

Evaluation of the Connecting Families Project: Process and Interim Impact Report

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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 family to help them make changes that will improve the situation for the family as a whole as well as the child.

Existing monitoring and performance data collected by the service suggests that within the first two years of operation Connecting Families has saved public sector agencies an estimated £1.5million. Reports produced by their Information Officer enabled Connecting Families to identify a numbers of positive outcomes following families' involvement with the service including; 34 children and young people being deregistered from the Child Protection Register, 6 children and young people being rehabilitated to their family homes and reductions in domestic abuse and missing persons callouts to the police.

This Connecting Families evaluation aims to build on these findings through providing an independent investigation into the delivery of the service. It 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 free response written answers about the project were obtained from 40 adult family members who have used or are currently working with the service and a small focus group 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 response written answers from some social workers associated with families involved. Due to practical constraints the views from children and young people 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 after the involvement of Connecting 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 no longer requiring the involvement of social services at all.

- 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 theme that came out of the in depth discussion with some families was that Connecting Families helped to facilitate the **broader wellbeing of the family**, for example through support with issues such as domestic violence. Likewise, the practitioners 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 a commonly recognised outcome by parents from working with Connecting Families. This helped 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.

These findings demonstrate that 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, the data highlighted the following key areas of positive experiences for families:

- The interventions were believed to be well suited and tailored to the unique needs of families. In particular, parents and professionals emphasised the importance of **flexible, whole family, strengths-based and motivational approaches**. In a minority of cases some interventions 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 express more negative feelings about the service.
- The benefits of 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 integration of partner agencies 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. However, there were also some messages from the findings on lessons to be learned to ensure the service is as effective as possible. These included:

- Improved awareness of the service and its referral process. This should contribute to ensuring that families are referred at the right time when they are ready and willing to change.
- Ensuring that families are matched with the right worker was perceived as extremely important to ensuring a successful relationship is built.
- Maximising capacity of the service and involvement with partner agencies to facilitate more effective change.
- Continued monitoring with improved feedback forms for service users should enable the service to enhance future delivery.

Unsurprisingly, one key theme that emerged was a link between families' negative experience and less effective engagement. 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 the children and families involved.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Connecting Families is an innovative, pilot family support project for complex and vulnerable families in Bridgend. To assess its implementation and impact, an independent researcher was commissioned to work with the project's Information Officer and other team members to conduct an evaluation of the service. The evaluation was conducted in the spring and summer of 2013 when the project had been operating for just over 18 months.

1.2 The main aims of this evaluation report are to provide some evidence regarding the impact of Connecting Families upon the families it works with and to examine the implementation and delivery of the service. The report will then make some recommendations about the continuation and potential expansion of the service including suggestions for tools to enhance monitoring and evaluation for future delivery.

Background to the Connecting Families project

1.3 Connecting Families is a Local Service Board (LSB) initiative in Bridgend. It works with the most complex and vulnerable families in the area who place a large and disproportionate demand on public services and their local communities. Connecting Families brings together partners from Bridgend County Borough Council, South Wales Police, the Department for Work and Pensions, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board, the Voluntary Sector and the Probation Service to provide an integrated support service that aids families with improving their lifestyles and behaviour.

1.4 The Bridgend County Borough Councils Corporate Plan 2010 – 2013 identifies six strategic themes that inform the overarching plan for Bridgend. These strategic themes are:

- 1) Strong Communities;
- 2) Young Voices;
- 3) Healthy Living;
- 4) New Opportunities;
- 5) Proud Past; and
- 6) Green Spaces.

1.5 These themes reflect the Welsh Government's vision of a bright future which was outlined in the Community Strategy for Bridgend 2009 – 2012. In the wider political context, the importance of 'keeping families together' has been highlighted as important to all family support services in England and Wales. In 2010, the UK government pledged to invest 30 million pounds over a four year period to support 120,000 'troubled' families to prevent relationship breakdown¹. From a more local perspective, elements of Connecting Families incorporate Bridgend Council's *Families Together Strategy* (2012), which sets the vision for

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/focus-on-families-new-drive-to-help-troubled-families>

families, outlines the needs of children, maps service availability and identifies gaps within service provision. Connecting Families also follows the *Integrated Working Framework* (Department for Education, 2012), which was developed as part of the Supporting Vulnerable Children Programme. This framework recognises that children, young people and their families are more likely to implement and sustain positive change if services are coherent and co-ordinated. This was evidenced in the paper *Integrated Working – A paving document* (2009) and set the scene for multi-agency working in terms of meeting the needs of children and young people.

1.6 In 2010 the LSB, which brings together representatives from key public organisations, commissioned some research to profile residents in Bridgend. This aimed to examine how effectively public services were working to improve the quality of life for individuals living and working in the area. The research identified the types of families that placed high demand on local public services. Findings suggested that a relatively small proportion of families, (47 at that time), placed the greatest demands on Bridgend's public services². These families were usually the most vulnerable with a range of complex needs. Consequently, the LSB resolved that the best way forward would be to implement a multi-agency team that could deliver bespoke services to the most complex and vulnerable families. Evidence gathered from studies of the Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS, see Thom, 2012), and the Westminster Recovery Project (see Thoburn et al, 2011) indicates that a more intense and coordinated multi-agency evidenced based model would be more effective at helping these families improve their circumstances. The team that would deliver this service was named Connecting Families.

1.7 Multi-agency working and collaboration are central to the Connecting Families Project because the team dovetails the other significant family support initiatives endorsed by Bridgend County Borough Council. These initiatives are:

- The Integrated Working Team: a proactive team focusing on early intervention and prevention, reducing the likelihood of families requiring higher threshold or statutory support from services;
- The Family Support Team: a statutory service that supports tier 2 and 3 families with additional needs around budgeting, parenting advice and disability;
- Action for Children: a charity that provides support services for children, young people and their families, including home visiting family support, advice and guidance, parenting programmes, drop in play sessions and parent and toddler facilities; and

² Unpublished scoping report. For more information, please contact the Bridgend LSB.

- The Western Bay Integrated Family Support Services (IFSS): a regional collaborative initiative unique to Wales consisting of partners from Bridgend, Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot Local Authorities and Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board. The IFSS provides 4 to 6 weeks of intense intervention to families, where parents are experiencing problems with substance misuse and/or domestic abuse. The model is underpinned by the Child and Family (Wales) Measure 2010 and associated regulations.

The Connecting Families Service

1.8 The aims of the Connecting Families Service are to:

- Improve long term outcomes for children, young people and their families;
- Reduce service dependency through the promotion of positive behaviour and lifestyle change; and
- Support the Welsh and UK Governments agendas of decreasing the national deficit.

1.9 The Connecting Families service draws on an evidence base of best practice to inform its delivery. The key aspects of the service are discussed below.

1.10 Multi-agency working

A recent literature review by Lea (2011) examined the body of work around families with complex needs including identifying good practice. Lea concludes that a multi-agency approach is an extremely important aspect of support and highlights that coordination and co-locating services can facilitate data sharing between services. Likewise, Flint et al (2011, p4) asserted that:

A multi-agency whole family approach and access to specialist services were also essential in providing the context for sustainable positive outcomes and beginning to address the underlying issues affecting vulnerable young people and their families.

1.11 A whole family approach

Whilst there are cases and issues where it would be inappropriate to involve the whole family, (see for example the work by Morris et al, 2008, on domestic abuse), a number of projects have adopted the whole family model. Morris (2012, and Morris et al 2008) also noted that the notion of the 'family' might need to be interpreted more widely in some circumstances to include, for example, extended family members. This has informed the design of the Connecting Families project. Drawing on the approach taken in the Westminster Family Recovery Project, the Information Officer creates 'genograms' to allow the key workers to recognise the composition of each family and engage with them accordingly.

1.12 Key worker for families

A few recent evaluations of family intervention programmes have identified the value of a dedicated individual that works with a family that have complex problems (see for example, York Consulting, 2013; Thom, 2010; York Consulting, 2011). This evidence suggests that workers who are professionally skilled at building consistent, respectful and trusting relationships with families and are able to work intensively with flexibility, drawing on multi-disciplinary support and resources in a timely and coordinated manner have an increased likelihood of affecting positive modifications within families.

1.13 Strengths-based working

Connecting Families also adopts a strength-based approach when helping families to generate change, which reflects the transition in family therapy towards strengths rather than deficit approach (see Saleebey, 1996; Nichols and Schwartz, 2004 and Walsh, 2002). Focusing on families strengths has been suggested to be an effective tool for facilitating engagement and positive family outcomes (Fauth et al, 2010; Henricson, 2012). An evaluation of the Integrated Family Support Service also highlights the value of families themselves appraising their family lives and directing changes (Thom, 2012).

1.14 Resilience Framework

Connecting Families utilise the Resilient Therapy matrix (see Hart, Bincow and Thomas, 2007). This framework has evolved from international research and learning in the study of human resilience. It provides practitioners with a strategic, pragmatic and systemic frame of reference and practice philosophy, which facilitates a coherent approach to building and generating resilience capital, with and within, individuals, families and communities.

1.15 By drawing on these key aspects of evidenced based best practice, the Connecting Families service aims to work with families to improve their outcomes by changing behaviour in a sustainable way. The above aspects will be considered in the process evaluation chapter, which examines how the Connecting Families users and practitioners perceive this approach to change. The evaluation aims to examine the progress made towards these aims, as well as considering the implementation and delivery of the Connecting Families project.

Monitoring Information

1.16 Connecting Families has an Information Officer employed as part of its team. This enables them to collect data on their service and monitor its progress and performance as the service continues to evolve. Data from the reports produced by the Information Officer provide some background information to this report. The evaluation is designed to support this data by gathering an insight from service users and practitioners into their experiences and opinions of the delivery of the service and the impact they perceive it can have on families' lives.

1.17 At the time of this research the Connecting Families service had four key workers, two consultant social workers, one group manager, one full time administrative assistant and one Information Officer. They also received at least one day a week designated time with professionals from partner agencies. This included Job Centre Plus, the local health board, educational psychologists, the probation service and police, through the LSB partnership. In addition there is support from some third sector agencies such as Hafan Cymru.

1.18 Some information regarding the delivery of the Connecting Families, based on information collected by the service, is detailed below:

- Connecting Families received **146 referrals** between August 1st 2011 and August 31st 2013.
- 58 of these families referred were **closed without any intervention** from Connecting Families.
 - 11 (19%) of the 58 families did not work with Connecting Families because they refused the support or did not sign the information sharing consent form.
 - 5 (9%) of the 58 families did not receive an intervention because the service was full to capacity.
 - The remaining 72% were closed mostly because the family was not suited to the intervention. For example they did not reach the highest tier in complexity needs or could be supported by another service.
- Connecting Families had **completed interventions** with 65 families (44.5% of families referred to CF).
 - 6 (9%) of these 65 families that had completed interventions with Connecting Families were closed because the family failed to engage.
- Connecting Families were **still working with** 22 of those families.

1.19 Data is also gathered on cost avoidance by the Information Officer. This is calculated by weighing up the potential costs if the families continued along their expected risk trajectories, against the costs that occur during and following their involvement with the Connecting Families service. This includes the costs of interventions conducted by Connecting Families professionals instead of outside agencies and the costs incurred to agencies despite Connecting Families intervention.

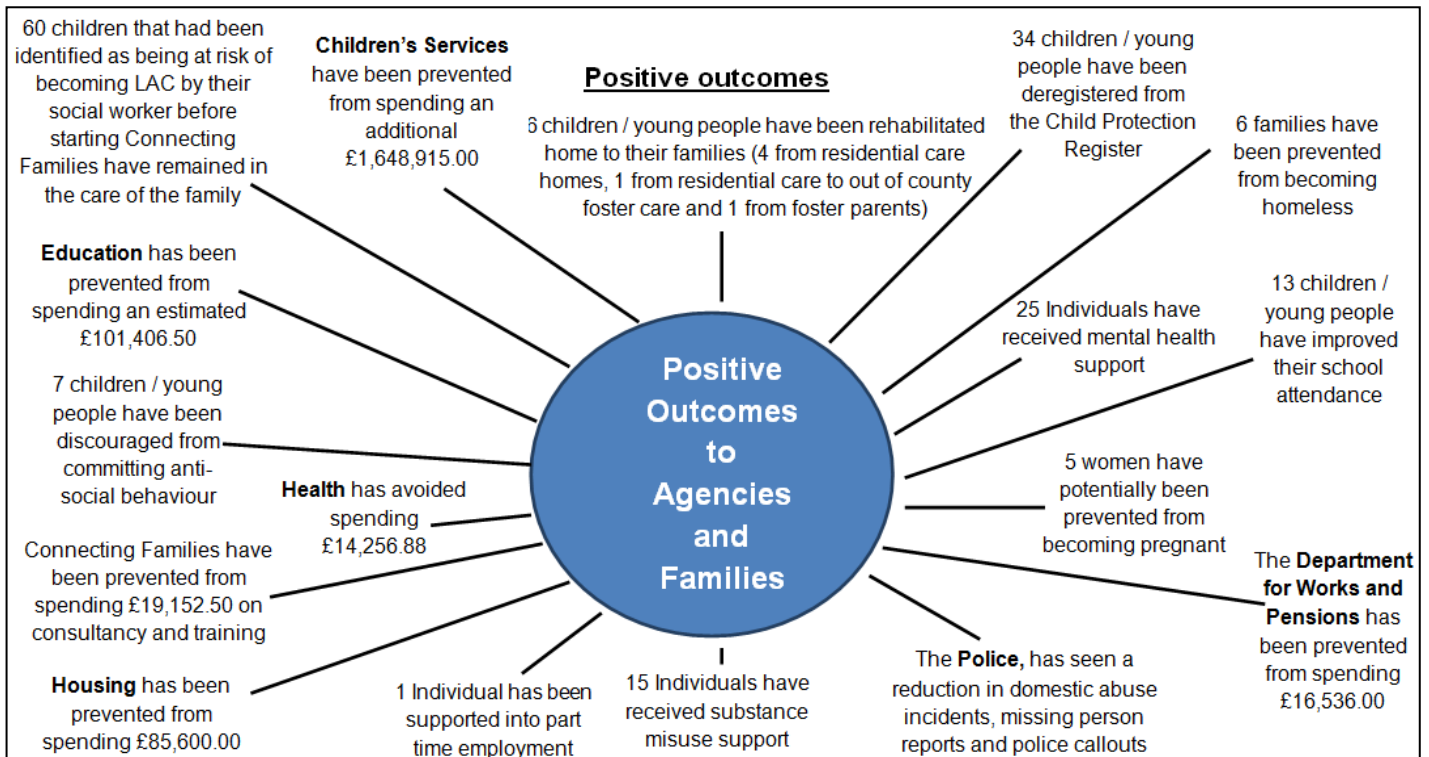
1.20 Within the first two years of operation Connecting Families has been estimated to have saved public sector services almost £1.5 million. Summary information on Connecting Families obtained from the Connecting Families monitoring reports³ is listed below (see Annex A for further information):

- The operational cost for Connecting Families (between August 1st 2011 and July 31st 2013) was estimated at £723,452. This is made up of £372,384 in the first year of operation and £351,068 in the second.
- Estimated cost avoided to public sector services was £2,147,693.65. This is made up of £1,234,644.15 during the first operational year and £913,049.50 during the second.

1.21 These costs are used as part of the performance data of the service. There is no control group or established counterfactual measure to allow the service to identify would costs were likely to be incurred without the Connecting Families intervention. Nevertheless, the data suggests that the service is able to make some substantial savings to local public services as well as making a difference to the lives of families it works with.

1.22 The report identifies the positive outcomes to agencies and families by August 2013 and is summarised in the following diagram.

³ For more information, see Marshall, K (2013) Cost Avoidance Summary Report August 2011 to August 2013 [available from Katrina.Marshall@bridgend.gov.uk].



Positive outcomes and cost avoided by Connecting Families. Source: Marshall, K. (2013).

1.23 Building on this data, the aim of this evaluation report is to explore perceptions of the delivery, implementation and impact of the Connecting Families service from the perspective of both the practitioners involved and the families they work with.

Report Structure

1.24 The remainder of this report is organised as follows:

- The **research design** for the evaluation is presented in the **Chapter Two**, which presents an outline of how data was collected. The research was designed 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.
- **Chapter Three** is the first results chapter and discusses the **interim impact findings** from the evaluation. This chapter is driven by the changes in family life, if any, that service users identified themselves as occurring following their involvement in the Connecting Families project. This data is supported and supplemented through the views of the practitioners working with the families. The key themes that emerged were:
 - Improved parenting practice and downgrading of the legal status of the child
 - Better family relationships
 - Broader wellbeing of the family

- Increased parental wellbeing and confidence
 - Help with practical issues
 - Positive relationships with other services
 - Sustainable changes and costs averted
 - Attribution of changes to Connecting Families
- The implementation and delivery of the Connecting Families service is explored in **Chapter Four** forming **the process evaluation**. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the elements of the program that the practitioners and other staff members reported as either beneficial or challenging when conducting the intervention. The views of the service users regarding the aspects of Connecting Families that they thought worked well or could be improved are then considered. The main areas covered are:
 - Effective interventions (such as using a whole family approach, strengths-based and motivational working, and ensuring interventions are family led, flexible and intensive)
 - The role of the key workers (such as the importance of; a trusting and respectful relationship, a range of skills and experience and taking a different approach to statutory services)
 - Multi-agency working and the role of enlisting
 - Receiving appropriate referrals through awareness of the service and its criteria and aims, the importance of timing and ensuring families have a willingness to engage
 - Finally, **Chapter Five** synthesises the main themes from the evaluation findings and suggests learning points through the presentation of the **conclusions and recommendations** from the report.

2. EVALUATION RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 The purpose of this research report was to provide a richer, detailed understanding about the impact and process of the Connecting Families project, this supplements the monitoring data is routinely gathered by the project's Information Officer.

2.2 The main aims of the evaluation were to:

- Examine the impact that Connecting Families has been perceived to make to the lives of families who have used the service.
- Gather evidence on the implementation and delivery of the Connecting Families service regarding what is working well and what could be done better to inform future practice

2.3 These aims form the structure for presenting the findings of the report. The interim impact of the Connecting Families project is considered in Chapter Three. The delivery of Connecting Families is then examined in the subsequent chapter.

2.4 To address these aims, and gather a more detailed picture of how the Connecting Families service is operating and making a perceived difference to people's lives, it was important to gather information from all stakeholders involved in the project. This included service users as well as providers. The decisive factor in creating the research strategy was to ensure that these stakeholders were able to express their own understandings and experiences rather than choose between pre-determined researcher defined responses. Qualitative methods are useful for exploring perceptions about a service because they provide an opportunity for all stakeholders to convey their feelings in their own words. Consequently the research was largely qualitatively driven.

2.5 A mixed method design was chosen, which allowed the most appropriate methods to be selected for each target group of stakeholders in accordance with the target population size and the nature and depth of the data required. The data collection tools chosen for each group of participants were as follows and will be discussed in further detail below:

- **Families** (service users): an open ended questionnaire was sent to all families that had previously worked with, or were currently working with, Connecting Families. There was also focus group discussion with a small sample;
- **Connecting Families team**: semi-structured interviews with each current member of the team;
- **Multi Agency partners**: a series of small focus groups with the majority of partners from agencies working with Connecting Families. This included professionals from health, police, Hafan Cymru, educational psychologists and probation; and
- **Social workers**: a short open ended email questionnaire was sent to social workers involved with the Connecting Families service.

Families that have worked with Connecting Families

2.6 Due to the relatively small scale nature of the Connecting Families project it was possible to offer every family that had worked with, or was currently working with Connecting Families an opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions about the service. A structured open ended questionnaire was posted to all adults within the family with a stamped addressed envelope for them to return their responses.

2.7 The questionnaire (see Appendix B) contained three questions. It asked the family members to describe:

- a) Three differences that working with Connecting Families made to the individual or family;
- b) The most important aspect of the service; and
- c) Any improvements that could be made to the service.

2.8 Those families who did not respond to the postal questionnaire were telephoned and asked to complete the questions over the phone. These responses were written down and repeated back to the service user to ensure that they agreed with what had been recorded. All responses were then thematically analysed. The overall response rate for the questionnaires was 48.2% (40 adults). The majority of the responses contained largely positive feedback. Whilst every effort was made to gain an insight into the experience of every family that worked with the service, it is possible that those families that did not reply could have provided further insight into what Connecting Families could do better. This could be an area for future research through improved feedback forms.

2.9 A small number of individuals (three) agreed to be interviewed jointly. The interview was semi structured in nature to ensure that individuals had the freedom to speak openly about their experiences of the service based around a few key questions. It also provided the researcher with an opportunity to gain a more detailed understanding of the 'participants' experiences of the service. The responses were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically with the other responses from families.

2.10 The postal questionnaire also invited respondents to take part in an interview and/or participate in an event run by the Connecting Families consultant social worker to inform future delivery and practice. This event did not form part of the formal evaluation. Respondents were informed that their questionnaire responses would be kept separately from their names and identifying information to help ensure anonymity in responses.

The Connecting Families team

2.11 To capture the views and opinions of the Connecting Families staff, semi structured interviews were conducted with current team members. This involved the Group Manager, two Consultant Social Workers, four Intensive Outreach Workers, two Administrative

Officers and the Information Officer. The interview contained ten questions that aimed to explore; working practices (including benefits and challenges), perceived impact on families, partnership working and suggested improvements for the future (see Appendix C). The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and the responses were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Multi-Agency Partners

2.12 The Connecting Families partners were invited to attend one of a few small focus groups. The participants were asked to discuss three aspects:

- a) Connecting Families: what works well? Any challenges / improvements?
- b) Multi Agency working: what works well? Any challenges / improvements?
- c) What, if any, impact/difference has Connecting Families made to the families they work with?

2.13 The groups discussed these issues and wrote down their answers together on flip chart paper which was then written up and analysed. The natural conversations that arose out of the interactions provided a rich amount of data from a larger sample given the limited amount of time.

Social workers and residential managers

2.14 To gain an understanding of how those who referred and worked with the families in the statutory service perceived Connecting Families, a number of social service staff were also asked to share their thoughts. All social workers involved with families that had worked with or were currently working with Connecting Families received an individual email asking them to provide feedback that would be written up and analysed anonymously. They were asked about any differences they felt the service may have made, what worked well and if there were any improvements that could be made to the service (see Appendix D). The managers of the two residential homes that had children who had worked with Connecting Families also received this email.

Concluding thoughts

2.15 Given the limited time and resources for the evaluation, the research design facilitated a valuable and rich insight into the service. In particular, the opportunity for all workers involved with the project and all adult family members to contribute to the research provides a more complete evidence base regarding the impact and delivery of the service. One methodological weakness of this research report however, is that no research was conducted with the children and young people involved with Connecting Families due to time constraints. This interim evaluation and report are part of an iterative process however to facilitate future evaluation. Consequently, the service feedback forms, including one designed specifically for children, have been developed in conjunction with the team to

facilitate future monitoring and evaluation activities (see Appendix E). In addition, the range and depth of the data produced will be subject to further analysis as used in conjunction with financial and monitoring data to inform future reports.

2.16 The remainder of the report presents the findings from this research in accordance with the two key aspects of the evaluation: the perceived impact of the service on families, and the users and providers experiences of the Connecting Families process. The report then concludes with some key messages and implications for future delivery.

3. FINDINGS – IMPACT EVALUATION

3.1 To gain an insight into the type of impact that the Connecting Families project can have on the lives and experiences of the families it works with, service users and providers were invited to identify any differences they perceive the service has made. This chapter draws on this data to identify the perceived impacts that Connecting Families has had on the lives of families they have worked with.

3.2 A number of key themes emerged from analysis of the data collected. There were also some views expressed about when there may be little or no impact. The reasons for this will be explored in the following chapter regarding the implementation and delivery of the service. Conclusions and considerations for future practice are discussed in Chapter Five.

3.3 The main perceived positive changes that participants felt had occurred after families worked with Connecting Families can be grouped into the following themes:

- Improved parenting practice leading to improved welfare of the child
- Broader wellbeing of the family
- Help with practical issues
- Boosted individual wellbeing and confidence
- Better family relationships
- Positive relationships with other services

Other themes that emerged were:

- Sustainable changes and costs averted
- Attribution of changes to Connected Families

3.4 Each of these themes will be explored further drawing on the views and experiences of service users as well as practitioners working for and with the Connecting Families Project.

Improved parenting practice leading to improved welfare of the child

3.5 A number of families explained that changes in their parenting practice were one of the main impacts from working with the service. Both practitioners and parents identified a number of aspects of their parenting that had been improved as a result of working with Connecting Families. This included improved techniques for managing their children's behaviour and improved knowledge regarding child development.

3.6 There were a number of observed changes in families that parents reported were the result of improved parenting skills. Some parents reported that their children's behaviour was now "*under control*". One also reported that as a result of their involvement with the service, the "*children now go to bed on time*". These accounts help to illustrate some of the

ways in which families lives have been changed following their work with Connecting Families.

3.7 One key worker explained that central to helping some parents learn to manage troublesome behaviour was to emphasise the importance of using appropriate techniques for managing their children, instead of blaming problems on the child. Likewise, a number of Children's Services social workers perceived Connecting Families as being a support service that provides parents with "*practical parenting advice*" which in turn enhances "*parenting capacity*" through introducing and developing "*routines, structure and boundaries within the family*".

3.8 This was reflected in a number of comments from the parents, for example one explained that their family was "*stuck in a rut and Connecting Families showed [them] how to manage the behaviour of the kids*". Likewise another parent appreciated that the service helped her "*learn to handle teenage behaviour*" through a training course on setting boundaries and managing anger issues.

3.9 In addition, some parents noted that improved parenting skills involved learning to manage their own behaviour, as well as their children's. For example, one parent reported that since working with Connecting Families "*I am able to cope; I am calmer and less argumentative. I no longer go off at silly things*". Similarly, another parent asserted the importance of learning to "*pick your arguments*". As with a number of other families, the respondents were recognising the importance of their new parenting skills and techniques in improving their children's behaviour.

3.10 Additionally, a number of respondents felt that developing their awareness of children's needs was extremely important in promoting effective parenting. Parents reported that Connecting Families enhanced their "*knowledge of child development*", assisted with empowering them to "*keep children safe*" or helped them with "*understanding the needs of a baby*". In addition, one mother reported that her husband's completion of Gro Brain⁴ has helped him become a better dad. Such changes would have a significant impact upon the raising of these children previously considered as at risk.

3.11 One of the main aims of Connecting Families is to keep families together by addressing the concerns raised by social services regarding the safety and wellbeing of the child or children in the family. Such concerns are often the cause of the families' referrals to

⁴ [GroBrain Baby Course](#) focuses on the simple parenting skills needed at this stage...love, comfort and 'baby talk'. Personal, social and emotional development, physical development, communication and language are now prime areas of learning. These abilities start to develop from birth. The course activities can be delivered one-to-one to parents, e.g. by Children's Centre staff, or delivered as a short course.

the service. A number of practitioners noted that in some cases, Connecting Families had been able to help downgrade the legal status of the children, for example, moving from Child Protection to Child in Need, and avoid them moving into the care of the Local Authority.

3.12 One practitioner confirmed that, *“a lot of children would have been removed and or gone into care without Connecting Families’ involvement”*. This message was reflected in responses from a Children’s Services social worker who stated *“I am sure that without the direct input of Connecting Families there would be a risk of plans not coming to fruition or on return placement breakdown”*. Similarly another social worker reported that *“Connecting Families is an intense service which is able to support families to avoid breakdown preventing children being placed into the care of the local authority”*.

3.13 Practitioners were not the only participants to assert the difference Connecting Families could help with in this area. One parent also reported that she is *“working with Connecting Families to stop social services taking her children”*. She explained that *“they have gone from child in need to child protection, so I am working hard to stop it going to the next level”*.

Better family relationships

3.14 Linked to the improved parenting skills for managing children’s behaviour, another main change that families reported experiencing as a result of their involvement with Connecting Families was that they had better family relationships. Parents felt that this helped to improve the quality of their family life.

3.15 Through engaging with Connecting Families, relationships were often felt to be stronger where family members learnt to value each other. One parent reported that *“I appreciate my family and partner more”* since working with the service. Likewise another parent explained that now *“I am less annoyed and so can show the kids love more easily”*. These sorts of changes were perceived to have helped ensure improved relationships, even if they were still not perfect. For example, one father was pleased that he had *“an amicable relationship”* with his daughter, which was a highly significant move forward from when he was worried he may lose her completely.

3.16 These findings were reflected in the responses of social workers. One reported that *“Connecting Families is effective in undertaking relevant direct work programmes with families to assist in them being able to function at a level where their lives are fairly stable and they can live together”*. This also demonstrates the ability of the service to effect changes within the families as a whole. Another social worker reported that *“Connecting Families assisted in stabilising a relationship between a mother and son as well as supporting the mother with reflecting on her own presentation towards her child”*. The social

worker added that this brought the *“family together”* through using communication to *“build bridges”*.

3.17 Sometimes the quality of relationships was believed to be enhanced through spending more time together. One mother explained that *“Connecting Families have been good with my kids and my husband. They get on better now that my husband is home”*. Equally, others reported that since taking part in the service they were *“better as a family, we do more things together”*. Such changes are indicators of how the family have been helped to reunite as a unit.

3.18 A large part of the positive impact on relationships that parents reported was attributed to improved communications between family members, something that Connecting Families helped with. Some parents felt that a main difference to their family since working with Connecting Families was that they *“learnt to have more confidence and reconnect with each other”*. Through taking a whole family approach and often working with family members together, some parents report that they were *“talking better as a family”* or had *“learnt to talk things through rather than argue”*. One parent reported that this had also helped them to *“interact with the child better”*.

3.19 As a consequence of this improved communication, one parent explained that her family *“have been able to connect and understand each other”*. Other parents added that they have continued to *“talk about experiences”* and have been able to *“explore problems”*. This has enabled families to improve their family life through experiencing healthier, higher quality family relationships. A key worker observed that reflective listening often encourages families to be honest with each other enabling them to deal with issues collectively in order to move forward.

3.20 The importance of being able to explore problems in a safe environment was noted by a Children’s Services social worker as being important to families. It was stated that *“it is vital to offer families time to explore in a safe environment the reasoning for difficulties, which supports a robust opportunity to introduce change”*.

Broader wellbeing of the family

3.21 Connecting Families was considered to have done more than impact upon the parenting of a child and family relationships. When asked if there were any differences that they thought working with Connecting Families has made to their lives, families reported a number of changes to their life in general. Parents and practitioners asserted that a range and variety of changes that were made by families. A number of parents felt that Connecting Families addressed any concerns they had that impacted upon their family life. This included improved debt and budgeting management, addressing issues of domestic abuse, mental health and substance misuse, preparation for work or college and improved housing. Some families described the service as *“life changing”* because it *“helped us get our lives*

back together” in more ways than just addressing the child protection concerns identified by children’s services.

3.22 The following quote from one young mother in an interview, who was keen to make it clear that Connecting Families helped her family in a variety of ways, in addition to parenting and addressing the safeguarding needs of her child.

Connecting families have helped me in loads of different ways; I mean it helped my confidence, and that’s not just like, confidence in myself but like, confidence in going to college or going back to work, confidence with my parenting and stuff like that. Um, they’ve helped me to understand a lot, especially as I was in a violent relationship and stuff, and they’ve helped me to understand a lot about that, um, since getting involved with them, and having them refer me to a benefits officer and stuff. I’ve had no problems with my money, my budgeting anything like that. I’m not sure; they just helped in so many different ways.

The extract demonstrates the holistic and bespoke nature of the service which had succeeded in improving the wellbeing of the family in general, not just the welfare of the child.

3.23 The changes experienced by families were different in each case. A number of professionals explained that, because of the complex and broad range of issues that were experienced by families coming in to the service, the changes made were equally varied. This was also highlighted by a number of Connecting Families professionals. One practitioner explained that “*the look of a successful family is always going to be different, it’s not going to be that this, this and this has been met, it’s going to be entirely different for every family*”. This signifies that when working with families, the Connecting Families team would address a variety of needs for the whole family, rather than focus on the specific child protection concerns for the child. Such an approach would help to improve family life and children’s experiences in the longer term and was clearly appreciated by a number of parents in this study.

Increased parental wellbeing and confidence

3.24 Another example of the impact that parents reported Connecting Families had beyond that of ensuring the welfare of the child was increasing the parents’ own wellbeing and confidence. Connecting Families practitioners enlist the support of other services to address specific needs to ensure parents were helped with issues such as their self-confidence. A Children’s Services social worker added that, in their experience, parents working with Connecting Families “*have been supported to develop their organisational and life skills*”. Much of these positive changes to the wellbeing of the parents were associated

with their improved confidence and ability to do more for themselves, as well as for their children.

3.25 From a practitioner perspective, several key workers concluded that *“empowering parents to deal with specific issues such as substance misuse enables them to assess the wider impact on their children, thus improving outcomes for the entire family”*. One social worker who stated that *“the presence of the team (alongside other agencies) and the close monitoring this has allowed has encouraged the parents to focus on the children rather than themselves and drug use”*. Professionals conveyed a strong sense that helping the parents to improve their lives and wellbeing would, in turn, improve the circumstances for the child and family.

3.26 It was notable that helping parents increase their confidence and take responsibility for their own wellbeing often included smaller steps towards the overall goals for the family. These steps and smaller changes helped give momentum and belief to parents for future change. One social worker epitomised this by explaining that that whilst the professionals often had high aspirations for the changes that they could help the family make, she often found that family members were positive about what she perceived as small and minor changes in their life. She felt that this could help to encourage the family in continuing to make other positive changes whilst working with Connecting Families.

3.27 A number of parents testified that Connecting Families helped to improve their own wellbeing. Some parents had negative previous experiences of parenthood and felt that Connecting Families helped to boost their confidence. One parent reported being especially pleased that *“talking to the workers has given me the confidence to be a mum again”*. Other parents reported that they now felt they had the confidence to do other things such as going to college, getting a job or starting to drive again.

3.28 There was also a feeling among some parents that they were *“now better at managing their own welfare”*. A small number of parents reported being able to more effectively manage their own pressures and concerns with one explaining that since working with Connecting Families, he *“can identify the factors that lead to stress and recognises the ways of dealing with stress”*. Likewise another parent explained that the service helped her whole family, but she was especially appreciative that she was *“supported to deal with traumatic experiences”*. There was a widespread feeling that in helping these parents to address their own wellbeing, it helped improve the family as a whole.

Help with practical issues

3.29 Further to helping parents with their own emotional wellbeing, a number of Connecting Families practitioners recognised that supporting parents with practical issues was a contributing factor to positive change within families. The main practical areas families reported this form of support were providing advice on finance and housing issues.

Several parents reported that one of the main things that had changed since their work with the service was that they had been supported in accessing alternative accommodation.

3.30 One family explained the significance of being re-homed and reported that *“the children stopped fighting since we got a bigger house”*. In addition some appreciated help with other issues such as working with other services. One mother stated that *“the key worker supported me when I felt scared because I made a complaint about another worker who wasn’t connected to Connecting Families”*. It is significant that through addressing the needs of the family and helping with practical issues, such as housing, the families felt that the service had made an important difference to their family life.

3.31 A more common finding was that parents described how the Connecting Families team had helped them with debt and budgeting management. This was perceived to have been a vital change to families that, as a result, had *“sorted out [their] financial difficulties”*. It was also important for families who were not in debt however, but appreciated that the key worker helped them to be *“able to manage their finances better”*. A Children’s Services social worker reported that the key worker had encouraged one of her mother’s to open a bank account, which was essential to the individual because for the first time she could manage her own finances and ensure that her bills were paid. Such positive changes are likely to have indirectly improved the wellbeing of children through improving the situation of the family.

Support from partner agencies

3.32 In addition to the general, practical aspects of family life that were able to be addressed by the key workers in the Connecting Families team was the support that was provided through the multi-agency partners. Analysis of the parent feedback emphasised Connecting Families as a valuable multi-disciplinary service. Similarly, a number of practitioners described the service as a *“one stop shop”* that provided enhanced support around specific issues such as mental health and domestic abuse as well as parenting difficulties.

3.33 One Children’s Services social worker described the benefits of partnership working as being.

Working in partnership with Connecting Families allowed for a consistent approach to twin tracking a plan, bringing the client and parent together to achieve the goals set within the Care Plan. Connecting Families role was an essential element of achieving a successful outcome through the direct work undertaken with the parent. The effective communication between my service and Connecting Families ensured all issues were addressed in a timely manner.

3.34 Likewise one key worker explained that a crucial aspect of services was to help *“support families to access the right service”*. Another explained that *“families have commented that because they were in the Connecting Families team, that means they don’t have to go and work with someone else, it can be done in house and that makes a big difference to them, especially for teenagers”*. This approach often leads to individuals receiving support from a range of agencies for example one parent was delighted to have received support from a combination of domestic abuse, mental health and drug and alcohol services.

3.35 Helping people access the services they needed was perceived by parents as an important aspect of working with Connecting Families. For example one family stated *“it is a valuable service; we were able to access the services that we urgently needed”*. Some parents highlighted that the work with Hafan Cymru on domestic abuse was an important feature of the Connecting Families service for them. One mother explained that through working with Hafan Cymru she was helped to *“understand violence”*. Likewise, another parent also identified that as a result of the work she completed around domestic abuse she was able *“to sort things out with her ex-partner and felt confident enough to engage with services”*. These programmes help to improve the lives of the parents as well as the children and family as a whole.

Positive relationships with other services

3.36 Further to facilitating relationships with other practitioners in the partner agencies, Connecting Families was also praised by families for aiding their interactions with social services. Whilst it is a voluntary service, all families that Connecting Families work with are open to social services for a range of complex issues. The key workers work in collaboration with social workers to address the needs and concerns of both the family and Children’s Services. This includes assisting families to recognise and appreciate the concerns of social services.

3.37 For many families, their experiences with Children’s Services has been negative and in some cases, traumatic. The Connecting Families service, therefore, aims to help social workers and families work together towards the same goal: safeguarding the child. One key worker explained, *“Connecting Families is about preventing children from going into child protection or care, through putting strategies in place to promote change, for example; helping the families to understand the concerns of social services”*.

3.38 A number of parents reported that they appreciated this support from their key workers in managing their relations with social services. One parent explained that working with the service *“made us relaxed and not afraid of social services”*. Another felt that the most important aspect of Connecting Families was that they *“gave me support when dealing with social services”*. This was recognised by workers as one of the most appreciated

impact of the service, with one describing that her work has “*improved families’ relationships with statutory and voluntary agencies*”.

3.39 In addition, working with other agencies through their key workers can improve their relationship with others agencies. For example one worker reported that “*when the benefits advisor helps families complete CVs and gets them ready for work, they see that person in a different light from someone that is questioning them about finding a job and just giving them the papers to sign on*”.

3.40 This work was also valued by the social workers working with the families, who recognised that the key worker could mediate the needs of the social worker and the family. One social worker explained “*It has been easier to work with the family when mum has been able to talk about problems with [the] team*”. Another social worker summarised the impact that Connecting Families has had on a family that he has been working with:

The parents have felt listened to and understood. Prior to the involvement of Connecting Families, the relationship between the family, services and professionals was at a low ebb. Connecting Families has helped to establish greater trust and more positive working relationships between all involved staff and the family.

Sustainable changes and costs averted

3.41 One of the main objectives of Connecting Families from its inception was to reduce the expenditure of public services by helping those families that place the most demand on the services. This includes an aim to help families make positive changes that are sustainable, to relieve future reliance on intensive support and interventions. It was clear that a number of families did believe that they were maintaining some of the positive impacts of the service through the techniques and changes Connecting Families helped them achieve.

3.42 The feedback from families suggests that in some cases at least, positive changes have been sustained. One parent explained that since working with Connecting Families, “*I have not been as angry, I do not get angry so quickly – the worker helped with triggers*”. By helping to change family’s perspectives and management of behaviour some parents felt they had successfully changed their coping strategies.

3.43 Furthermore, some parents recognised that they were able to manage more effectively on their own since working with the service resulting in a reduction in service dependency. One concluded that “*I need less support than I did before*”. Another parent stated “*we need less help now because my son has moved schools and his behaviour is improving*”.

3.44 Families have also reported being able to seek appropriate assistance when they needed it, before their situation exacerbated. Evidence for this can be found in the statement made by a female who described that since receiving support from Connecting Families she now *“becomes aware of when she is struggling and will seek support from her GP by saying look I am struggling at the moment, is there anything you could do to assist me?”*.

3.45 In addition, as mentioned in Chapter One, a number of reports have been produced by the Information Officer, who monitors a family’s progress throughout and beyond their involvement with the service. This allows an estimation of the costs averted as a result of the changes made by families. A recent report concluded that even when taking into account the cost of the Connecting Families service, interventions provided by the team prevented the Public Sectors agencies from spending almost £1.5 million (Marshall, 2013).

3.46 When interviewed in relation to the costs averted the Information Officer surmised that:

Since Connecting Families became operational in August 2011, interventions have been completed with 63 families and the team are currently providing support to another 22. The team have also prevented family breakdown, resulting in 60 children and young people identified as being at risk of becoming looked after by their social worker remaining at home with their families. Children and young people have also been de-registered from the child protection register through encouraging parents to make positive sustained change.

3.47 Sustained positive changes in service dependency were also noted by multi-agency partners working within Connecting Families. For example, one partner commented that *“the families that are referred to Connecting Families are encouraged to assess their own issues and problems, and they are given the tools to think of a solution. Hopefully the families will then be able to implement the solutions which will bring about sustained change. If you have sustained change, you will then have less dependency on services”*.

3.48 A Children’s Services social worker further added that *“the work undertaken by Connecting Families assisted the family in developing and strengthening skills which will benefit and contribute to the sustainability of the plan”*. This was believed to ensure more sustainable changes to families by teaching them how to address any issues that arose in the future. One of the multi-agency partners explained that following Connecting Families involvement, *“when a family is having a panic or a crisis they can think ‘hang on a minute, we’ve had these tools from the Connecting Families, let’s think about how we can work together and think about how we can put it into practice”*.

3.49 It should be noted that some families have struggled to sustain positive change resulting in them being re-referred to Connecting Families. Furthermore, this qualitative nature of the research makes it impossible to determine the extent to which the families reporting sustained change directly resulted from the interventions delivered by Connecting Families. Despite this, the feedback from families and practitioners does imply that a number of families believe this has been the case. Together with the evidence from the families regarding their ability to maintain the positive changes they have achieved, these findings suggest that these families feel that they have been able to sustain some changes in their lives.

Attribution of changes to Connecting Families

3.50 As highlighted above, the lack of an available comparison group and robust statistical analysis as part of the evaluation means that this research is unable to determine the extent to which any of these positive outcomes experienced by these families can be attributed to the Connecting Families service. The majority of families and practitioners however were clear that they believed that Connecting Families were responsible for a number of the positive impacts experienced.

3.51 A number of service users, key workers and social workers made reference to the value of Connecting Families as a service. One parent explained explicitly that *“Connecting Families stopped me losing my mind and kids”*, similarly, another respondent felt strongly that *“working with Connecting Families stopped social services taking [her] kids”*. This suggests that some parents believed that Connecting Families were responsible for them being able to keep their children in their care.

3.52 As described throughout the chapter, the positive changes experienced were not limited to addressing the concerns of child protection and care issues. The service was also recognised for specifically providing advice and management techniques to maintain changes. One parent explained that *“Connecting Families gave us information so that we could deal with our problems differently”*. A number of respondents concluded therefore that the service had a significant impact on their broader wellbeing and continued family lifestyles. One claimed, that *“without Connecting Families we would still be stuck in a rut”*. Another individual simply said *“Connecting Families helped my family greatly”*.

3.53 Whilst there are some families that did not engage with the service (explored in the next chapter) the Connecting Families staff felt that their service was essential for a number of their families. One key worker explained that *“without Connecting Families, families wouldn’t have the opportunity to take part in programs of continued support, for example; a relapse prevention program, strategies to cope if they feel like they want to relapse”*. There was a strong concern that the families they worked with were not receiving this sort of support from other services.

3.54 In addition to the above comments, practitioners considered the situations some families may have been in if they had not worked with the service. Connecting Families was described as a crisis intervention that is time critical and provides a unique service in the area. For example, one practitioner stated *“I think that if the families didn’t have the service from Connecting Families, where else would they get it from? Quite often, the family are having a crisis now and by the time somebody from another service assists things could have escalated”*. Consequently the practitioners believed that the service was crucial in supporting the families that they had worked with.

3.55 The feedback from social workers also emphasises the importance of the Connecting Families service. One social worker from children’s service who has worked with the service concluded that:

All in all there is a case to believe that the family may well be together because of this intervention...Connecting Families does a good and valuable job”.

Similarly, another asserted in relation to one of her families that:

“If it was not for this service, I feel that there would not be any positive changes made and this would probably end up in the local authority removing the children from their parents’ care. This service has kept the family together!”

3.56 Whilst the sample of social workers in this research is limited, such comments highlight the positive and significant contribution that some practitioners in other services believe Connecting Families is making.

Conclusion

3.57 The findings suggest families involved with Connecting Families have experienced a range of changes. This includes positive differences related to their parenting and family relationships which have helped to address concerns of child protection. There are also a number of impacts reported by families however that have improved the general wellbeing of the family and the parents. Parents reported having more confidence in themselves and being able to manage their behaviour and seek appropriate support when required. Families were also able to access the services they needed, to work on issues such as domestic abuse and also felt that they had better relationships with social services. In addition, the findings suggest that some of these changes are being maintained by families and making a continued difference to their lives. Responses from the key workers, social workers and the families themselves have attributed these changes directly to the work of the Connecting Families project and their enlisting of the partners that they work with.

3.58 This positive impact was not experienced by all families. A few parents reported that no beneficial changes had occurred since working with the Connecting Families service. This was also acknowledged by the key workers. It is important, therefore, to understand how and why the families and practitioners felt that how positive differences were achieved, and why, in some cases, this was not the case. This is explored in the following chapter.

4. FINDINGS – PROCESS EVALUATION

4.1 This chapter will explore the implementation and delivery of the Connecting Families service by drawing on the experiences and opinions shared by the families as service users, and practitioners working with the families. This chapter aims to highlight the elements of Connecting Families that family members and practitioners believe are central to ensuring families achieve positive outcomes. In addition it will identify areas which are perceived as obstacles to the successful delivery of the program and examine why, in some cases, the service is not meeting its aims for all families. This helps to provide contextual information for the interpretation of the impact findings by providing more detail about why and in which cases positive changes were or were not made. Some conclusions will be extracted at the end of this chapter leading to a discussion of lessons learned and recommendations in the final chapter.

4.2 There were several aspects of the Connecting Families service that families and practitioners perceived to be important factors in enabling positive change for families. There were also a variety of reasons that both service users and providers felt were barriers to the service operating as effectively as possible. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail below. The final section of the chapter will then consider the suggestions for improving the service that emerged from the findings.

4.3 The key themes regarding the delivery of Connecting Families are:

- The importance of effective interventions:
 - Whole family approach
 - Strengths-based and motivational techniques
 - Family led interventions
 - Flexibility of the key worker
 - Intensive support
 - Non- statutory service
- The role of the key workers
 - Importance of a trusting, respectful relationship
 - Range of skills and experience
 - Different approach to statutory services
- Benefits of multi-agency working
 - Value of enlisting approach to referrals
- Importance of receiving appropriate referrals
 - General awareness of service and its criteria and aims
 - The significance of referral timing
 - Families' willingness to engage

Effective interventions

4.4 As evidenced in previous studies outlined at the start of this report, there are a number of approaches to family interventions that are considered to be most effective at engaging families and promoting positive changes. This includes working with the whole family, taking a strengths-based approach and ensuring the intervention aims are family led, flexible and intensive. When analysing the findings, it emerged that a number of these approaches were recognised by parents and practitioners. This included whole family approaches, strengths-based techniques, family led interventions, the flexibility of the service, the intensive nature of support and the fact it was not a statutory service. Each of this is discussed in more detail below.

The whole family approach

4.5 Engaging with the whole family was seen as an extremely beneficial aspect of the Connecting Families service. Furthermore, a key worker explained that it was especially useful to work with whoever is perceived by the family as part of the family unit, which could include extended family members. By including these often important players in the family's lives, it is easier to gain a richer understanding of the family's needs.

4.6 One key worker explained that by addressing the needs of the wider family, everyone was encouraged to take responsibility for their family. This prevents parents blaming unmanageable children for their problems, which she explained was a common obstacle to achieving positive change. A social worker concluded that the families that receive a service from Connecting Families benefit because *"Connecting Families are able to spend time with the family as a unit"*. This was seen as a key factor in promoting change.

4.7 Families recognised and appreciated this approach, which incorporated the whole family and could be tailored to suit complex families with multiple needs. One parent explained that this support offered something different compared with social services and facilitated change with the family as a whole. In an interview, one parent provided an interesting insight to the advantages of using a whole family approach:

The difference between Children's Services and Connecting Families is, Children's Services identify the child and the needs of the child, they never consider the impact that, that has on the whole family, whereas Connecting Families work with the whole family to try and deal with the issues that have presented to the family.

4.8 Some parents commented that they were especially appreciative that they had all received assistance from the service. One reported that *"the whole family has been helped"*. As outlined above, the aim as well as the ability of the service was to help all family members. This was extremely well received. As one parent concluded, *"we liked the whole family thing"*.

4.9 The Connecting Families service was also praised for not focusing only on mothers. One parent expressed that they felt it was important that “*Connecting Families involve men and not just women*”. The findings from the families who responded suggested an overall appreciation for the whole family approach.

Strengths-based and motivational techniques

4.10 As outlined earlier in the report, recognising and building on the families’ strengths to help motivate and support them to make positive changes has been shown to be an effective strategy for family interventions. The findings suggest that the same is true for those working with Connecting Families. One of the multi-agency partners identified the involvement “*of the whole family, in drawing upon strengths instead of focusing on the weaknesses*” as a significant advantage of the service.

4.11 It was clear from the key workers’ narratives that they felt the strength-based approach was an effective method for working with vulnerable families that faced a variety of complex needs. One key worker explained that “*the service looks at the family’s needs from their perspective and recognises their recourses and strengths*”. Similarly, another felt that “*I think someone going in and building on their strengths, not saying you’re not doing this, you’re not doing that...I think that makes a big difference*”.

4.12 One social worker specifically attributed the success of the service in addressing child protection concerns through the strength-based approach. This allowed and supported parents to develop their parenting skills. It was perceived that:

Connecting Families makes all the difference to reducing risk of significant harm, due to the offer of initial intense therapeutic intervention that has the ability to empower those they work with, to find their own strengths to successfully take on responsibility to succeed.

4.13 The Connecting Families service used a number of techniques to help family members identify and build on their strengths. Encouraging the families to talk about and recognise each other’s strengths was also appreciated by the families. One parent attributed positive relationship change to the value card exercise used by the workers. She explained that “*we did strength exercises and myself and the girls discussed what were good at and what we liked about each other*”. The importance of value cards was also highlighted by the staff at Connecting Families. One worker commented that “*completing card exercises together creates an awareness of what is important and different family members recognise this*”.

4.14 This suggests that both taking a strength-based approach to service delivery as well as the implementation of strength-based activities are therefore seen as positive contributors to creating positive changes within families.

Family led interventions

4.15 Another key aspect of the Connecting Families service is the use of interventions that are family led. This approach encourages families to identify their own concerns and needs to be addressed. They are then able to help determine which of these they work on with the service, and when. One key worker emphasised; *“we don’t go in there with a set piece of work or deadline. We recognise they need to come to their own solutions and strategies really”*. Empowering families to have some control over the types of support they receive assists with creating positive behaviour changes.

4.16 Practitioners working within Connecting Families appreciate that the service is driven by the notion of empowering families to identify their own needs so that bespoke interventions can be designed and delivered using the most appropriate methods. One key worker summarised this as *“a model that enables the key worker and family to work together to set goals ensuring that the needs of both the family and service are met”*.

4.17 Likewise, key workers reported that when they meet with families for the first time, they do not have a pre-determined plan of action. They argued that it is important for families to realise what the issues are and examine the solutions for themselves. One practitioner explained that she felt the service was able to make a difference to families because *“you’re not going in there telling them what to do, you’re actually listening to them”*. This supports the ethos that Connecting Families service delivery should be ‘family led’ to be most effective.

4.18 Related to this approach, several staff from Connecting Families noted the value of encouraging families to be open and honest about their feelings, thoughts and fears. One worker emphasised that this is especially important for those families who want to change and are ready to move forward. The service encourages families to reflect on past issues, feelings or circumstances in order to promote honesty within the family. One key worker recalled an example where sharing and honesty amongst a family facilitated awareness of a problem and was therefore a driver to change.

A family may say to a loved one ‘do you know what, there was a time when I was really worried about how much you were drinking and I really could tell when you were drinking, so even though you were hiding it, I really could tell there was something wrong and I didn’t know how to deal with the secretive behaviours.

4.19 Practitioners felt that adopting this approach helped families to identify their own issues and concerns and recognise the importance of working towards positive change to address the needs of the family, rather than because they are told to. One social worker concluded that *“motivational and cognitive therapy is considered to be a task centred practice that can provide families with the opportunity to have input to find solutions, and thus motivates the family members to act and be better equipped with the tools to remember why steps are necessary to improve wellbeing”*.

Flexibility of the key worker

4.20 Strongly linked to the importance of being family led, Connecting Families also adopts a flexible approach to allow key workers to adapt the service in accordance with the individual circumstances of each family. One worker explained that their practice is *“very much about the family’s needs”* and could be tailored to address different issues at different times, allowing the families to identify and prioritise the changes they would like to make.

4.21 The Connecting Families service aims to empower individuals to make changes through adapting interventions to suit learning styles. Key workers have flexibility within their role to utilise interventions that best suit the individual circumstances of the families referred to the service. One worker summarised this by saying:

We’ve got the capacity to say ok, this parent doesn’t learn like other parents so then we can change tools and stuff. If they don’t get it, it’s not going to work so we’ve got to try and change it to make it work”. I think whereas social workers have got set criteria, or health have got targets and things they’re supposed to meet so they can’t change or they’re not supposed to change whereas we’re quite lucky.

4.22 Another worker also reported that one parent, who had previous children removed by Children’s Services, used avoidance techniques to conceal her problems from her family and support services. The mother later explained at the time she believed by not speaking about her problems, she felt that they did not exist. The Connecting Families key worker helped the mother with her low self-esteem and confidence. She was encouraged to attend a mother and toddler group and eventually began to confide in her key worker. Throughout the intervention, a number of solution focused interventions were put into place resulting in the individual receiving support around her debt issues. The flexibility of the service allowed the worker to help this mother with a variety of concerns as and when she disclosed them.

4.23 A number of parents reported that this flexibility was one of the main positive aspects of the service, especially where it facilitates the use of different interventions to work with adults and children of different abilities. This principle of adaptability can include subtle changes in the delivery of practice. For example, one individual with literacy difficulties described how her *“worker communicated in a way that didn’t degrade [her]. She used pictures and read all the reports and forms to [her]”*. Likewise, one parent valued that her

workers used age appropriate interventions when working with her teenage daughter who had challenging behaviour. She commented *“my daughter related to the younger workers, they made the work fun”*.

4.24 In contrast, a comment from one parent suggests that the practitioners do not always get this right. For example, one parent felt that *“the work was too immature – jigsaws/flashcards, couldn’t see where that was going”*. She further added that she was given *“no explanation as to what the activities would achieve”*. Therefore, whilst flexibility was recognised by some individuals, there are some lessons to be learned regarding the importance of communicating the role of interventions chosen by key workers.

Intensive support

4.25 Another perceived benefit of Connecting Families was its capacity to provide an intensive service to suit the needs of the family. It was widely recognised that Connecting Families practitioners are ‘fortunate’ in terms of their case load. One worker explained that *“we can go every day and build a relationship with the families quicker. We don’t go in there on a threatening level; they don’t see us like that”*. Another worker believed it was important that Connecting Families *“work intensively with families while they are at the point of change otherwise it doesn’t work”*. This approach was believed to facilitate a better and more effective relationship with the families.

4.26 This view that intensity builds positive relationships with families was shared by some of the social workers. One explained that this was because:

Work is not rushed, thus can offer the outcome of evidenced based gatherings to support referring social workers recommendations to achieve change.

4.27 Similarly, another social worker attributed changes in family behaviour with the intense, timely and bespoke interventions provided by Connecting Families. She reported that *“Connecting Families are able to do the work over a longer period of time which social services are unable to do. This creates change, for example being open and honest with the department”*.

4.28 Conversely, however, some families reported that they did not believe that the length of the intervention was long enough for them. One parent commented that he felt *“the service should have gone on for longer”*. In addition, one parent explained that he felt practitioners tried to complete too many interventions within a short time span. Other parents reported that their access to the service ended prior to the interventions being completed. This can lead to families feeling lost and abandoned by services, creating a sense that *“I got forgotten about once I had supervised contact with the kids. I didn’t even get a phone call. The service ended half way through”*. It is important therefore to ensure

key workers work with families to manage the exit strategy. This includes clear communication as to why the intervention is ending and what follow up support is available.

Non-statutory service

4.29 A theme that came out in much of the descriptions of the implementation and the delivery of the Connecting Families service were presented in terms of how it compares with social services. A number of the key themes that have been discussed in relation to ensuring interventions are effective are perceived to be a different approach to that of statutory involvement from Children's Services.

4.30 In relation to the ability to be flexible within Connecting Families, one key worker remarked that *"social workers and other professionals have targets and deadlines to meet, so they've got to do an assessment by such a date and families' lives don't always click in with that, so we're lucky that we can adapt our role within each family and meet their needs much better"*. Similarly, the freedom to offer a wide range of interventions was recognised by those working in statutory services. One social worker explained that an important aspect of Connecting Families was that it *"provides the family with more intensive support and alternative support from that of a social worker"*.

4.31 The family led and strengths approaches were also identified as seen to be a beneficial alternative to the directive approach required by social workers. One worker who had previously worked in Children's Services explained that *"Connecting Families is coming at it from a different angle and I think that it really works because the family feel more empowered and in control"*. A key worker further explained the differences between statutory services and Connecting Families by stating.

Instead of the command and control approach which you're getting from Children's Services...we will bring the families round to the idea where they are leading it, rather than social services dictating and I think that's really nice because people will move if you point them in the right direction.

4.32 This was also reflected in the views of parents, who often noted the difference between their experiences with Children's Services and their work with Connecting Families. The significant difference for many was that Connecting Families focused on addressing the wider family needs, rather than just outstanding child protection concerns. One parent concluded:

...the difference between Children's Services and Connecting Families is... Children's Services identify the child and the needs of the child, they never consider the impact that has on the whole family. Whereas Connecting Families identified a family and they

tried to work with the whole family to try and deal with the issues that are presented to the family.

The role of the key workers

4.33 Appreciation of the specific work of a key worker was common in the feedback from families. This was often because parents felt that they managed to build a positive working relationship with their key worker. In particular, the trusting relationships and the range of skills the right worker could bring to a family were appreciated.

4.34 Practitioners also believed that ensuring families were assigned a key worker was an important aspect of the Connecting Families service. One of the multi-agency partners reported that that *“the staff have made a positive difference to families, because they all have got a positive outlook and really want the families to succeed”*. The effectiveness of the role however, required the key workers to work positively with families. One worker stated *“staff are passionate about what they do and I think that makes a difference as opposed to just turning up for work and doing what they have to, and going home. It is really important to them that the families get the best service and hopefully then get the best outcome for themselves. So I think that really makes a difference”*.

Trusting and respectful relationships

4.35 The importance of building trusting and professional relationships with families was described as significant by Connecting Families practitioners. One Connecting Families worker summarised a vital function of the service as *“breaking down barriers between services and families”*. They felt this could best be achieved through treating families with dignity and respect, as well as adopting a positive, constructive approach. The consultant social worker described the team as *“very passionate about what they do, and are really keen to do anything that will kind of improve their effectiveness in terms of being able to make kind of positive changes to families lives”*

4.36 Open and collaborative relationships were perceived to be important in effecting change within families. One social worker stated that *“the interventions used by Connecting Families are open and clear, and families know what’s going to happen next”*. It is also important that workers are respectful of the family that they work with and the challenges they face. A number of workers emphasised that parents often have low confidence especially when their children are on the child protection register. For example, one worker explained that *“some of them come in so low, so down beaten because they’ve been to a child protection conference and been told how crap they are, and then you’ve got someone coming in being really positive and that makes a big difference from the start”*. She felt that it was important for key workers to recognise the situation that these parents are in, and work constructively to support them.

4.37 A positive, constructive approach was also something that family members identified as a valuable quality of the service. Some parents noted that *“it was good to have someone to talk to, who listened and let me be myself”*. One parent remarked that *“the worker was open and honest and Connecting Families couldn’t have done anything else”*. In addition, trust was crucial to building a productive relationship with families. One parent explained *“you need to know that the workers can be trusted so that you can turn to them for support”*. Another service user added *“I trust the worker I know she doesn’t gossip”*. Equally, parents felt that they could then be honest when speaking to the key workers because *“Connecting Families supported me, listened and got the help I needed to help me deal with issues from the past”*.

4.38 In addition to trust, families have also reported that the ability to be open and honest in communication with their worker without feeling judged was another important aspect of family engagement. One parent felt that an important feature of the service was that *“the worker never judged me and always listened”*. This sentiment was confirmed by a number of individuals including one who stated *“it was good to have an impartial person to discuss things. The worker listened without judgement”*. This facilitated a more trusting, respectful and therefore fruitful relationship.

4.39 These messages were echoed in the feedback from social workers. One explained that they *“found that the key workers communicate effectively which is essential in driving plans forward”*. Likewise, another commented that *“the service advocacy role to support the young person and family to explore difficulties experienced offers a ‘caring outlook’, in addition to ‘real support’, which can enhance community decision making to be more positive about [local] social services”*. In general therefore, the respondents conveyed a feeling that the relationship between the key workers and the family was effective and influential.

4.40 This was not a universal view however, and there was an example of a parent that did not find experience of a trusting relationship with her worker. One parent reported that she did not like it that the key worker fed back what happened in sessions. She explained. *“I lost trust as everything I said to the key worker was reported back to the social worker”*. In this case, the parents did not have the valuable trusting relationship others believed to be an effective facilitator for achieving change.

4.41 In addition, one social worker felt that *“workers need more training and time to spend with families incorporating activity based sessions to develop the relationship with the family”*. In general however, the feedback from practitioners and families suggested that the workers were able to build quality relationships based on trust and respect, and that this facilitated the promoting of positive change within families.

Range of skills and experience

4.42 During the group interview in particular, a number of staff commented on the skill set within the team. For example, one worker stated that within Connecting Families *“there is a diverse set of skills and it is a multi-agency one stop shop”*. This was believed to be of significant benefit to parents. The team was recruited specifically to cover a range of backgrounds, such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and working with babies or children in care. Connecting Families practitioners explained that when families are referred to the service, the allocation process allows them to allocate a key worker with the skills and experience that best suits the families’ needs.

4.43 In addition, practitioners are encouraged to build on their knowledge through learning from others. One example of this that workers described was ‘Practice Issues’ sessions, which brings together staff from the Integrated Family Support Services (IFSS), Connecting Families and Family Support. The ‘Practice Issues’ meetings provide an opportunity for practitioners to share and exchange knowledge and skills. In addition to this the resources and tools used by the key workers are continually developing. One key worker explained that *“the team have a lot of resources the consultant social worker brought some tools from her back ground. For example; questionnaires and learning styles with families – this is really important to help pitch work effectively”*.

4.44 Parents also recognised the diverse skill set within the Connecting Families team. Different families reported receiving help in different areas. Parents noted that the key workers completed specific work around domestic abuse, anxiety, harm-reduction strategies for substance misuse and relationship support. When asked what is important to you, one mother responded that *“everything was important to me, the parenting, conflict management, signs of misusing substances and managing teenage behaviour”*.

4.45 Overall parents seemed impressed in the range of help they were offered from the service. In the group interview, one father explained that at first, he thought Connecting Families was just there to help people with parenting support. He went on to explain that:

...we didn't realise it was, they actually helped deal with a wider, a lot wider, range of issues and that they've actually got the people here to deal, or to help deal with those issues rather than having to go hunting through different services or making referrals to outside agencies.

Right worker for the family

4.46 Despite the positive comments described above, parents’ feedback on key workers was not always positive. In one case a parent felt that Connecting Families had little or no positive impact and she believed this was because the worker was not well suited to her family. She explained that she was unhappy with her worker because she felt that they caused trouble between herself and her partner.

The worker wasn't right for our family. The outcome would have been different with a different worker. We asked to change the worker but the allocated worker was the only one who could do the 3 month assessment.

4.47 The mother reported that she asked for a change of worker and believed that if she had been given a new worker, the outcome could have been different. This emphasises the importance of the parents' relationship with their key worker. As identified above, a trusting, positive relationship was believed to be critical for enabling change. In addition, another parent emphasised that for them, *"the intervention was at the wrong time, I wasn't in the frame of mind to complete the work"*. The suitability of timing and the key worker therefore need to be taken into consideration at the point of referral.

4.48 Staff within Connecting Families, also recognised the importance of matching the *"right worker with the right family"* and felt that it would be more difficult to have a positive impact on families if there is a personality clash with the worker. A key worker reported that the allocation meeting facilitates the process of ensuring that the right worker is assigned to a family. For example, before allocating a family the consultant social worker considers the skill sets of the key worker and analyses the current issues facing the families. This ensures that the families have the opportunity to access services delivered by competent staff.

Benefits of multi-agency working

4.49 As outlined in the impact evaluation chapter of this report, the multi-agency nature of Connecting Families was perceived by families and practitioners alike to be a great benefit to the service. A number of Connecting Families practitioners believed that overall the multi-agency approach to delivering coordinated interventions was a favourable working practice because it ensures that families receive timely support from the right services.

4.50 One social worker concluded that Connecting Families as being *"a one stop shop for families wanting to break service dependency"*. There were both positive and negative aspects of multi-agency working that emerged from the findings. The two key benefits that were highlighted were increased access to information about the family and the role of enlisting.

Sharing information and joint up working

4.51 As intended, one of the key advantages to the multi-agency arrangement in the Connecting Families service is that the Information Officer is able to, with the families' permission, collate relevant information on a family to help the key worker build up a richer picture when trying to work with parents to address needs. A consultant social worker explained that whilst there was still an information protocol in place, *"actually having a multi-agency team within Connecting Families makes that information sharing a lot more straightforward, you know a lot clearer"*.

4.52 One worker stated *“I think it is really beneficial that people are able to share knowledge in the team as opposed to having to contact other agencies and the red tape that goes with that really”*. Other positives including the multi-agency partners arranging meetings and sharing information within set guidelines and protocols. The Information Officer stated *“the multi-agency meetings has the advantage of services sharing information and best practice, discussing what interventions have been completed with families and examining what works and why it works”*.

4.53 The co-location of the partners in the same building was also believed to bring benefits to the service. Key workers explained that actually having professionals from different agencies come in and spend designated time with them working with the families was extremely beneficial. For example, one worker expressed the value of having access to educational psychology. She explained that *“education psychologists are a nightmare to get hold of, but because they are a part of our team, we can speak to them, they are more easily accessible”*. In addition, some staff suggested that the relocation of the Connecting Families team into premises with other local Family Support agencies, including IFSS, was extremely beneficial for joint working and sharing good practice.

The role of enlisting

4.54 The Connecting Families service adopts an enlisting approach when referring families to other agencies. This means that key workers pro-actively identify and bring in support from agencies for families rather than signposting them off elsewhere to find help on their own. This includes obtaining support from multi-agency partners and other local organisations and agencies. This has a number of advantages including ensuring that families receive the right intervention at the right time. Coordinating support around the family also helped to avoid duplication and overwhelming families.

4.55 One key worker felt that this was an important aspect of the service, remarking that enlisting is important to families because families *“don’t always know what support is available or how to access it”*. Another worker added that it is important to tell families *“what they are entitled to”* in order to ensure they receive the help they need. A number of practitioners also spoke about the importance of enlisting the right services at the right time, in order to avoid ‘service overload’. One key worker explained that they believed it was *“important to enlist the right services at the right time, but it is equally as important not to bring in too many people”*.

4.56 It was also reported that enlisting the support of the multi-agency partners had an impact on families. This was explained by a key worker who stated *“I took the police officer on a joint visit which was good in reinforcing the consequences of the mother’s actions. This makes it real for the families having the consequences of their actions explained by a police officer... They take it more seriously when they say you could be in prison for it”*. She concluded that this was a more effective way to get her message across to this family.

4.57 The approach of enlisting other services was also recognised as helpful by families. One parent explained:

They refer you on to someone to help you instead of you having to fish around...it's one person, one contact, they will refer you or help you to get the help and support you need from someone who's qualified or has more experience dealing with the issues that they're trying to help you with.

4.58 For many parents, working with Connecting Families not only enabled but supported them in getting the help they needed to address a wide range of problems. Some parents described how key workers came with them to doctor's appointments or gyms to provide them with the confidence they needed to attend.

Challenges to multi-agency working

4.59 As will other multi-agency services however, Connecting Families also encountered some challenges. Some practitioners and parents felt that multi-agency working was operating well, but it needed expanding. Others highlighted some obstacles that emerged from trying to bring together different teams working to different rules or practices.

4.60 As outlined earlier in the report, multi-agency working was perceived to be an important factor in enabling families to make positive changes. Some workers however felt that Connecting Families would benefit from a wider and extended input from their multi-agency partners. For example, some felt that the service would benefit further from extra time with multi-agency partners such as police, benefits, Hafan Cymru and health, who provide vital support to a large number of families.

4.61 In addition some staff identified gaps within the team. For example, some practitioners believed a strong link with the youth offending service would be beneficial. Likewise, due to current change in benefits, additional support with housing was identified as a potential area of service expansion.

A stronger link with housing would be nice - it would be good if you had a housing issue and you could have an answer much quicker. Especially with all these changes with the bedroom tax and stuff.

4.62 In terms of access to information, practitioners generally found that the extra data that working in a multi-agency team provided them allowed them to have a more complete picture of the family and stay updated with any new developments or situations. Key workers therefore can tailor the type and timing of interventions accordingly due to the flexibility of the service. There were concerns however about managing the additional information that key workers were privy to.

4.63 One key worker reported that occasionally she struggled ‘knowing more information’ than the families. She explained:

We get a lot of information on the family, more than social services. I find it strange that they don't know and the families themselves don't know. It's hard that we can't tell them. For example, if they are hanging around with people who have been arrested, but not been through court etc. There are concerns that we know information that cannot be shared. Families don't know that they are doing anything wrong, because they don't know the information. It is hard not being able to share intelligence, but it is good to know.

In such cases, the supervision and support from consultant social workers is often crucial.

4.64 Some Connecting Families practitioners also felt that “*there are inconsistencies with information sharing between agencies*”. For example, it was noted that, due to the different protocols of different agencies, information could not all be stored on the same database. Health data for example is kept in hard copies. Links had been made to ensure data uploaded onto one system is placed onto another, but one worker explained that they still encountered a delay of a few days in receiving the information. Furthermore, in one case where a family had moved, tracing information from a previous address outside of the Local Authority took over six months. Whilst there was awareness amongst the Connecting Families practitioners that each agency is governed by a unique set of policies, procedures and expectations, there was an overall feeling that a universal system would be beneficial. One practitioner concluded:

...there should be one recording system that can be accessed and updated by everyone working with a family.

4.65 Finally the process of referring families to the Connecting Families was also identified as problematic by some practitioners. The findings suggested that the referral process had been evolving since the introduction of the service, and is still being amended at the time of data collection. There was a feeling amongst the Connecting Families team that this may be due to a lack of awareness of the service and understanding of what they offer.

4.66 One social worker felt that the use of the Multi-Agency Support Panel as a gateway for referrals was challenging because it involved a lengthy referral document. She also concluded it would be helpful to have more information about the service available to practitioners who are able to make referrals.

...it would be helpful to have a list of everything the service can offer upfront and if more definitive answers about whether a specific

service could be provided prior to completing the referral as this is a substantial document.

4.67 A lack of awareness about the service was also identified as a concern by some key workers who felt that that the service could be missed to families if it was not understood by referring partners. One worker felt that it might be beneficial to use multi-agency partners and multi-agency forums to promote the aims the service more widely.

Conclusion

4.68 The combination of an intensive strengths-based, family led, flexible, whole family approach have been identified by parents and practitioners as providing a key to enabling change in families' lives. In addition, a positive, trusting relationship with a key worker who is informed about the family and helps them enlist support from a range of agencies to meet their needs are further factors which contribute to positive experiences of the service.

4.69 Whilst some of these challenges are common to multi-agency working, there are a number of messages for future practice that can be taken from the findings regarding effective practice and lessons for future delivery.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

5.1 The evaluation of Connecting Families aims to offer an insight into the delivery of the service and the perceived differences it has made to the lives of families it works with. This chapter is divided into three sections: the first summarises the sorts of impact that the respondents have identified; the second identifies areas that practitioners and parents felt were good practice in terms of delivery and enabling change; and the final section identifies some messages for future service delivery.

The perceived impact of Connecting Families

5.2 Both parents and professionals recognised the value of improved **parenting skills and practice** through working with Connecting Families. Parents reported 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.

5.3 Better **family relationships** were also identified as an outcome of engaging with Connecting Families. This included improved relationships between adult family members 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.

5.4 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.

5.5 Increased **parental wellbeing and confidence** was a commonly reported outcome by parents from working with Connecting Families. This helped to facilitate parents doing more for themselves as well as for their children. Enlisted support from partner agencies also helped parents address issues such as domestic violence or mental health which, in turn, helped their parenting ability.

5.6 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.

5.7 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.

5.8 Professionals and parents 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.

What Connecting Families does well

5.9 The service and its 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.

5.10 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. Positive experiences tended to be correlated with strong and fruitful relationships with key workers and the few parents that reported challenges with key workers also tended to be express more negative feelings about the service.

5.11 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.

Lessons for future service delivery

5.12 There was some concern raised about the **referral process**, particularly from social workers, although Connecting Families staff also identified it as a potential area of improvement. The findings suggest that improved awareness of the aims of the service and its referral process, including who can refer and how, could be beneficial.

5.13 Awareness of the service could also help to ensure that the **timing of the referral** is recognised as an important factor in the success of the service. Parents and practitioners reported the importance of the families being in the right frame of mind and willing to change in order for the service to be effective.

5.14 As the key worker was identified as one of the crucial elements in working with families to address their problems, allocating **the right worker for the family** is also of great importance. The findings suggest that families benefit from building a trusting,

respectful and positive relationship with their key worker, and the potential for positive outcomes may be affected where this strong relationship is not created.

5.15 Whilst the intensive and multi-agency aspects of the service were two of the key strengths of Connecting Families, some practitioners and parents also felt that by expanding the **capacity of the service, including expanding partner agency involvement**, the impact and experiences of families could be further improved.

5.16 It would also be beneficial to build on this qualitative work, which offers an insight into parents and practitioners experiences and perceptions of the impact of the programme. **Continued monitoring will help to further improve delivery.** The distribution of the new parents and child/ young person feedback and wider engagement events will provide additional feedback on the positive aspects of the service and areas for improvement to inform future practice. It will also provide valuable feedback from young people. Additional research which draws together hard data on costs averted through the service by drawing on a baseline and or comparison group could also facilitate more generalisable conclusions on the impact of the service.

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APPENDIX A

Further information on cost avoidance

The following information has been documented by the Information Officer from Connecting Families and can be found in the report:

Marshall, K. 2013. *Connecting Families: Cost Avoidance between August 2011 and August 2013 (Summary Version)*.

Cost avoidance has been achieved through the provision of various evidenced interventions including:

- Coordinating cross-agency interventions
- Delivering Keep Safe and Ability to Protect assessments
- Discouraging children and young people from committing anti-social behaviour
- Educating children and young people around the consequences of being reported to the Police as a missing person
- Encouraging children and young people to attend school (preventing exclusion)
- Empowering some of the most vulnerable families to make positive lifestyle changes and choices
- Offering practical advice around budgeting, preparing healthy meals, managing difficult behaviour and improving home conditions
- Preventing children / young people entering the Looked After System (cared for both within Bridgend and 'Out of County' placements)
- Providing mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse support, improving management and recovery
- Reducing service dependency and the threshold of need
- Resolving relationship conflict in families through mediation

In addition to cost avoidance to the public sector agencies, families have experienced positive outcomes including children being de-registered from the Child Protection Register and tenancies being secured avoiding homelessness. Staff working within Connecting Families endeavour to reduce "risk" and enhance the protective factors associated with resilience. It is anticipated that in the long term this will lead to more sustainable outcomes for families and reduce the likelihood of service dependency.

Cost avoidance across key agencies

Agency	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total	%
Children's Services	£983,860.00	£662,635.00	£2,420.00	£1,648,915.00	76.6%
Connecting Families (training & consultancy)	£0.00	£17,300.00	£1,852.50	£19,152.50	0.9%
Department for Works and Pensions	£11,700.00	£4,836.00	£0.00	£16,536.00	0.8%
Education	£71,440.95	£29,965.55	£0.00	£101,406.50	4.7%
Health	£9,767.20	£4,489.68	£0.00	£14,256.88	0.7%
Housing	£40,960.00	£44,640.00	£0.00	£85,600.00	4.0%
Police	£116,916.00	£149,183.27	£0.00	£266,099.27	12.4%
Total	£1,234,644.15	£913,049.50	£4,272.50	£2,151,966.15	100.0%

Comparison of cost avoidance to each agency by operational year

Agency	Intervention	Year 1 (01/08/11 – 31/07/12)	Year 2 (01/08/12 – 31/07/13)	Year 3 (01/08/13 – 31/08/13)	Cost Avoidance	Total per agency
Cost avoidance achieved through the provision of interventions to families	10 ability to protect assessments	£4,000.00	£3,200.00	£800.00	£8,000.00	£1,648,915.00
	Behaviour support with 5 families	£0.00	£4,320.00	£0.00	£4,320.00	
	34 children / young people (YP) de-registered from the CPR	£16,200.00	£32,805.00	£1,620.00	£50,625.00	
	60 children / YP identified as being at risk of LAC have remained with family	£733,300.00	£141,000.00	£0.00	£874,300.00	
	1 child / YP at risk of being placed in residential care remained at home	£0.00	£156,000.00	£0.00	£156,000.00	
	1 child / YP rehabilitated home from in house foster care	£0.00	£15,600.00	£0.00	£15,600.00	
	4 children / YP rehabilitated home from LA residential care based in Bridgend	£198,000.00	£168,000.00	£0.00	£366,000.00	
	1 child / YP rehabilitated from LA residential care to out of county foster care	£0.00	£114,400.00	£0.00	£114,400.00	
	Confidence building with 2 individuals	£0.00	£270.00	£0.00	£270.00	
	Domestic abuse work with 10 individuals	£540.00	£4,580.00	£0.00	£5,120.00	
	Gambling support with 1 individual	£500.00	£0.00	£0.00	£500.00	
	8 in depth reports	£2,500.00	£12,000.00	£0.00	£14,500.00	
	Keep Safe work (group workshop) 5 individuals	£0.00	£3,000.00	£0.00	£3,000.00	
	Keep Safe work(individual work) with 20 individuals	£13,600.00	£2,400.00	£0.00	£16,000.00	
	Parenting course (one to one) with 13 families	£13,000.00	£0.00	£0.00	£13,000.00	
	Relationship support with 9 families	£0.00	£1,950.00	£0.00	£1,950.00	
	1 SERAF Assessment (1 child / young person)	£0.00	£2,200.00	£0.00	£2,200.00	
	1 TAITH Assessment (1 child / young person)	£2,220.00	£0.00	£0.00	£2,220.00	
	Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme) delivered to 3 individuals	£0.00	£910.00	£0.00	£910.00	
	Department for Works and Pensions	1 fraudulent benefit claim	£780.00	£0.00	£0.00	
1 fraudulent housing benefit claim (BCBC)		£5,720.00	£0.00	£0.00	£5,720.00	
1 individual securing employment		£5,200.00	£0.00	£0.00	£5,200.00	
2 overpayments of benefits		£0.00	£4,836.00	£0.00	£4,836.00	
Education	13 children / young people encouraged to attend school	£36,382.95	£15,301.55	£0.00	£51,684.50	£101,406.50
	3 children / young people prevented from being excluded	£35,058.00	£0.00	£0.00	£35,058.00	
	1 child / YP prevented from being schooled at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)	£0.00	£14,664.00	£0.00	£14,664.00	
Health	Complimentary health visitor support with 12 families	£0.00	£279.68	£0.00	£279.68	£14,256.88
	Mental health support with 25 individuals	£3,120.00	£2,660.00	£0.00	£5,780.00	
	Substance misuse support with 15 individuals	£6,647.20	£1,550.00	£0.00	£8,197.20	
Housing	Prevention of 6 evictions	£13,000.00	£26,000.00	£0.00	£39,000.00	£85,600.00
	5 tenancies secured	£27,960.00	£18,640.00	£0.00	£46,600.00	
Police	7 children / young people discouraged from engaging in ASB	£62,280.00	£46,710.00	£0.00	£108,990.00	£266,099.27
	Reduction in arrests	£0.00	£5,709.27	£0.00	£5,709.27	
	Reduction in domestic abuse incidents (9 fewer incidents)	£2,248.00	£2,810.00	£0.00	£5,058.00	
	Reduction in missing person reports (34 fewer incidents)	£50,736.00	£93,010.00	£0.00	£143,746.00	
	Reduction in police callouts (11 fewer incidents)	£1,652.00	£944.00	£0.00	£2,596.00	
Internal training / consultancy	Consultancy work (Educational Psychologists)	£0.00	£15,750.00	£0.00	£15,750.00	£19,152.50
	Internal training (autism, risk assessing, non-violence resistance programme substance awareness)	£0.00	£1,550.00	£1,852.50	£3,402.50	
Total		£1,234,644.15	£913,049.50	£4,272.50	£2,151,966.15	£2,151,966.15
Operational costs (per operational year)		£372,384.00	£351,068.00	£338,316.00	£1,061,768.00	£1,061,768.00
Overall total (total cost avoidance – operational costs)		£862,260.15	£561,981.50	-£334,043.50	£1,090,198.15	£1,090,198.15

APPENDIX B

Information sheet and questions sent to families:



Connecting Families Lunch:

Information Leaflet

You are invited to come and talk about what you think about Connecting Families over a free lunch.

What are we doing?

We are keen to find out what you think worked well for your family what how could improve. We would also like to know if Connecting Families has made any difference to your life.

Every adult who has worked with, or is still working with Connecting Families is invited to take part.

What would we like you to do?

- 1) We would really like everyone to answer the three questions on the next page in **Section One**.

If you would like to tell us more about what you think about Connecting Families, you can choose in **Section Two** to do one, both (or neither) of the following:

- 2) Come along to a **free lunch** with other adults who have worked with Connecting Families. We will ask you talk about the questions in Section One and decide with others what you think are the most important things about Connecting Families.
- 3) Ask to speak to someone on your own about what you think about Connecting Families. This could be face to face or we could ring you if you prefer to talk on the telephone. This will not be with your key worker.

How can you do it?

Please complete Section One and, if you would like, Section Two of the form. We have included a stamped addressed envelope for you to send your reply back to us. Your answers to Section One will not be kept with your name so no one will know what you have written.

For more information please ring Hayley Collicott or Helen Laity on: 01656 815420



Section One: What do you think about Connecting Families?

1. Can you tell us three differences that working with Connecting Families has made to your family?
1) _____
2) _____
3) _____
2. What did you do with Connecting Families that was important to you?

3. What could Connecting Families have done better?

Section Two (optional): Invitation to talk more about your thoughts on Connecting Families

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____

Would you like to come to the Connecting Families Lunch?

Yes No

Would you like to talk to someone on your own about Connecting Families?

Yes No

How would you like us to contact you?

Post Telephone

Please send your reply to us using the stamped, addressed envelope. If we have not heard from you, someone will give you a call so you can choose to give your answers over the telephone.

APPENDIX C

Example Interview guide with Connecting Families practitioners

Evaluation of the Connecting Families Project

Practitioners and agency workers – Semi-structured Interview Schedule During / after intervention

1. Could you tell me about the Connecting Families process?
 - a. (How would you describe your role)?
2. What do you feel is the purpose of Connecting Families?
3. What is it like working for Connecting Families?
4. Are there any aspects of Connecting Families that you particularly liked?
(Perhaps compared to previous programs/ posts?)
5. Are there any aspects of Connecting Families that you have found challenging?
(Perhaps compared to previous roles)
 - a. (How) were any challenges any problems resolved?
6. Do you feel that Connecting Families had an immediate effect on families you've worked with?
 - a. How?
7. Are there any aspects of Connecting Families that you feel will, or have already had a long-lasting effect on families you've worked with?
8. What do you think about partnership working within Connecting Families?
 - a. Benefits?
 - b. Challenges?
9. What do you think Connecting Families do well?
10. What do you think Connecting Families could do better?

APPENDIX D

Email sent to social workers

Dear [neme],

I am conducting an evaluation of the Connecting Families project, which I believe your team may have come into contact with, and would really appreciate it if you took a couple of minutes to reply with some notes or comments in response to the 3 quick questions below.

What do you think about Connecting Families?

1. What differences do you think Connecting Families has made?
2. What do you think is good about Connecting Families?
3. What could Connecting Families do better?

Your responses will be anonymised with all names and identifiable information removed and integrated with other responses to be written into the final evaluation report.

If you would prefer to give me a quick call to tell me what you think about the service, my number is (01656) 815420 extension 5428. If I have not heard from you by next Friday (14th June), I may give you a quick call.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any way questions,

Kind Regards,
Hayley

APPENDIX E

Template adult feedback form for future evaluation (page one)



Your views are important to us:

We would like hear what you think about Connecting Families so that we can continue to learn about what we do well and improve our service.

1. Can you tell us about the difficulties your family had that led you to work with our service?

2. What changes did you as a family want to make through your work with our service?

3. Did you make these changes?

Yes Partly No

4. Do you think that our service helped you to make these changes?

Yes Partly No

5. Have you kept up these changes?

Yes Partly No

6. During your work with our service, did you feel respected?

Yes Partly No

7. During your work with our service, did you feel valued?

Yes Partly No

Template adult feedback form for future evaluation (page two)

8. During your work with our service, did you feel listened to?

Yes

Partly

No

9. During your work with our service, did you feel fairly treated?

Yes

Partly

No

10. Did you complete the agreed work with our service?

Yes

Partly

No

Why do you think that is?

11. Has your work with our service helped you to improve your family life?

Yes

Partly

No

12. Would you recommend our service to other families?

Yes

No

13. What have we done well?

14. What could we do better?

15. How did our service compare to other support services?

Better

The same

Worse

Why do you think that is?

Template child feedback form for future evaluation



Name: _____

Date: _____

1. How did you feel about your family **before** Connecting Families worked with you?

Please choose one face:-



2. How did you feel about your family **after** Connecting Families worked with you?

Please choose one face:-



3. How did it feel spending time with your Connecting Families worker?

Please choose one face:-



4. What did you like about what you did?

5. What could be better about what you did?

Thank you.

Template practitioner feedback form for future evaluation



Your views are important to us...

We would like hear what you think about Connecting Families so that we can continue to learn about what we do well and improve our service.

1. Can you tell us about the sorts of difficulties the family were experiencing, which led them to be referred our service?

2. What sorts of changes did the family need/want to make through their work with our service?

3. Do you think that our service helped them to make these changes?

Yes Partly No

4. Have these changes been maintained?

Yes Partly No

5. Did the family complete work with our service?

Yes Partly No

Why do you think that is?

6. Would you recommend our service to other professionals?

Yes No

7. What do you think Connecting Families does well?

8. What could we do better?
