE AGENCY REVIEW

STEP 1
A review process is initiated by one or more persons for clearly identified reasons.

STEP 2
Key potential participants meet to:
  (i) agree on who should participate in review planning and implementation;
  (ii) to plan and review and implement it.

STEP 3
Strategic Plan for Review
  (i) agreement on goals of the review;
  (ii) agreement on key guiding principles of the review;
  (iii) agreement on review objectives:
    - who is to do what (task allocation);
    - over what period of time (time frame);
    - how (methods for consultation; resolving conflicts; use of internal/external reviewers etc.)
  (iv) feasibility assessment:
    - are the resources available?
    - whose support is required for completion of the review and implementation of recommendation? How will understanding and commitment be achieved?
    - are the time lines feasible?

STEP 4
Implementation of Evaluation/Review Stages

Stage 1:
- What are the key guiding principles?
- What weightings are given to these goals/objectives and guiding principles?

Stage 2:
- What are the specific activities fo the agency?
- How are they resources?

Stage 3:
- What indicators are used to measure outcomes?
- What is the relationship between outcomes and goals/objectives/guiding principles, ie. are goals and objectives being achieved?

Stage 4:
- What is the relationship between agency programs/structure and wider community needs, methods of service delivery, priorities for the future, levels of resourcing, supports and barriers etc.?

STEP 5
Assessment of information and development of recommendations for future directions.

STEP 6
Implementation of recommendations.

STEP 7
Establishing monitoring procedures to facilitate the next review.

NOTES TO CONTRIBUTORS

1. Manuscripts should be typewritten on one side only on A4 paper, with double spacing and wide margins. Three copies should be submitted, and the approximate number of words stated.

2. References should be referred to in the text by giving, in brackets, the surname of the author and should be listed in numerical order at the end of the article, as follows:

   BOOKS: Author's name and initials; year of publication (in brackets); title of book underline; publisher, page reference, if appropriate.

   ARTICLES: Author's name and initials; date of publication (in brackets); title of article; abbreviated title of journal underlined; volume and number.

3. Footnotes should be kept to a minimum.

4. Each article should be prefaced with a brief resume.

5. Contributors are invited to submit a brief biographical note and a current photograph suitable for printing.

6. All manuscripts submitted will be reviewed by three referees. Manuscripts may be accepted for publication, returned for revision or rejected. The Editor's decision is final.

7. All manuscripts and editorial communications should be addressed to:
   The Editor,
   Australian Child and Family Welfare,
   C/- Department of Social Work,
   La Trobe University,
   Plenty Road,
   Bundoora, Vic.

   All Book Reviews should be addressed to: The Book Review Editor, at the above address.