



Building  
stronger  
families



*[My Family Support Worker] really helped build my confidence and to start believing in myself. If I hadn't had the support from Family Action I don't think I would be where I am today.” – Service user*

## *Improving Futures:* An evaluation of Family Action's Family Support Services in Southend and Haringey **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

June 2017

# Executive summary

Family Action delivers schools based Family Support Services in Haringey and Southend as part of the national Improving Futures Programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The services offer holistic support for families with a child up to the age of 10, with Family Support Workers acting as Lead Professionals, co-ordinating Team Around the Family (TAF) meetings when required and signposting to other agencies as appropriate.

## Service Descriptions

### Southend

The Southend service has four Family Support Workers, a team administrator and a full-time project manager. It operates a home-based model, providing families with weekly 1:1 home-based support from a Family Support Worker, along with parenting workshops in schools. The Family Support Worker may also accompany the family to meetings or appointments, particularly with other agencies or health and social care services. Families receive support for between six and nine months. The core service in Southend is supported by parenting groups in schools, organised family outings, and recruitment of volunteers to help provide ongoing support when the Family Action service is coming to an end. This aspect of the service is particularly focused on helping families to build and maintain effective social and support networks in their local community.

### Haringey

The service in Haringey also offers a home-based 1:1 support service, delivered by two Family Support Workers, with the addition of a drop-in service for parents based in five local schools, delivered by one Family

Support Worker. Parents who require shorter term support, particularly in relation to practical issues such as housing and benefits assistance, or short term counselling, are able to receive between six and ten sessions based in their child's school. In addition, the Big Lottery funding provided in Haringey also enabled Family Action to run Kidstime workshops alongside the Family Support service. These workshops support families where a parent is affected by mental ill-health, providing a safe space for adults and children to talk about mental illness with the aim of helping children to understand what has happened to their parents, and for families to find solutions to the stresses mental health problems bring. The Haringey service is supported by a local charity, Markfield, which provides family befriending and tailored parental support for families with children who have additional needs. This includes skills transfer for teachers in local schools.

## Funding history and purpose of this evaluation

Family Action was initially awarded four years of funding for the services in 2012. Following successful delivery of the service for four years, Family Action was awarded further funding from the Big Lottery to continue delivery of the core service for an additional year, and to extend the service model further by developing the school-based elements described above. The decision to develop the school-based extensions to the service model in both Southend and Haringey was to enable more referrals, improve joined-up working and respond even more effectively to the needs of children and their families. The service extensions included the introduction of an in-school drop-in service in Haringey, and parenting workshops in five primary schools in Southend.

Family Action commissioned Apteligen to undertake an independent evaluation of

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the services, focusing on the development and impact of Family Action's work in this additional year of extended service provision. The report uses qualitative and quantitative data to assess the outcomes of the service. Data collected by the service from July 2016 to March 2017 and data collected by Apteligen between December 2016 and March 2017 has been used.

## Volumes, need and reasons for accessing the services

A total of **100** families received support from Family Action's Family Support Services in Southend and Haringey during the funding year to date (1<sup>st</sup> July 2016 to 21<sup>st</sup> March 2017).

The qualitative evidence for the evaluation demonstrates that families accessing the services are complex and have three main areas of high need:

1. At least one escalating issue which has the potential to break down the family unit combined with multiple areas of underlying need, or
2. A complex and high level of support need arising from the family's involvement with a number of care and support agencies, requiring co-ordination efforts on top of an already challenging home environment, or
3. A high and acute level of support need, originating from a situation of exhaustion, extreme stress, or pressure on one parent.

In Haringey, Practitioners who refer into the service gave the primary reasons for referring a family or child as parenting difficulties (88%), behavioural issues

among children (75%) and housing issues (50%). Mental health issues were much less frequently given as a primary reason, despite this being stated as a key focus area in Haringey. The results are similar in Southend, with 100% of Practitioners who responded to the evaluation survey citing parenting difficulties as a primary reason, and 83% behavioural issues among children.

## Key Findings

The evaluation evidence highlighted that **families often view their needs differently from professionals**, emphasising the benefit of a flexible Family Support model that can adapt to new or underlying issues as they emerge once the support plan has begun.

**All Practitioners in both areas rated the service as 'good' or 'very good'**, citing its ability to effectively engage parents who have been reluctant to engage with the school or other services in the past, and the range of support available.

*"The breadth of the service, including advice work, in-depth family support, training and befriending have offered a very valuable range of services to families. The ongoing funding for the project has meant that a number [of] families have engaged in the project and we have seen parents become actively involved in supporting each other through training and befriending. – Haringey Practitioner.*

**This evaluation has highlighted the opportunity for continued focus on building community engagement via befriending and volunteering initiatives, as a key component of an effective family support service.** Building community

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engagement potentially offers more opportunities for individual families to be supported beyond the Family Action service, as well as helping to build stronger collaboration between existing services and groups in the community. The national evaluation of the Improving Futures projects highlighted the positive impact that community engagement can have on families – reducing their social isolation, increasing their support networks and building their confidence. Utilising community volunteers seemed particularly effective as it engaged hard to reach families and acted as a stepping stone for families leaving services to further build their confidence.

**The evidence shows that both services do effectively reach a wide cross-section of the population, in particular both men and women. There is also clear evidence to show that many families engage well with the Family Action service, and stay engaged throughout the planned period of support.** The data for the current funding year shows that families in Southend received support on average for 24 weeks, and in Haringey the average was 29 weeks. In Southend, 76% of families stayed involved for more than three months. **The school pathway may be an especially effective way for fathers to access the service.**

**There is noticeable improvement for families in all key outcome domains as measured by the Family Star outcomes tool.** In Southend, the greatest improvements seen were in relation to setting boundaries and routines within the family (2.65 and 2.8 points out of 10 respectively). In Haringey, the data also shows improvements in all areas, but with a more skewed picture towards improvements in relation to setting boundaries (2.8 points) and

developing social networks (2.2 points). Improvements of around three points are typically considered to be especially positive within the context of these families.

**Parental outcomes are quite varied, but many are underpinned by improvements in parental well-being, confidence in parenting and ability to engage effectively with the school and other agencies.** Good parental outcomes are also the result of receiving practical help to resolve immediate issues that cause stress and anxiety, and which contribute to an unstable home environment. These findings are supported by the qualitative interviews, where parents gave responses on their priority areas of support that ranged from learning how to be a parent, to better understanding and communicating with their children, with much lower stress levels and conflict because of the support.

**Outcomes for children are also positive, particularly regarding improvements in behaviour at school and improved potential to engage more effectively in learning.** Although Family Support Workers do some work with children, the main focus of the services is on parents, and the way they interact with their children. **The evidence shows that the services are working in the way they have been designed, supporting parents to improve well-being and provide adequate support for their children at home, which in turn puts them in a position to support their children behaving and performing well at school.**

*“For those families I have directly worked with as part of the Building Bridges project, there have been improved family relationships, routines and behaviour support.”* – Support Worker with the Voluntary and Community Sector in Haringey.

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**100% of Practitioners who refer to the service in Southend reported some improvement in child behaviour, children feeling happy at home, and child/parent relationships among the families they referred. In Haringey, 67% of Practitioners reported some improvement in child behaviour, 56% reported improvements in children feeling happy at home, and 44% reported some improvement in child/parent relationships and levels of absence at school.**

Schools particularly benefit from having access to a Family Support Worker, as the worker can provide a level of support that cannot be provided in-house. This has a direct improvement on behaviour of children at school and is likely to have a positive impact on attendance and attainment over the longer term.

**It is clear from the evidence given by families and professionals that the schools model helps to raise awareness of the service among school staff. This means that the service can reach out to more families in need and the school pathway can therefore promote earlier intervention. The evaluation also found evidence of a number of other benefits across the wider system of care and support. The most common benefits related to:**

- Building stronger connections between families and schools, improving parental engagement and ‘bridging the gap’ between home and school, and**
- Improving consistency in the way different agencies work together to support a family.**

For example, one referring Practitioner in Southend noted:

*“When there is support bridging the gap between home and school we see quicker results moving families forward.”*

**This was also supported by the findings from the interviews with families, many of whom reported greater confidence in their ability to deal with other agencies and improved relationships with teachers at their child’s school. The feedback from Family Support Workers is consistent with this – they feel the service prevents escalation, improves links between the school and other agencies, and facilitates a multi-agency approach to early intervention.**

### Conclusion

Family Action’s services in Southend and Haringey have both been extremely well-received by staff in schools, other referring Practitioners, and the families who have been supported. The outcome data collected by the services themselves also shows consistent improvements in those outcomes identified by referring Practitioners and families. The evaluation evidence shows that Family Action’s Family Support Services generate a number of positive short to medium term outcomes, across a wide range of areas. Family Action’s Family Support Services empower parents to be effective and caring, consequently improving the lives of children and effectively relieving schools from some of the daily pressures they face.

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