

This year Family Action celebrates its 140th anniversary!

Regional Focus: Experiencing Transformation at Family Action Leicester

Some months ago now, Jayne Stokes came to a team meeting in Leicester and listened to our moans about feeling that there was less understanding than there could be within Family Action of some of the work undertaken at Leicester and of our team's experience of the FWA/FSU merger. One of her helpful suggestions was that we write an article for FAB – and here it is, albeit later than was intended. This is what happens when you start moaning to Deputy Directors – you end up with more work!



The team at Family Action Leicester

Classical myth, fairy stories and even some modern fiction is littered with accounts of people being miraculously transformed, and the changes, more often than not, are problematic. Princes and princesses turn into frogs, lovers become swans or stars, young women are changed into trees to escape their pursuers, and many will know Kafka's story 'Metamorphosis', in which the protagonist wakes up one morning to

supporting families since 1869

find that he has been transformed into a creature resembling a giant cockroach.

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"The impact of change on staff teams is not always anticipated or experienced immediately and can sometimes present itself as something else entirely."
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Generally, though not always, the changes are uninvited and our experience in Leicester was no different - we simply knew that we were to become something else, and it was for us to determine or discover whether or not the new identity was preferable to the old. The reason for the change was, of course, that, unlike most other parts of the country, Leicester and Leicestershire had both an active FWA team and an active FSU team at the time of the merger in June 2006, and it made sense for the two teams to integrate.

The then-FWA team had been formed around three years previously using money from the Leicester City Children's Fund to create a new Building Bridges service known locally as Leicester Children's Support Service and staffed by Family Support Workers. It had subsequently built on this initial service and widened its portfolio to include, for example, a specialist service within the County of Leicestershire around the needs of parents with learning disabilities, a more intensive family support service in the City for families using statutory

provision, and an imaginative approach to the issues of domestic abuse, both for children and survivors. The team's foundation marked, in fact, a welcome return to Leicester for FWA, as there had been a presence in the area some years previously, before funding difficulties had led, sadly, to the service having to close.

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"Changes can only happen over time, given time, good-will and some direction."
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The FSU team had been in existence for around 50 years and offered a range of largely centre-based social work services aimed at providing therapeutic support to children and families who had suffered abuse and to families at risk of breakdown. Specialist assessments and follow-up therapeutic work with children, who had sexually abused others, with adults who may have previously abused children in their care, and with adults whose early abusive experiences compromised their relationships with their own children, were also provided. In its later years the team had broadened its remit to include a more preventative strand to its services. This included work with children and families of multiple heritage and crisis support work to families in their own homes who were struggling with a child's

behaviour or with adult/child relationships.



The team at Family Action Leicester

The FSU team occupied two large, rather run-down (but much-loved) houses near the City centre, owned by FSU itself. The FWA team rented part of an open-plan office. The FSU building obviously had to be sold and, in August 2007, all 28 of us moved together into another large house we have on lease from the City council. Any pretence we might have wanted to entertain that we were not now all part of the same organisation was from this point onwards completely counter-productive, and we experienced many of the same blessings and frustrations encountered by other blended families.

There were clearly some common areas of work between the two teams (work around domestic abuse, for example) but, to be fair, there were more differences than similarities. Perhaps more interestingly, both teams were strengthened by a strong sense of identity and independence, and a sense of pride and belief in the value of the work we did – characteristics which had stood us in good stead in our development and survival as separate organisations but which presented particular challenges as we attempted to integrate. In fact, one of the more difficult lessons we have learnt over the last two years is that the process of true integration has had to involve some letting go of some of those very things which we clung to most fervently during both the 'good old days' and the not so good.

I've been thinking a lot about all this recently, and I feel that the struggle in the process of a change like this is to do with the fact that the kind of work that we all do in Family Action can only be done well if, in the words of Kahlil Gibran, we 'work with love'.

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"And what is it to work with love?" he writes, "It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit"
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And the problem is that working with love is harder in an atmosphere of imposed change, however much we may accept the need for the change and be pleased and appreciative that a way forward has been found, because love is a thing that is freely given and which grows from a part of us that does not always yield to reason.

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"There is no place for complacency but that we must remain open-minded and receptive to each other's strengths and to our own limitations."
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When I read over what I have written, I find myself worrying that it sounds as though the experience of coming together has been a bleak one, but the reality is very different. It has been hard, of course (and still is sometimes), but not bleak, and the way in which our team has grown and is continually growing together, seems to me to be a minor miracle. Steps along the way have included moving from separate team meetings to a system of joint meetings serving a variety of needs, working together to make our building fit for purpose and planning an official launch of Family Action Leicester.

We have been thinking about how our services can be re-configured to form a more coherent working style, which recognises that families' needs fluctuate in terms of the type and intensity of service required, delivering training and skill-sharing to each other about our respective areas of knowledge and experience, and using our team development days to celebrate and explore what we have achieved and what we still need to work on. Many of us feel that our new name has been very helpful in terms of breaking down an 'us and them' culture.

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"Deeper differences can colour discussions and debates about things that appear on the surface to be straightforward."
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We have learnt many things though our experience of being transformed into an integrated team.

For myself, I have learnt that the experience of co-creating with colleagues what we now have in Leicester is something which I value above all other experiences in my professional career. I will always be proud to have been a part of it and thankful to those whose professionalism, integrity and innate goodness have made it possible. 🙏

Anne Marsden
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