

Evaluation of the Family Action Small Steps Service

Final Report – Executive Summary

June 2019

Executive Summary

The aim of the Small Steps Service is to provide early support and evidence-based interventions to families of children and young people displaying behaviour that causes concern or challenges: both for families where there is no formal diagnosis of ASD or ADHD, and for families that have had a diagnosis of ASD and/or ADHD. The service is subcontracted to Family Action through Nottinghamshire County Council and commissioned by the Healthy Families Programme contract. Small Steps operates by providing a range of services including Drop In sessions, workshops, one-to-one support, and an Information and Support Line.

Envoy Partnership were commissioned by Family Action to evaluate Small Steps. The evaluation sought to understand the effectiveness of the service, the outcomes created for stakeholders, and the impact of the service on the Concerning Behaviours Pathway.

Outcomes of the service

The evaluation showed significant outcomes for families. Most significant were the outcomes for parents and carers, including an **improved understanding of their child's behaviour**, feeling **less isolated** and **more confident**, and in some cases being **better able to manage their child's behaviour**. Sometimes this leads to **improved relationships between parents/carers and their children**.

The Small Steps Service has helped **improve the mental wellbeing of parents and carers**. This is because Small Steps gives them an opportunity to share their experiences, 'offload', and to be listened to. Parents who have used the service and are now discharged had an average increase of 5.6 points on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, moving from 43.6 points to 49.2 points.

For some parents and carers, **the support they receive from school and from other services has improved** as a result of Small Steps' work. Parents and carers are also better equipped with **knowledge of other services** and where they can get further help if needed.

"I feel like I'm calmer, not shouting as much with [my granddaughter] as much as I used to. I feel like I understand the ADHD, the behaviour more. She hasn't had as many meltdowns so I think things are improving." [Carer]

"I get a sense of relief coming here. It gives me a chance to blurt out everything that's been building up – to offload. You get to speak to someone who listens and who understands." [Parent]

"Small Steps are a big support to me and my son. They have given me the confidence to deal with school and so many ideas on how to deal with my son on a day to day basis." [Parent]

"At one point before [I started with Small Steps] I rang social services in desperation: they came but said she [my daughter] didn't need their help – [I] didn't know where to go to get support. Small Steps helped me deal with the whole situation." [Parent]

Process evaluation

The process evaluation shows that the services offered by Small Steps work well overall; the content is appropriate, the staff are effective and empathetic, and many parents compared Small Steps favourably with other services. Both families and professionals commented on how Small Steps is able to give more time to individual families, giving families a greater level of consistency in support and thereby facilitating progress. However, there were a number of issues that were raised in the evaluation, which are outlined below.

Despite a lot of communication work by the Small Steps Service and its commissioners, not all partners were aware of the change to the pathway initially. At least one Early Help team was not aware of the new referral process until they tried to refer through a GP, and found out (some time after the change had taken place) that the advice they had been giving was wrong. There still appears to be some confusion among partners about exactly how the pathway works.

There is a significant delay between a family being referred and the Small Steps team having the capacity to progress this, driven in part by the very large numbers of referrals to the service. This means that it is taking some families longer to access support than might previously have been the case. This is a concern both to those who are referring to Small Steps, and the organisations that Small Steps refers on to.

“I still have significant concerns about the waiting times for referrals into our service from Small Steps, and families accessing post diagnosis support after we have made a diagnosis. I am concerned about the impact this is having on the children and their families. We have had less than 10 referrals into our service via Small Steps since August 2018 [as of mid-April 2019]. Compared to previous referral rate of 50-70 children per month.” [Partner – Paediatric services]

The delay is particularly problematic for those with significant needs who are likely to need to be referred on to a paediatrician. For children under five, there is a mechanism for partners to flag an individual case as particularly high need, and to ensure that the case goes directly to the GP for referral to a paediatrician. However, some partners believed that there was not a sufficient mechanism to fast-track referrals where, in the views of other professionals, a paediatrician will need to be involved, believing that, as Small Steps is now the main route for a family to be referred to a paediatrician, it now takes longer for families with significant needs to access paediatric support. This may be through a lack of understanding of the red flag referral possibilities that exist (including that partners believe that the red flag referral process is only for children under five), or because the children in question don't necessarily warrant a red flag but the partners believe they need to be fast tracked anyway.

The referral process can be time consuming. Some partners felt that it was disproportionately time consuming for those families that had lower levels of need. In addition, it can be particularly time consuming for schools to fill in the form when one of their students is exhibiting concerning behaviours at home rather than at school, and where they do not therefore have first-hand experience of the behaviours in question. The referral form has been part of the Concerning Behaviour Pathway for 10 years, however, so this is an issue that predates the Small Steps Service.

Conclusions

It is clear from conversations with other stakeholders that Small Steps fills a gap, delivering an important and necessary service that has positive outcomes for families.

Small Steps have already responded to many of the issues raised in this report, and their response is included in the main report. However, while some of the issues around the referral process and communication are the responsibility of Small Steps, many are not. **It is the recommendation of the evaluators that the issues identified need to be considered and reviewed within the context of a wider discussion about levels of demand and how the pathway is working in general.** If these issues are addressed then the service will have a very significant impact on families in Nottinghamshire.