

University of Glasgow

**Renfrewshire Families First Evaluation
The Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change**

SUMMARY APRIL 2015

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April 2015

The Integrated Children's Services Plan indicates how we will work towards delivering this long term vision and explains how services working with children, young people and their families will provide support to achieve improved outcomes for Renfrewshire's children over the next three years.

The most significant influence on children making the best start in life is the care and nurture of their parents. Our universal services of education and health work to support parents to make a positive impact on children and young people. It is our aim to prevent problems or difficulties from arising where at all possible, but when they do, we want to act with parents to resolve issues as quickly and effectively as possible.

Reach for a Better Future outlines our approach based on prevention and early and effective intervention.

The prevention approach means that parents, with the support of services when needed, will continue to focus on positive outcomes for most children by stopping problems before they arise.

The second element of our approach is to identify and intervene early when problems do occur. Evidence and research shows that early and effective intervention improves outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Using these approaches will help services support families, children and young people to achieve the outcomes that all of our children deserve.

Councillor Jacqueline Henry

Chair of the Children and Young People Thematic Board
Renfrewshire Council

Key findings

The findings presented here are based on 71 interviews with parents/carers and 56 interviews with professionals in the Linwood and Ferguslie neighbourhoods.

Overall, findings from the major stakeholders in the Families First neighbourhood projects; parents, Core Team members, and partner organisations have been overwhelmingly positive. Interviews with parents have clearly demonstrated that the initiative has had a positive, and in some instances a profound, impact on the lives of families in the Linwood and Ferguslie neighbourhoods. For many of these families referral, from partner agencies or by self-referral, has brought immediate support from dedicated Core Team members. Often, initial presenting problems have represented the tip of an iceberg and many of the families that the project has worked with have, over a period of time, revealed a series of additional and often complex underlying problems and difficulties. Yet even in these situations the Core Teams have shown themselves able to cope, both with the range of issues and with the complexity of some family situations. Many of the partner agencies that the project has engaged with over the last two years have reported that the Project's presence has resulted in benefits to their organisations. For some this has been the result of referring families onto a service that they believe is best placed to deal with their clients' issues, for others it has meant an improvement in their working environment. For example, class teachers spoke about how, with Core Team support, disruptive children have become more settled in class and better able to learn. Consequently, teachers then spend more time thinking about teaching rather than worrying about class control. Social work and health visitors noted that support from the Core Team had frequently prevented situations and issues from becoming more serious.

If the *Core Team Initiative* is as successful as the evaluation indicates then there are important implications for local authority services. It is clear that the nature of the project has resulted in a service to local families which is proactive and responsive to a wide range of needs. Indeed, parents often contrasted their 'positive' experience of the team with their 'negative' experiences of other local and central government authority services. The messages from this evaluation are clear, to better meet the needs of families, services should be:

- Faster in response and more able to devote time to building up and maintaining relationships with families. Initial presenting issues may just be one of many that families face and it takes time to understand parents and children's, often complex, situations
- Willing to model appropriate behaviour for families rather than merely 'instructing them what to do'
- Building relationships with families based on mutual respect and relating to them on their terms
- Prepared to 'go the extra mile'. Services which are able to operate in a flexible manner and go beyond families expectations of what is required are held in high esteem by the community

- Reducing the number of agencies families have to deal with at times of crisis. Having a one-stop service with an emphasis on building strong professional client relationship helps maintain parental confidence at times in their lives when self-belief and self-esteem is often low. At such times families are often ill prepared to cope with the demands imposed on them by any number of professional agencies.

Findings from Core Team staff, parents and representatives of partner services indicated broad agreement on the impact of the project.

Core Team Staff

- The Core Team have helped many local families deal with a wide range of issues, from financial difficulties, through parent and child health issues, relationship difficulties and child behavioural problems.
- The financial advice workers have brought an added dimension to the work of the Project, so much so, that benefit checks for families have become routinised into the work of the project. Between November 2013 and March June 2014 the project secured over £573,000 in additional income for local families. They also helped local people manage more than £25,000 of debt.
- The Project's approach to working with families, adopting a 'walking with them' ethos while encouraging parents to take increasing responsibility for dealing with the issues appears to have been highly successful and there is little evidence of families becoming dependent on family workers.
- Staff highlighted the benefits of having a locally based team operating in a flexible and responsive manner with an ability to deal with a range of issues and difficulties.

Parents/Carers

- The *Core Team Initiative* quickly established itself in the Ferguslie and Linwood neighbourhoods and built trusting relationships with local families.
- The project has made a notable positive impact to the lives of families in the two communities. In some instances, the support has had an immediate impact on families lives, for example, in preventing eviction and securing additional benefits. In other instances, impact may take longer and, in the case of families with mental health problems, may require cyclical support from the project.
- There is good evidence that the approach used by workers in modeling behaviour, advocacy and 'walking' parents through issues has begun to build the skills and resilience of those in vulnerable families and, therefore, contribute to the wider social capital of their communities.

- Many parents contrasted the positive ethos and approach of the Core Team with that of other public services including; social work, health visitors and the jobcentre where personnel were regularly viewed as patronising and judgmental.
- Parents also commented on the fact that Core Team members were able to spend more time with them than they had experienced with other public services where engagement time was more limited.
- Parents who had engaged with the energy advice service spoke positively about the help they had received. Among the encouraging outcomes were instances where families had switched to more economical tariffs, been supported to apply for insulation grants, or been informed on how to manage their heating systems more efficiently.
- Those parents who had been matched with a Homestart volunteer were very pleased with the support they received and were particularly appreciative of the fact that the volunteers had given up their own time to help other families.

Partner Agencies

- Partner agencies regularly reported the *Core Team initiative* as an asset for supporting families in the communities in which they worked.
- There was little evidence of service overlap between the Core Team and other public services.
- Referral systems from other agencies had grown over the life of the project. Local schools, nurseries, and health visitors had become regular referrers.
- A number of partners suggested that the *Core Team project* was playing a role in building the social capacity and resilience of the communities.
- The *Core Team project* was having a positive impact on the work of other services in the neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

Renfrewshire Council's *Core Team Initiative* represents a bold investment on the part of the Council to develop a locally based early intervention approach. It is clear that the success of this project will influence the future development of Council services including Education and Social Work. Findings from the evaluation indicates that the project has had a substantial impact on the lives of many parents and children living in the Ferguslie and Linwood areas. Moreover, in terms of measurable impact the project has secured more than half a million pounds in additional benefit income for families in the localities.