



Creating Strong Communities Evaluation Summary

Background

The Creating Strong Communities model was designed to fundamentally change the way local practitioners and partners in North East Lincolnshire work together to safeguard vulnerable children. The approach aimed to support a culture change and system shift to dramatically reduce the numbers of individuals and families requiring intensive support. The package of support was designed as a classic invest-to-save model. It was anticipated that there would be a reduction in the current high level of demand for statutory provision, which would lead to a redistribution of resources, and thereby enable sustainability of the approach. The model, referred to as North East Lincolnshire's Framework for Practice, innovatively combined the following 4 established tools within community practice intervention:

- Outcome Based Accountability (OBA) focussing whole organisations on outcomes, rather than process
- Restorative Practice (RP) aiming to resolve conflict at the earliest stage, by encouraging both high challenge and high support for all parties. It encourages critical reflection and consideration of language
- Signs of Safety (SoS) enables practitioners across different disciplines to work collaboratively and in partnership with families and children, using the same language and methods
- Family Group Conferencing (FGC) provides mediated support for the whole family, resulting in an agreed family support plan, which sets out the best route forward for the family to take care of their child

Aims and Objectives

Objectives of the Creating Strong Communities programme included:

- a 40% reduction in the number of children being identified as in need (CIN) over a three-year period
- a 40% reduction in the number of children subject to a Child Protection (CP) Plan over a three-year period
- a 23% reduction in the number of Looked After Children (LAC) over a three-year period
- a reduction in the rate of referrals to social care
- improvement in behaviour of vulnerable pupils
- improvement in school attendance of vulnerable pupils
- significantly fewer children on intervention plans over a three-year period
- reduction in the number of families requiring intensive crisis support
- reduction in incidents of bullying or serious incidents involving vulnerable children
- reduction in social work turnover
- reduction in the rate of re-referrals to social care

North East Lincolnshire Council were particularly interested in reducing their CIN, CP, LAC and referral figures. Data for these areas was readily available on the central government website and has allowed the evaluation team to evidence movement towards target outcomes.

Evaluation Overview

The evaluation framework was designed to capture the combined impact of the four components of integrated support on practitioner practice, partnership working and outcomes for young people and families. The mixed method approach included practitioner e-surveys for SoS (baseline = 37.7% response rate (113); follow up = 38.9% response rate (44)); RP (baseline = 70% response rate (59); follow up = 58% response rate (34)) and OBA

(baseline = 79% response rate (99); follow up = 66% response rate (65)); practitioner focus groups, trainer consultation and training observation across three strands; work around the Restorative Schools programme, including e-surveys and case studies; ten family case studies related to the FGC service; surveys for families and social workers related to the FGC service; workshops with the FGC team (baseline and follow up); a number of good practice case studies and secondary data analysis; and an FGC cost benefit analysis was undertaken on 20 historical and 20 current families. This evaluation study was carried out between May 2015 and February 2017 by York Consulting LLP.

Findings

Although programme activities have not been running long enough to expect a significant impact on programme outcomes, there is evidence of positive progress, including a reduction in the number of children subject to a CP Plan and a reduction in the referral rate to social care. Areas for further improvement are the number of LAC and the number of CIN, both of which have increased in the last 12 months.

Staff were trained in the principles of OBA, and an OBA Champions Network supported and cascaded good practice. RP made a significant mark on operational practice areas across the authority with three-quarters (74%) of the 59 staff trained and who completed the survey indicating that it had changed the way they managed staff, and 88% indicated that they were actively using it to implement change. SOS was enthusiastically embraced by practitioners across the authority. Action learning sets encouraged good practice and a new single assessment tool was fully embedded. Over 90% of staff trained indicated that the application of SOS generated clear benefits in the way they worked with families, and there was evidence of outside agencies responding to SOS by adapting their referral procedures

The FGC team worked with 154 families and delivered 65 conferences since the service was expanded in November 2015. A total of 28 conferences were held over a 6-month period, reflecting increased efficiency of operation.

Cost Benefit Analysis

A cost benefit analysis of FGC was conducted using a Fiscal Return on Investment (FROI) methodology. This involved calculating the cost of FGC and setting it against the observed benefits (the adverse outcomes which have been avoided). Based on 20 FGC cases, this revealed a return on investment of 18.2. This represents a saving of £18.20 for every £1 spent on support.

Lessons Learnt

A number of lessons have emerged from the implementation of programme activity. These include:

- the positive impact that an integrated programme of activity has on sustaining momentum
- securing buy-in by clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of interventions
- the effectiveness of the audit framework in identifying both achievements and areas for improvement

Factors supporting the long-term sustainability of the approaches include:

- strong senior management commitment
- the ongoing cascading of practice through Champions Networks
- being part of a wider change programme across the authority
- all 4 components of the programme will continue post-Innovation Funding support

Areas where there is scope for future development locally, and wider application, include:

- extending FGC into early intervention through Family Hubs, establishing a Regional Centre of Excellence for social worker recruitment
- promoting the Fiscal Return on Investment tool more widely as an invest-to-save model

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