

In the Best Interests of the Child

Report on the North Region Community Consultations

Communities of:

- **McBride**
- **Valemount**
- **Mackenzie**

January 2003

In the best interests of the child...

This report is dedicated to children living in the northern communities and to families, service providers and community members who are working hard to make a difference in the lives of children.

Communities told us the best interest of the child must remain at the centre of all change. They told us that their greatest strength is working together and that the system must strengthen communities, not divide them.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the consultation forums – for sharing your stories, your feelings, your opinions and your ideas.

The challenge is to create a uniquely northern service delivery system that builds on the strengths of the communities, to put resources where they will do the most good and to support communities to work together to build a positive future for all children.

Table of Contents

1. Profile of Community Consultations	Page 4
2. Values and Principles of Service Delivery	Page 5
3. Community Strengths	Page 7
4. Key Community Issues.....	Page 10
5. Community Development and Service Delivery Strategies.....	Page 13
6. Financial Management Strategies.....	Page 18
7. Board Composition and Linkages	Page 19

1. PROFILE OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

The consultations were locally organised and reflect the differences between communities.

Valemount and McBride decided to hold two consultation forums on the same day (Nov. 6, 2002). Because of the close interrelationships between the communities and the commonality of many services and resources one session was held in Valemount in the afternoon and one in McBride in the early evening. It was believed that this would allow for community members from either community to attend a forum. Youth were invited to attend the forums but no youth were able to attend.

The forums were organised by Robson Valley Home Support Society in consultation with other community persons and agencies.

Mackenzie held an afternoon forum for service providers and an evening forum for both service providers and community members (Nov. 28/02). The community did not hold a specific youth forum and no youth attended either session.

The forums were organised jointly between Mackenzie Counselling Services and the local Ministry of Children and Family Development Office.

Attendance

Name of Community	Attendance Profile
Valemount Afternoon session	10 participants including one person via teleconference Service Providers/education/foster parents/Mayor
McBride Evening Session	10 Participants Service Providers/MCFD/education/health/municipal council/community
Mackenzie Afternoon Session	Six Participants MCFD/Service Providers/Foster Parents/Education Community Planning Committee Member: Glen Schmidt
Mackenzie Evening Session	33 Participants: community, schools, service providers, health programs, foster parents

2. VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Each community has uniqueness to its service delivery networks, communication and presenting challenges that reflect the diversity within the communities.

Some values and principles that were either directly discussed or implied within discussions are as follows:

- **The best interests of the child are paramount**

- **Access**

Transportation and lack of access to specialized services was cited as a problem for all communities. Travel to Prince George is required for many services.

Many services are provided through outreach. This creates some difficulties for communication, stability and predictability of service.

Communities also described local access issues such as multiple agency/service locations.

There was support in all communities for the concept of co-location.

Home visiting options for families was seen as an important component of service.

- **Open communication**

Communication between agencies was generally described as good but could be improved. Awareness of agency programs, changes, innovations are not always known throughout the communities. Transience of some services also creates some communication difficulties. There was also some reference to agency territoriality that created some obstacles to communication.

- **Integrated/collaborative case planning**

All communities supported the concept of integrated case planning.

- **Community Development**

Each community described community development initiatives that had been implemented and had new ideas for broader community involvement in services. Many of these initiatives go beyond the scope of the new authority(s) but are seen as important in providing for the safety of children and families and involve the whole community.

- **Professionalism/Staff Support**

The need to support/train/retain professionals in the community was frequently mentioned. Strategies to encourage this support were discussed.

- **Community involvement in decision making**

Meaningful local input into program planning and development, policy and decision making is important to all communities.

- **Comprehensiveness of services**

Communities want as comprehensive range of services that can be provided. If these services cannot be provided locally then it is important that they have access to a comprehensive network of resources as close to home as possible with the least number of barriers.

- **Evaluation**

Evaluation tools, previous studies, baseline measures etc. are viewed as important components for reviewing effectiveness of current programs, promoting informed service delivery changes and advocating for new program development.

- **Relationship**

The success of new governance and service delivery models is dependent on relationships. The relationship between the authorities and communities will be critical. Relationships with clients and between agencies are also critical for successful service delivery. Some components of the relationship include compassion, listening, friendliness, respect and open communication.

3. COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

All communities have strong and committed persons who will help promote the safety and well being of children, youth and families. This includes service providers, health care programs, education, parents and foster parents, local government representatives, business and others.

Local initiatives and cooperation between agencies, various levels of government, service clubs and faith communities is apparent.

During the consultations, each community discussed problem-solving strategies readily. Once the parameters were known (i.e. budget cuts) opposition and apprehension were expressed, but then forum participants looked at current strengths and creative solutions to a number of the barriers being encountered in service delivery.

Some comments are noted (Robson Valley). This means the statement is applicable to Valemount and McBride

Community	Strengths
Valemount	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Response to incidence of domestic violence: development of a network of safe homes for women and children. These can be utilized in emergencies or as part of a planned leaving (Robson Valley) - Strong network of foster parents (Robson Valley) Foster care can be appropriate and helpful but new ideas are needed to help prevent harmful effects of splitting families. - Block Watch programs (provides safety for children) - Faith community involvement: a local pastor (has now moved) had good involvement with youth. Needed again in community. Need to recruit similar people with similar skills - Interagency meetings do take place. Existing committee consists of social services, village, RCMP, schools, Metis, paramedics etc. - A small restorative justice (community work service) program - To assist in keeping children safe visibility is important. This is achieved through Day Cares, freeschool, play school, mother goose programs etc. - Library also offers programs and visibility - There is a food bank - A small youth centre funded through Columbia Basin Trust

Community	Strengths
Valemount cont'd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is some co-location of service
McBride	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is because of people within the communities that things work. - This dedication and knowledge from within the community cannot be lost. - Robson Valley Home Support Society offers some parenting programs/support. (Robson Valley) - 90 per cent of MCFD work is family support: indicates high level of earlier intervention for families preventing subsequent removal/separation - Good communication between agencies and with families - Strong service provider network - Willingness to problem solve as a community

Mackenzie	<p data-bbox="526 898 1114 930">Afternoon Service Provider Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The child and youth care program (Mackenzie Counseling Services) has been beneficial for children with special needs - Limited school district speech and language and psychology services are an assistance - There was a group home that worked well but it is now closed - Public Health services have been valuable. This is a good opportunity for in-home visiting and assisting parents in the home (Concern the public health nurse will be leaving town and questions if the position will be replaced) - Good links between Public Health and MCFD to assist families - All agencies working toward the best interests of children <p data-bbox="526 1612 797 1644">Evening Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mackenzie Counseling Services working well - Success ingredients: listening, compassion, communication, friendliness, out of office services - Training for professionals and parents - Good range of parenting programs - Recreation centre is good. Also has a good understanding of children with special needs
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Mackenzie cont'd

- Community has a good understanding of special needs children (but could be improved)
- Infant Development Program valuable: Home visiting component of program is important
- Supported child care
- Strong willingness of people to work together: i.e. Health Nurses, RCMP, MCFD, agencies, education
- Pre-schools, daycare available with qualified staff. Have some flexibility for extended hours. More flexibility helpful
- School programs work together with community. School based teams include outside persons to ensure planning is coordinated.
- There are team meetings and specialists working together
- Teachers and community agencies take time to provide explanations of disabilities to peers
- Library offers arts and crafts as well as traditional library services
- Church youth groups/recreation programs
- Children who witness violence program works well (early intervention helps reduce future problems)

4. KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES

All communities are concerned about the effect of budget reductions to their community. Reductions across government are severely impacting communities and their overall capacity (i.e. increased volunteerism) to support the goals of the new authority. As one community voiced “if you cut any more there won’t be anything left”.

Transportation and access to services are a major concern in all communities as they are all a two to three hour drive from Prince George on highways that may have treacherous winter conditions. Many specialist services are not available, or are available only seasonally. These are rural areas where there are local transportation barriers to accessing services. In the case of Mackenzie, the service area also covers remote villages with limited access.

There was concern that the creation of a regional authority will lead to greater centralization of services to Prince George with decreased local service and service planning. The communities’ experience with changes to Health and Education raises fears that this will occur with Child and Family Services.

Recruitment, retention and stability of professionals in the community were raised as issues. This is an ongoing concern in the North but needs to be addressed by the new authority as a priority.

The multi-governance model was raised as an issue by all. Each community provided a strong message that all governance authorities need to plan and provide services collaboratively and seamlessly.

Community	Key Community Issues
<p>Valemount</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stronger communication between school district and MCFD - Many services provided in Prince George. Travel is a problem for families (Robson Valley) - Access to services may also include such things as teaching children to call long distance - Families basic needs not being met - Unemployment and job losses - Children in care and others accessing services can be stigmatized in small communities (Robson Valley and Mackenzie comments) Public education required. - Development of trust an issue. Confidentiality important in small communities. Need strong professional ethics and policies - Many of our current services are band-aids. Overriding social issues such as poverty, exposure to

Community	Key Community Issues
Valemount cont'd	<p>media violence, substance abuse etc. have to be addressed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two-governance model: the community is too small to be separating programs. Need to look at options to work together - Concerns about how services will be provided with mixed/blended families - Close working relationships with Community Living Services also required. “we do not want to foster division within the community” - Children and families should be the common denominator - Frustration expressed by foster parents that information is not provided to them if a member of Federation. Information needs to be provided to all foster parents.
McBride	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community needs jobs and employed people to promote child welfare issues. Job losses significant - Funding for programs has been decreased throughout the years. Community believes current funding is inadequate - More volunteers are need but there are fewer people volunteering - Staffing stability an issue (Robson Valley) - Policies and practice regarding confidentiality, sharing of information presents barriers. (i.e. agencies carpooling with MCFD, current barriers to co-location) - Staffing “critical mass” Backfilling of positions for holidays, illness and when tasks take persons to other communities (<i>All communities</i>)
Mackenzie	<p>Afternoon Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concern about specialized services in PG and travel time and cost to access these services. Also seasonal provision of these services. - Three General Practitioners in town. No psychiatry/psychology (School District has limited psychology services) - High proportion of FASD children and youth - Pediatricians in Prince George - One adult mental health counselor in Mackenzie - Perception Prince George gets all the services with few going to Mackenzie

Community	Key Community Issues
Mackenzie cont'd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stigma associated with attending services in small town - Many persons afraid and embarrassed to access services - MCFD short FTE's. Also, lack of stable supervision with multiple team leaders over the years. - Training and access to training for professionals an issue (<i>all communities</i>) - Many children may be boarding in Mackenzie to go to school etc. - Foster parents concerned that move to new authority structure may affect TAX STATUS. This is a legal issue to be reviewed by new authority. - Service responsibility for large geographic area with remote villages Evening Session - Recruitment and retention of professionals. - Increased pressure and burn-out rates for professionals when job and service cuts occur - Some people leave community for education but do not return. Examples provided where people did return to provide service - Concerns regarding older males dating young girls (population demographics) - Concern a decrease of services (i.e. mental health) over the past five years. - If services not provided in early years youth end up in youth justice system - Many financial pressures on families when mills shut down for periods of time. Financial uncertainty with closures and cutbacks. - A union town. Difficult for youth to get jobs and work experience. - Many aboriginal children from bands outside of BC - There is a large gap between "have" and "have not" children. Many families cannot afford travel to access services so some children do not receive service. Others end up in youth justice system. - School closures and cutbacks an issue

5. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SERVICE DELIVERY STRATEGIES

“Don’t fix what isn’t broken” was an important message provided by all communities. To build on current community strengths and capacity was seen as the foundation for change and growth. This however, was not meant to imply a message that “status quo” was desirable. Service delivery options for change were discussed in all forums.

The involvement of the whole community to address social welfare issues was identified as both a strength and a challenge. Communities did not identify specific services that should be core to the new authority, but preferred to discuss a range of services important for the health and welfare of children and families. There was a willingness to look at new ideas and models to strengthen programs and service delivery even though it may be done under significant fiscal pressures and constraints.

Service delivery components identified at the forums include the following:

- Child protection services
- Child, youth and adult mental health services
- Drug and alcohol services
- Youth justice (including restorative justice concepts)
- Family support programs (both child protection and prevention focus)
- Early childhood programs
- Life skills/Job skills
- Adolescent preparation for independence
- Assessment and treatment
- Individual and group counseling
- Mentoring
- Respite care
- Infant Development Programs
- In-home programs
- Programs for special needs children, youth and adults (including Community Living Services)
- Community development and support (i.e. block parenting, library programs, affordable and accessible recreation, volunteerism)
- Youth centres/groups
- Child care and supported child care
- Parenting programs
- Domestic violence
- Residential placements and supports
- Relationships with Health and Education programs
- Coordinated policies/programs with MHR

Service providers struggle with the day to day pressures of working with families and decreased resources to provide these services. There is also a lack of up to date knowledge of resources within communities. Concepts around the development of new co-location models were discussed as well as strategies to improve inter-agency communication.

Community	Strategies
Valemount	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use Herztman’s community mapping to assist planning. Profiles in community similar to Vancouver downtown eastside. - MCFD does not have office. Worker “working out of back of car”. - This affects community relationship with MCFD in many ways. Lack of communication, trust, reporting patterns and feedback etc. Need office and presence at least one day a week. Possibilities for sharing of office explored. - “might as well be silent, nobody cares” - Involving parents in phoning in reports can be helpful in some cases. - Issues of domestic violence, alcohol and drug issues, power imbalance discussed and community programs seen as important - Important for programs to be in community to develop trust with clients and between programs - Important for children to see their workers - A number of programs have part time positions so some coordination opportunities discussed. - Use technology (i.e. internet) to assist communication, program updates etc. Use of technology also helps parents know what services are available - To keep children safe visibility is important. Use of daycare, preschool, mother goose programs etc. - Library another venue for providing visibility. - Food bank another venue - Public education regarding programs, child health and safety needed. Also reduces stigmatization - Block watch/parenting - Day cares important but cost is an issue - Community development is essential. Also someone to help with volunteer recruitment, support, supervision etc. to ensure safety for

Community	Strategies
<p>McBride cont'd</p> <p>Mackenzie</p>	<p>groups (Robson Valley). These are missed and worked well. (One program still in place through Robson Valley Home Support.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tutoring programs would be helpful - More daycare and supported childcare - Need teaching child care programs so that parents learn parenting skills. Helps prevent children from coming into care - Use extended family where possible but not always available. - Need one-to-one counseling for families when things break down. - Consider all aspects of child welfare and not just MCFD (Child Protection) i.e. food and nutrition <p>Afternoon Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ministries/authorities have to coordinate - Respite services important - Many special needs children need ongoing care. - For some special needs children independent living may be a goal but need supports. - Problems encountered at 19. Need to ensure transition supports and planning in place. - There will be stressors for youth as they move through this transition - Some children have to live outside the home. These children need the support of counseling services. - Caregivers also need support through education and suggestions in dealing with difficult behaviors. - Child welfare services could be provided out of different locations where there is communication, shared services etc. (i.e. health unit, rec. centre, courthouse) - Shared service centres also reduce stigmatization - Outreach/in home services important - MCFD and school district need to work together. Develop positive social skills with children and youth. Look at early interventions. - Teaching assistance for some children important.

Community	Strategies
Mackenzie cont'd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessment important. Access to assessment - Concerns expressed regarding using IQ as measure for some services. Need functional vs. diagnostic assessment. - Life skills programs for youth - FASD programs - Child and youth care programs important - Day care - Parenting programs - Foster parenting/financial and support <p>Evening Session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programs for special needs children - Infant Development Program / in-home programs - Access to specialized services - How will reduction of children in care affect front line workers? - Recognize the support needs of siblings of children with special needs - Life Skills Place; worked well but is now closed. Need a similar program to teach life skills, safety and establishes knowledgeable relationships. - Life skills for teens, young adults - Respite availability for parents: from short term during day to overnight/weekend - Respite for emergencies - Youth/young adult services - Need to have integrated services/offices. Don't have families going to different places - A lot of concern expressed at meeting regarding children with special needs. A number of people voiced need to ensure a broad range of services for general population of children/youth/families "at risk" - "children in the system are falling through the cracks" - Greater emphasis on prevention programs that target children who may be at risk - "do not take away services we currently have"

6. FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The communities spent different amounts of time looking at this issue. Some common themes were raised.

All communities discussed options that included moving services into different locations providing for more co-location and easier access for clients. The use of schools, recreation centres, courthouses, existing downsized government offices, health centres and libraries were raised as possible options for co-location. A number of benefits were cited to co-location including some cost reductions. As with transportation issues mentioned below, some barriers have been identified regarding confidentiality concerns that would need to be overcome. These are not insurmountable.

The costs associated with doing business with BCBC was also criticized with one community saying they could provide facility management services for less than the 20 per cent charged by BCBC.

A McBride forum participant wanted it clearly mentioned that if budget reductions take place for the community then these should also apply to the Minister's salary and office budget.

Budget savings were identified through some travel efficiencies. Numerous examples were given where travel could be coordinated for clients and for service providers between communities and to Prince George. Joint travel, coordination of appointments etc. would help. There are some barriers that exist (i.e. concerns about people sharing vehicles and confidentiality issues) that would need to be addressed.

There is a need to coordinate budgets between Health/Education/MCFD with some possible cost savings.

More efficient paper strategies (from double siding) to reduced paperwork required of professionals. There are a number of paperwork requirements that could be eliminated/streamlined (i.e. multiple assessment formats and reporting requirements).

Technologies (i.e. linked systems, Internet) could be better used to save money. Ensure there is a cap on administration costs to ensure more money goes to direct service delivery.

All communities are troubled by the appearance that a move to Regional Authorities is merely a downloading of provincial responsibility to communities. There are concerns that funding will not be sufficient to provide basic services and that it will then be left to communities to find the offsetting funding to provide these services.

The issue of fair share budget allocation was discussed in all areas.

7. BOARD COMPOSITION AND LINKAGES

All communities ask why they do not have direct representation on the board and believe this would be ideal. While asking, they also understand the practical difficulties with this and support the concept of the development of community advisory committee(s) (with strong cross-representation reflective of the community) and having an identified Board Liaison. The idea of ensuring there is adequate mix of urban and rural representation at the board level was important. Rotating board meetings in various communities was also presented as a way for communities to have their voice heard.

Community	Governance
Valemount	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If each community cannot have its own representative have a liaison board person specifically identified for each community. - Have a board comprised of representatives who reflect urban/rural mix and not just geographic areas - Board Liaison must know the communities they are liaising with. - Valemount already has an inter-agency committee that could provide the nucleus of an advisory committee - All governance authorities must work together
McBride	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Question regarding whether the board was to be an employer board, contracting board or a mix. Model will be a mixed one initially. - Concerns community gradually lost control and input to services (e.g. increased centralization in health and education sectors). - Governance Board has to be sensitive to small communities - Board has to be able to argue effectively for funding in areas where funding is inadequate. - Have to have a mechanism for local government input - Idea of an advisory committee with direct representation to the Board by the chair of the committee - Rural representative's to Board

Community	Governance
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication/cooperation between all authorities
Mackenzie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Authorities including Community Living Services need to work and plan together - Concern that one authority may have disproportionate funding/resources than other authorities - Need to look at the transfer process closely to ensure smooth transition for clients - Consideration for bonding/attachment issues for children living with foster parents and possible separations. Concerns for aboriginal children currently placed in non-aboriginal homes and attachment issues. - Fear of losing local control of services presently held in community - Advocacy should be part of Board role - Board knowledgeable of local services - Assign a liaison board member to Mackenzie - Mackenzie child Care Planning Council could act as a local planning committee.