

Evaluation of the Connecting Families Project: Executive summary

The Connecting Families project is an innovative pilot family support service that works with some of the most vulnerable families in Bridgend. These families have a range of complex needs, at least one of which will be relating to the wellbeing of a child. Connecting Families aims to work with the whole families to help them make changes that will improve the situation for the family as a whole as well as the child.

The Connecting Families evaluation aims to explore what stakeholders, including the Connecting Families team, service users, and other practitioners, felt were the main changes that families made since working with the service. It also aims to examine the circumstances under which the impacts were made, including a consideration of the implementation and delivery of the service.

Research was qualitatively driven to allow a range of stakeholders to express their opinions and feelings about Connecting Families in their own words. To gain the view of the service users, written responses about the project were obtained from all adult families members who have or are currently working with the service and a small focus groups provided an in depth insight into some families experiences. In addition, views from the service providers were gained through interviews with all current staff, focus groups with multi-agency partners and free written responses from some social workers associated with families involved. Due to practical constraints however, the views from children and have not been included, however, ensuring the wellbeing of children is the focus for professionals within the Connecting Families service.

The data identifies the changes to families in the following areas:

- Both parents and professionals recognised the value of improved **parenting skills and practice** through working with Connecting Families. Parents described gaining new techniques to help manage their own behaviour, as well as their child's. In some cases this was described as resulting in **preventing children from being removed from their homes**, or moving them away from being a Child in Need or being removed from social services completely.
- Better **family relationships** were also identified as an outcome of engaging with Connecting Families. This included improved relationships between adults as well as between parents and children. Parents reported that they learnt to value each other and the ability to 'talk more as a family' was seen as one of the key differences the families experienced participating in the service.
- A significant perception that came out of the in depth discussion with some families was that Connecting Families helped to facilitate the **broader wellbeing of the family**. Likewise, the team felt that due to the tailored and flexible approach of the service allowed families to address wider issues to improve their family situation in general.

- Increased **parental wellbeing and confidence** was commonly recognised outcome by parents from working with Connecting Families. This helped to facilitate parents doing more for themselves as well as for their children. Support from other services also helped parents address issues such as domestic violence or mental health which, in turn, helped their parenting ability.
- Help from key workers and the multi-agency partners with **practical issues** was also appreciated by a number of parents. This included support with housing and the home environment, claiming benefits and managing finances.
- Some parents felt that their **relationships with other services**, and social services in particular, had improved as a result of working with Connecting Families. However, this was not a universal feeling and the service was often seen as separate to and better than social services because of their voluntary and family-focused approach.
- Professionals and parents alike reported some examples of families implementing **sustainable** changes. In particular parents reported changes in their response to stressful situations and acknowledged the long term value of gaining new skills in parenting and managing family life.

A number of families believed that their involvement with the Connecting Families was life changing and helped them deal with a number of elements of family life as well as parenting. Such improvements to their lives were believed to be a result of their engagement with the service and many parents felt that if families were not able to make these changes then it was because they were not ready to change.

In terms of the delivery of the programme, that data highlighted the following key areas of positive experiences:

- The interventions were believed to be well suited and tailored to unique family needs. In particular, parents and professionals emphasised the importance of **flexible, whole family, strengths-based and motivational approaches**. In a minority of cases, some activities were not believed to be appropriate but the general sense from the data is that the interventions are well delivered, timely and effective.
- The trusting and respectful **relationships with key workers** were perceived to be crucial to a number of parents, some of which highlighted the value of the range of skills and experiences the key workers provided. Whilst positive experiences tended to be correlated with strong and fruitful relationships with key workers, the few that reported challenges with key workers also tended to be express more negative feelings about the service.
- The benefits the **multi agency nature** of the service to address a range of families needs were reported by both parents and professionals. In particular, the seamless integrated working with partners from the teams was

recognised. Some parents also emphasised the value of support from key workers in working with services outside of those directly involved in the multi-agency team.

Perceptions of parents and professionals demonstrate that, in a number of cases, these approaches helped to achieve the range of positive impacts upon families as discussed above. There were some negative experiences however, and it will be important to address these in the continued delivery of the Connecting Families service. Ensuring that families are willing to engage and work with Connecting Families with the common goal of improving the wellbeing of the child is central to the success of the service. Professionals and parents alike felt that if the timing and expectations were not right, the service has little chance of success. Where families and the Connecting Families team and partners work well together however, findings demonstrate the positive impact the service can have upon the lives of children and families involved.