

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Review: Early Help

Site Visits: 13 April 2015

On 13 April 2015, members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee visited two sites where the Families First service operates. Members of the Committee met with officers, family support workers, and service users to discuss the operation of the service, the engagement of service users, accessibility, outcomes and possible future developments.

The following sites were visited:

- Highbury and Hornsey Team, Holland Walk Area Housing Office, 10am – 12.30pm.
- Holloway and Canonbury Family Action Team, The Exchange, 1pm – 3pm.

The Highbury and Hornsey visit was attended by Councillor Kaya Comer Schwartz, James Stephenson, and Jonathan Moore and Zoe Crane from the Democratic Services section.

The Holloway and Canonbury visit was attended by Councillors Alice Donovan and Nick Wayne, James Stephenson, and Jonathan Moore and Zoe Crane from the Democratic Services section.

During the visit the following main points were made –

Support Networks

- Families First aims to work with families over a period of six months, however, families will continue to access the service for longer if the case is not ready to be closed. In particular, officers advised that the six month timeline can be delayed if families are slow to engage with the service.
- Families interviewed at both centres were anxious about their case being closed. All service users present spoke very highly of the service and some worried that they may not be able to cope without Families First.
- Officers suggested that a fixed and relatively short timescale is needed to focus service users on achieving their goals and leaning to live independently. It was highlighted that families are always able to re-refer to the service, or ask for advice and guidance as required, and service leavers are advised of other support organisations.
- Although families may no longer require formal support after six months, some service users were concerned about their lack of a support network and worried that they may face social isolation once their case was closed. Service users emphasised the value of meeting other families in similar situations to their own.
- To mitigate this, families at the Holloway and Canonbury office suggested that Families First could facilitate a regular social group or activities for service users and former service users. This could help to develop the social support networks of families leaving the service, and help new service users to engage with the service. A buddy scheme for service leavers was also suggested.

- Family Support Workers at the Highbury and Hornsey site suggested arranging age appropriate activities for children and young people in families receiving help would help to build support networks at a younger age.

Suggested Improvements

- Service users and council staff both commented that Families First is a very comprehensive service. When asked about any gaps in provision, officers at the Holloway and Canonbury site suggested that there did not appear to be a local early intervention programme for perpetrators of domestic abuse.
- Family Support Workers at the Highbury and Hornsey Office suggested that it would be helpful to give Families First access to an emergency crisis fund. It was understood that Social Services had access to a similar fund but often families would not voluntarily engage with statutory services. It was suggested that being able to give service users small amounts of money (£10-20) under certain conditions would help to resolve crisis situations.
- It was also suggested by Family Support Workers at the Highbury and Hornsey Office that having access to technology to take on site visits would be helpful. It was commented that Council services are increasingly accessible online and some clients need support in learning how to access these.

Other points included –

- The Families First service is geographically based, with the borough being split into three areas; Highbury and Hornsey, Holloway and Canonbury, and Barnsbury and Finsbury.
- The Highbury and Hornsey Team is managed directly by the Council and the two other offices are managed by Family Action, a voluntary organisation, on behalf of the Council. It was considered that this provides service users with a comprehensive service which recognises the strengths of both the public and voluntary sectors.
- Co-locating Families First with other services assists in normalising access to help. The Highbury and Hornsey office is co-located with housing services, and the Holloway and Canonbury office is also available to local voluntary groups. Service users highlighted the importance of removing the stigma surrounding seeking help.
- Co-locating allows officers to share information. For example, the Highbury and Hornsey office is shared with estate services, tenancy management and ASB teams, and these officers sometimes work with the same families. Clinical psychologists also work from the Holloway and Canonbury office and are able to provide support to both families and staff.
- The ASB team will consider if perpetrators should be referred to Families First. The cost of dealing with ASB, in terms of officer time and potential legal costs, is significant and early intervention is considered to be an effective approach in terms of reducing both ASB and the associated costs.
- Although early intervention is considered to be the best method of addressing several issues, it is not possible to state how many families would otherwise be referred to statutory services if early help was not available. Not all families helped through Families First would meet the requirements for statutory support.

- Outreach work is carried out in local schools, doctor's surgeries and at community events. However, service users suggested that greater promotion is required as local people are often unaware of the service.
- Families First offers two parenting programmes. The 'Triple P' Positive Parenting Programme has a focus on research into behaviour management techniques and is particularly suitable for more academically able parents. The 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' programme is a longer programme with an emphasis on peer support. It is more suitable for parents whose first language is not English.
- It was commented that group parenting programmes can help to reduce social isolation by allowing attendees to meet other local people in similar circumstances to themselves. A Christmas party was previously held which helped to foster relationships between service users.
- The Council maintains a single referral point for families in need of support services. This method was considered beneficial to service users as it sought to place families with the most suitable support service first time. Service users indicated that they preferred having only one support worker as there was a clear point of contact and no need to re-tell their story to different services. However, as family circumstances change, families may be either referred up to statutory services, or referred down to Families First.
- Families may be referred to Families First from social services on the proviso that the family will be referred back to social services if they do not engage with Families First.
- A discussion was had on data protection. It is assumed that service users consent to their data being shared with other support services, with the exception of the police.
- Some families referred to Families First are reluctant to engage with the service. In such instances Families First will seek to encourage engagement by calling, visiting the family, or delivering leaflets and letters. The importance of giving local people a positive experience of the Families First service was emphasised. If there is an imminent risk of harm, then families will be referred to social services.
- The Highbury and Hornsey Team regularly placed a family support worker on reception, in case someone visited the office in a crisis situation.
- The performance of Families First is evaluated through various means. The progress of families is evaluated via the "Family Star" assessment tool. The three teams cross-audit each other's work. A telephone survey is conducted twice a year in which former service users answer a questionnaire on their experiences with the service. This provides quantitative data on the service's performance. Qualitative data has been provided by a mystery shopping service, in which former service users are asked to approach the service with a new issue. The advice and support provided is then evaluated. It was requested that evaluation data be provided to the Committee.
- It was explained that new council tenants who may benefit from engagement with Families First are advised of the service at the start of their tenancy.
- Families First workers often have diverse backgrounds as a range of skills is needed to provide a broad service. It was explained that the Families First staff includes specialists in disability, fostering, social care, employment support and mental health. Staff at the Highbury and Hornsey office were encouraged to share their experiences through fortnightly group reflection sessions.

- Members of the Committee asked Families First staff about any problems they face in their role. It was suggested that some families have unrealistically high expectations of what outcomes they may get from the service. For example, it is often not possible for Families First to directly intervene in a housing issue if the service user is not a council tenant.
- Members of the Committee learnt of a forthcoming pilot project specifically seeking to improve school attendance. Officers would be working with between four and eight families in the early mornings and late evenings to help set routines and further investigate potential issues.
- Families First offers employment support to its service users. An employment support specialist makes joint visits with family support workers to find out more about the client and then seeks to guide them into appropriate employment. It was explained that officers must be sensitive to the individual needs of service users, especially surrounding areas such as domestic abuse, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Clients were also offered guidance on work readiness and engagement with community learning.
- It was not possible to give an average length of time for service users to find employment, as this can vary considerably depending on the needs of the client.
- A member of staff at the Highbury and Hornsey office had produced a film in her own time with young service users aged 14-17. It was suggested that this had enabled young people to express themselves and gain confidence. Members of the Committee were keen to see the film.
- Members of the Committee interviewed service users. Service users indicated that Families First had provided practical help on matters such as housing, parenting, employment, education, medical matters, antisocial behaviour, as well as increasing confidence and raising aspirations. The family support workers were praised for their support and dedication. Family support workers were described by service users as professional, friendly, approachable and non-judgemental.
- Trust between families and support workers was considered very important. Some service users commented that support workers were from a similar background to their own and this helped to develop a bond between them. Some service users reported that they did not connect with the support worker they were initially placed with, and changed support worker as a result. Some families did not realise that they could change support worker, and suggested that this could be better publicised.
- Service users that had been re-referred to the service explained that they initially would have preferred to be assigned to their previous support worker, however had now developed a good relationship with their new support worker.
- Support workers visit families at their home and at other locations, meeting families once or twice a week. Service users believe that this regular contact helps to reduce social isolation. The “whole family” approach to support was also praised. It was commented that support workers are very good at interacting with children.
- Service users had initially felt anxious about seeking help, and some previously had negative experiences with other agencies and did not feel they could trust support services. Service users were now glad they engaged with the service, however noted that other agencies and council services were not as “customer friendly” as Families First. Family support workers advised that they often undertook advocacy work on behalf of their clients as other services were not as supportive. One service user

worried that her dealings with the Council would no longer be as effective when her case was closed.

- Service users indicated that they preferred to engage with Families First over statutory services.
- Family support workers indicated that case loads were high but manageable. As Families First provided holistic support to families, support workers often had to deal with a range of complex issues however support was focused on the areas requiring improvement as identified in the Family Star assessment tool.
- Family support workers are available during usual working hours (9am – 5pm). Some service users suggested that extending these regular hours could enhance the service, however family support workers can already make early and late appointments, and weekends, on request. Support workers highlighted that they are not an emergency service and as the majority of service users are not in full time employment, there was no reason to amend working hours. Families were generally clear on what their support workers could and couldn't do and recognised the importance of maintaining professional boundaries.
- Families First had a manageable staff turnover and current vacancies had a high number of good quality applicants. There was a level of career progression available within in service.
- There were no partner services which were considered difficult to engage with from an officer perspective. Staff were encouraged to think broadly about what services and local initiatives could help families.
- It was suggested that Families First offices could have crèche facilities or similar, as sometimes parents had to attend meetings or appointments with children which was not always appropriate.
- Some service users expressed an interest in working with, or volunteering for, Families First.

Those present thanked the families and officers for their cooperation and contribution to the scrutiny review.