



Durham County Council Families First Evaluation Summary

Background

Families First focused on improving children's social care practice at levels 3 and 4, covering children and young people with additional and complex needs, and those needing support to live safely at home. The long-term goals were to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce the costs of children's social care. The programme created 10 integrated, co-located, and mixed-skill social work teams to work with the most complex families and a programme of workforce development and practice transformation. The focus was on reflective and holistic practice and embedding a whole family ethos across children's services. The programme also involved engagement activities with partners and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Aims and objectives

Families First aimed to rebalance the pattern of work across the different levels of need, reducing the number of cases at the highest levels, thereby reducing Social Worker caseloads and enabling more intensive, sustained support to be offered to children and families. Families First aimed to reduce Looked After Children population by 20%, reduce Child Protection Plans (for Neglect) by 20%, and reduce re-referrals from 24% to 15% by 2016/17.

Evaluation

The mixed method, multi-stage evaluation was carried out between June 2015 and November 2016 by Kantar Public, with final analysis and reporting completed in early 2017. It included scoping activities, interviews with staff and service users (112 interviews and mini-group discussions with staff and 18 interviews with service users), historic case analysis (12 cases reviewed), staff and service user surveys (two staff surveys with 440 and 486 participants; 36 responses to the initial service user survey and 147 to the rolling surveys conducted by Durham County Council), and analysis of management information.

Findings

At the time of reporting, Durham County Council was still implementing and embedding the Families First changes, with more time needed to fully assess impacts. The evaluation found:

- The balance of work at each level of need, and the number of cases held at Level 4, had not significantly changed (26% of cases at level 4 and 7% at level 5 in Oct. '15, compared to 26% and 8% respectively in Oct. '16).
- The number of Looked After Children (excluding those in respite or short-term care) increased between March '15 and March '16, from 61.6 per 10,000 to 67.8 per 10,000; the rate of children who became looked after rose from 26.1 per 10,000 to 29.9 per 10,000 (April to March 2014/15 vs April to March 2015/16).
- In 2013/14 (April-March) the rate of children who became subject to a Child Protection Plan was 65.3 per 10,000. This fell to 46.5 per 10,000 children in 2015/16. The number of children who became the subject of a Child Protection Plan for Neglect (initial category of abuse) fell from 414 children in 2013/14 (April-March) to 301 in 2015/16 (April-March).
- Administrative data for the period April to June showed an increase in re-referral rates between 2015 and 2016, and a percentage above Durham County Council's own target. The re-referral rates for April to June 2015 and April to June 2016 were 20.2% and 24.8% respectively (vs a target of 21.0%).

The evaluation showed there was good progress in implementing Families First:

- Overall, there was effective communications and change management of the programme.
- The new team structures and co-location led to positive feedback from staff and families on the impact on practice, co-operation between teams, and relationships with families. This was supported by mobile working and the new roles within teams, although more clarity was needed about the responsibilities for some of these.
- Information sharing and co-operation between teams needed improvement, in particular ensuring there are formalised and consistent systems in place to govern this.
- The changes to systems and roles were supported by a workforce development plan, with evidence of staff beginning to undertake more reflective practice and, in one area, benefitting from a Learning Community.
- Impacts on practice were, in some instances, limited by high caseloads, in part caused by vacancies within Families First teams and in part by pressure from a condensed Child Protection Service, meaning many new child protection cases were allocated to Families First Social Workers.
- There were indications of improved service user engagement due to a more co-ordinated/joined up service experience, and some staff (e.g. Family Workers) were positive about their ability to work directly with families.
- Social Workers were less likely to say they spend enough time with families, reporting that that they were still required, in some cases, to spend too much time on administrative tasks, although this was in part a reflection of the core child protection and statutory responsibilities of that role. Team Co-ordinator roles were welcomed and expected to have a positive effect on balancing direct work with families and administration.
- Difficulties in filling VCS Co-ordinator positions, and the absence of a main strategic partner, meant limited progress in improving the range of available VCS provision
- Where staff felt things had declined, they were most likely to say things have got worse for children's services staff as a whole, and least likely to say that for families. There were polarised views on the impact of Families First, with staff who said things had improved highly likely to attribute this to Families First, but those who said things had got worse likely to say this was a result of Families First.
- Ofsted rated children's services in Durham as 'requiring improvement' following an inspection in 2016, and pointed to the reorganisation of children's services in recent years, including the Families First, as one reason for this. The report also noted that there have been some positives for early help services, which are an important element of the logic for Families First and that managers were addressing key issues.

Recommendations

- For Families First to be successful it needs to be implemented as a whole systems change. While a core component is the creation of 10 new teams, other parts of children's services and the wider system have a significant effect on the success of Families First.
- High caseloads, vacancies and capacity issues can be significant barriers to staff implementing and sustaining changes in practice, and on subsequent impacts for families and children's services. It is important to address these as well as continue to recruit and support new roles, including the Family Worker, Specialist Lead Professional and Social Work Consultant, to free up social work time for direct work with families. Responsibilities need to be clearly defined and communicated.
- Given the scale of change, a high degree of commitment at a senior strategic level is needed.

Changes made in services in response to evaluation findings

Durham County Council is addressing issues with vacancies and caseload distribution, including changing team boundaries to establish an additional 11th Families First team and improve the equity of caseload distribution. The council continues to work with the VCS to achieve improved connections between the service and local VCS provision.

The DFE's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme funded this project and its independent evaluation. Co-ordination of the evaluation was undertaken by the Rees Centre from the University of Oxford (www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk.) A full copy of this report can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications