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Evaluation of Families Working Together

Abbreviated Report

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School of Social and Political Sciences, April 2013

About the research

Families Working Together (FWT) is an intervention project designed by Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) to improve outcomes for families in Lincolnshire who are experiencing multiple, complex needs. The project aimed to explore how a broad range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations can work together more efficiently and effectively to this end. The project was one of 16 community budget pilots promoted by the government across England. During the life of the pilot, the government announced the introduction of a Troubled Families programme, to which FWT needed to respond.

The family intervention model underpinning the project is characterised by the allocation of a dedicated keyworker to each family to offer a wraparound service, drawing up a plan of support including a range of incentives and disincentives for the family, and co-ordinating the services involved with the family to promote a more seamless delivery. The outcomes anticipated from this approach were improvements in the families' lives, including reduced crime and anti-social behaviour, improved health and well-being, increased housing security and strengthened family resilience; improvements in the neighbourhoods and communities in which the families live; and a reduction in the costs incurred by services in responding to families' needs in more traditional ways.

The research was carried out between January 2012 and March 2013, and involved the following:

1. Interviews in person with all fourteen keyworkers and their two line managers. Ten of these keyworkers and one manager were re-interviewed six months on—the remaining four keyworkers and the other manager had either left the service or were absent on sickness or maternity leave
2. Interviews by telephone with fifteen Steering and Project Group representatives ('partners')
3. Interviews by telephone with fifteen frontline professionals from the partner agencies comprising: 4 LCC social workers, 1 Education Welfare Officer, 1 school student & family welfare officer, 1 home-school liaison officer, 1 school nurse, 2 housing officers, 1 health visitor, 1 family support worker, 1 targeted youth worker, 1 youth justice worker, and 1 debt advice worker
4. Interviews in person with a sample of twelve families supported by the project, with nine of these families re-interviewed towards the end of the research. This sample included ten mums, two dads and eight young people
5. Review of project documents including support plans for the sample of families.

Conclusions

Lincolnshire County Council have successfully established a service which responds to the specific challenges of supporting families with complex needs. The research found strong evidence of multi-agency partnership working and a willingness amongst key staff to rise to the challenges of the project. The keyworker role was seen to be effective in co-ordinating services around a family and minimising duplication. However, where the aims of intervention were contested or not clearly understood by all partners, joined-up working was more difficult to achieve, and strained relationships between staff in different services were more likely to exist.

- **We recommend that LCC work with partner agencies to ensure clearer understanding of FWT's roles, objectives and mode of working.**

Some services appeared to be more comfortable than others with the FWT approach. The research revealed a number of tensions between keyworkers and some social workers in LCC children's services, with the latter feeling that the keyworker became too involved with the family in some cases, losing sight of her professional boundaries. It is precisely this willingness of the keyworker to build close relationships with families, however, which generates engagement and motivation to change.

- **We recommend that LCC explore strategies for supporting keyworkers in maintaining and strengthening their role, and include children's services more fully in that process. There are some examples of effective partnerships between FWT and social workers, and these should be promoted as good practice in working with families with multiple complex needs.**

The research found evidence that Families Working Together acted as a successful Community Budget, with the pooling of resources from the various partner agencies involved in providing practical support. However, only a small number of partners contributed financially during the pilot period and this was so for a variety of reasons. It is therefore encouraging to see LCC expanding its ideas about how agencies might contribute, through secondments and the development of a 'virtual team'.

- **We recommend that FWT continues to be supported through a multi-agency governance structure as this has encouraged partner organisations to incorporate the strategic plans of FWT within their own organisations, and vice versa. Multi-agency working on the ground can only be supported if it exists also at a strategic level.**

It was clear from the research that FWT not only identified the presenting problems of families, which often impacted negatively upon the wider community, but also sought to understand the causes of these problems and the capacity of the families to resolve them. FWT provided a holistic approach to families with multiple deprivations, and responded to them with compassion and empathy. In comparison, there is a risk that the

Troubled Families Programme could prove to be less effective, as it focuses primarily upon crime, anti-social behaviour, worklessness and school attendance.

- **We recommend that LCC and its partners continue to ensure that FWT addresses the full range of needs of Lincolnshire's most vulnerable families.**

The research found that families had been struggling for many years and felt that they had been let down by services on numerous occasions. They expressed disappointment that their problems had to escalate to crisis point before they were supported. FWT worked with families where parents were finding it difficult to cope and showed signs of neglect of both their children and the family home. In contrast, the focus of the Troubled Families programme suggests that it will target older families with more entrenched and serious behavioural problems, who are likely to have been experiencing problems for some years already.

- **We recommend that LCC continue to give priority to supporting families with younger children through early intervention strategies employing a keyworker model.**

The introduction of the Troubled Families Programme has the potential to impact detrimentally upon the ways in which keyworkers are able to support families if caseloads are increased and intervention periods shortened.

- **We recommend that the following key features of the Families Working Together service should be considered to be essential for generating positive and sustainable outcomes for families. Any changes to the structure or working practices of FWT should ensure the preservation of these features in order to sustain the successful outcomes of the service.**

Key features of FWT which generate success

Impartiality

Given the families' entrenched histories with a number of agencies, it is important that the keyworker is impartial and does not represent the interests of any other agency. This enables them to build positive relationships with the family that promote change. Through this they can then also facilitate engagement with those other services and build bridges for future co-operation.

Time-intensive and sustained

FWT have a significant advantage over other services in that they have much more time to give to each family due to the smaller caseloads carried by each keyworker, and the sustained intervention period. This provides further opportunities for keyworkers to uncover underlying problems, to support the families to overcome these and to engender self-management.

Voluntary involvement/ownership

Families respond well to the fact that their involvement is voluntary (even where refusal to engage could have ramifications, e.g. eviction or removal of children). They see the service as helping them to make the changes that they want to make, and therefore feel in control of the process. Requiring families to participate on a statutory basis is unlikely to produce the same level of engagement.

Practical and emotional support

Families are often told what they must do by other services but lack the practical and emotional capacity to comply with these instructions. FWT keyworkers have both the practical skills and emotional intelligence to enable families to build this capacity.

Family budget

FWT is unique in having a ring-fenced budget to spend on meeting the needs of the families. We have seen evidence of this having been managed prudently, with good oversight and an intent to spend public money appropriately and economically. This budget has been used to assist with the initial engagement of families and with moving them forward.

The Authors

Peter Somerville is Professor of Social Policy and Sue Bond-Taylor is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Lincoln. They are happy to provide further information and to answer questions about their research



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