

## **Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

### **Scrutiny Review: Early Help**

**Site Visit: 22 April 2015**

On 22 April 2015, members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee met with service users, support workers and the Deputy Team Manager from the Islington Families Intensive Team (IFIT) at the New River Green Children's Centre.

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

During the visit the following main points were made –

- IFIT was a consent based service which families must choose to engage with.
- Service users rated IFIT very highly, indicating that it acted quickly, was approachable, and provided comprehensive support to the whole family. Service users liked that support was offered to all members of the family.
- It was intended for service users to work with IFIT for one year. Support workers advised that this length of time was required as many service users had complex needs. The year was split into three stages: assessment, intensive intervention, and maintenance. Support reduces during the maintenance stage and families were encouraged to sustain the changes made during the intervention stage.
- Support could continue beyond a year in certain circumstances, such as if a family was slow to engage with the service.
- Support workers were described as dedicated, approachable, helpful and knowledgeable of social issues. Service users praised support workers for helping them to think positively about their situation.
- It was very important to service users that they had a dedicated support worker. It was emphasised that trust and strong relationships between service users and support workers was vital.
- Some support workers had provided support outside of usual working hours during crisis periods. It was highlighted that this required management approval, however families valued this flexibility. The importance of professional boundaries was stated.
- Service users compared the positive experience they had with IFIT to the negative experiences they had with other local services. In particular, service users said the service was much more approachable than social services, schools and housing providers.
- Support workers agreed that some services were not as sympathetic to service users as IFIT and some could improve their communications. However, it was suggested that service users' negative experiences of other services may be influenced by the purpose of their interaction with them. For example, service users were most likely to engage with schools, housing and social services when there was a particular problem. In such instances, the service often has statutory powers to sanction service users and this was more likely to lead to negative experiences than interacting with IFIT, the only purpose of which was to support parents and families.

- Support workers could attend meetings with service users as a form of advocacy. Service users suggested that this was particularly effective with schools, and support workers agreed that some schools seemed more willing to engage with professionals than parents. It was also commented that support workers could identify service failures due to their familiarity with the processes of schools and other agencies.
- Support workers commented that some housing providers could be more sympathetic. However, housing providers do not always know the background of service users; and service users often do not wish to disclose personal information to their housing provider.
- It was suggested that more could be done to promote positive and sensitive interaction between the Council's own services and service users.
- Some service users explained that through IFIT they had gained the self-confidence to engage with other services, whereas others did not trust other services, and worried that they would no longer be able to interact positively with other services after their advocacy support from IFIT ended.
- The IFIT service was supported by an Education Support Worker to specifically assist with educational matters. Support workers found this very helpful as she had a deep understanding of school processes.
- Service users considered that they had greatly benefitted from the service, however many service users did not want their intervention to end and were worried about what would happen afterwards.
- After IFIT intervention families were usually offered support from the Families First service. If this was accepted, joint home visits were carried out by the IFIT support worker and the Families First support worker to ease the transition.
- Support workers recognised the importance of the transition period and were keen to develop this in any way which would be beneficial to service users.
- Some service users had already used the Families First service. These users believed IFIT to be more comprehensive than Families First, and commented that only so much could be achieved in the six month timeframe used by Families First.
- Service users had initially been anxious about engaging with IFIT. Many had been referred from social services and spoke of the stigma attached to social services intervention. However, the parents interviewed were glad they had engaged with the service.
- Members of the Committee commented on the drastic change in service users; from being initially anxious about engaging with the service, to not wanting to end their intervention, within a year.
- Some service users had attended parenting programmes and rated these highly.
- Some service users indicated that they felt isolated. Some would be interested in attending social events for service users, and suggested that any events for children and young people should be age appropriate.
- In general, service users did not know of the IFIT service before their intervention.
- Support workers had a relatively small caseload for a support service, of around six families per support worker. Support workers considered that this enabled them to dedicate more time to each family than they would otherwise be able to.

Service users were asked if they could change anything about the service, what it would be:

- Service users were already very pleased with the level of service they received.
- It was suggested that intervention could last longer than a year.
- Service users would consider it helpful to have more joint meetings between their support worker and social worker.

Support workers were asked if they could change anything about the service, what it would be:

- It was thought that a dedicated meeting room for families would be helpful. This would be a modern space offering privacy and good quality resources, including games for children.
- Access to mobile technology would help support workers complete administration tasks outside of the office.
- Support workers were not permitted to work from home and it was considered that allowing this would ensure a better work/life balance.
- Independent external therapeutic support for workers was suggested. Although support workers were able to discuss their feelings with their manager, it was suggested that sometimes workers could not be entirely open with their manager.
- A small budget to help families in crisis would be considered useful, as would a budget to help families move house. It was commented that sometimes families need to move home to remove themselves from local issues.
- It was suggested that a budget to organise trips and visits for service users would be beneficial and could help to inspire young people.
- Some families would benefit from more direct mental health support within the team.
- Investing in staff personal development would help to enhance the skills of the team.
- It was thought that offering even earlier intervention, especially with younger primary school children, would stop problems developing in older children.

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