

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

## REVIEW OF THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA FAMILIES FORWARD SERVICE



# REVIEW OF THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA FAMILIES FORWARD SERVICE

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**PROJECT TEAM** Professor Marian Brandon and Dr Penny Sorensen

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## WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

The government's Troubled Families Programme was launched in 2011 with the initial aim of assisting 120,000 families who take up a disproportionate amount of government funds. This study is an evaluation of Families Forward, part of the Troubled Families Programme in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Families Forward is a highly intensive, personalised intervention for families with very complex needs. The aim of the service is to keep families together to reduce the likelihood of children and young people becoming looked after. The main criteria for referral are: imminent risk of family breakdown, a history of universal services being unable to engage with the family, and the case being open to a social worker. The multi-disciplinary Families Forward team offers families access to a range of professional skills, experiences and resources. Families are visited weekly, or more frequently in times of crisis, for 6-18 months depending on the families' circumstances. The service is based on multi systemic therapy – considering all environmental and social systems impacting on the family – and relationship based practice. The review of the service was undertaken to identify what is working for the families, what is working less well and what can be done to improve the service. With the policy focus on 'troubled families', it is important to find out how new initiatives are working and whether or not families experience them as helpful.

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to provide an understanding of how the service was working from a number of points of view including what makes a difference to families. The research questions were:

- How is the Families Forward team working?
  - What are the team's strengths/ areas for development?
- How are practitioners working with families?
  - Who is doing what with whom?
  - What are the practitioners' perceptions of good practice?
  - What are the practitioners' support needs?
- Which other practitioners are working with the family?
  - How does co-working and working on the same case operate?
- What are families' perceptions of good practice?
  - What do they like/dislike about the service?
  - How does it compare with other experiences of help?

## HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The review took place over 5 months between March and July 2014. The methodology included:

- Observation of a team meeting – researchers attended a weekly team meeting to observe referral discussions and team issues.
- Developmental workshop with team practitioners – a half day workshop attended by seven out of the team's nine practitioners. Practitioners presented a case study for discussion which enabled researchers to explore the work of the team.
- Telephone interviews with the manager and deputy manager of the team
- Interviews with families – 10 families were interviewed face to face at home. In the majority of the interviews the mother participated, although in two cases the interview was with the father. In two of the interviews only one parent was present, in 4 interviews a parent was present and other family members were in the home but did not participate, and in the other 4 interviews a parent was present and other family members participated intermittently.
- Interviews with other professionals – six professionals were interviewed by telephone. These professionals were from social work, CAMHS, and education and were part of the professional network supporting two of the families.

All transcribed data from the interviews and workshop were analysed using thematic analysis. This 'bottom up' approach allowed themes to emerge from the data providing new and detailed insight into the lives and experiences of families and the work of practitioners.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The parenting of adolescents was a major concern for the participating families. Many parents felt there were no options left for disciplining their children. Practitioners were experienced in parenting work but often had to work on changing behaviour in families where behaviour had become entrenched over several generations. This included domestic violence and unemployment.
- Families recognised the cyclical nature of their family problems - there was a sense that things were never really resolved but rather things were thought of as 'quiet' at times. Practitioners also experienced the cycles of calm followed by the need for even more intensive work with families.
- Families viewed Families Forward practitioners as helpful, kind, non-judgemental and available. Some families developed close relationships with their workers whilst still recognising the distinction between family and practitioner.

- Families valued the activities on offer and said that they helped them to feel close as a family. Practitioners felt that the activities could potentially challenge unhealthy family dynamics and that they were a good way of sustaining engagement with families. Participation in group activities with other families helped some families to develop friendship and support networks, staying in contact outside of the organised activities. Some said they were less lonely and isolated when they realised that other families had similar problems.
- Working with families in crisis was demanding for practitioners but they all felt well supported. Support included peer support, team meetings, regularly supervision and clinical support sessions every six weeks.
- Family Forward practitioners were in a good position to feedback information to other professionals working with the family due to the intensity and duration of their work. Other professionals valued working with these practitioners, citing good working relationships, co-location and a shared recording system as benefits of working with the team.
- Families said they gained a lot from the programme, including: increased confidence of parents and children; the ability to socialise; gaining new skills and interest; and family leisure time. Parents and practitioners felt that the young people eventually grew out of problems but along the way the service supported them to better deal with their issues while parents were equipped with improved parenting strategies.
- Possible changes expressed by parents included making activities more age appropriate and having activities to follow on once the service had ended.
- Ending the service for families is planned several months ahead. Managers and practitioners said that it was obvious when a family was ready to go it alone and the decision was made jointly with the practitioner, family, and other agencies working with the family. After involvement with the services, families expressed that their positive experiences meant that they would not be worried about asking for help in the future.
- Sometimes the service had to come to an end because the young person had turned 18. Practitioners felt that there was a gap in provision for those still vulnerable young people. Currently, families are not tracked after the service ends and the team relies on hearsay from other workers who may still be involved with the family.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Practitioners working with families need to do so in a kind, reliable, persistent and non-judgemental way.
- Managers and service providers need to appreciate that success with these families was, in part, due to the amount of time practitioners could spend with the families. Practitioner workloads need to be planned in order to provide this time for direct work and relationship building.
- Joint working was seen as essential to improve outcomes for families and requires good communication, trust, openness and mutual respect.
- Service providers can help increase 'social capital' by facilitating group activities with other families. This can help families build social networks which can continue when services end. Because families may be wary of letting their still vulnerable children attend community activities, a list of 'approved' follow up activities that families can access after the service ends may be helpful.

## STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

### Strengths

Findings were informed from a wide variety of sources; families, practitioners, their manager and deputy manager, and a small group of other related professionals.

### Limitations

One potential drawback of interviewing family members as a group was that parents would sometimes be reluctant to talk about past or present traumatic events in front of their children or go into much detail about the current behaviour of the child or young person. As families were not tracked after the service ended, further work is needed to evaluate the long term impact of the service on outcomes for families.



## FIND OUT MORE

**FULL REPORT** [goo.gl/ikjzZf](https://goo.gl/ikjzZf)

Professor Marian Brandon | [m.brandon@uea.ac.uk](mailto:m.brandon@uea.ac.uk)

**CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Elizabeth Fry Building,  
University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ

**DIRECTOR** Professor Marian Brandon