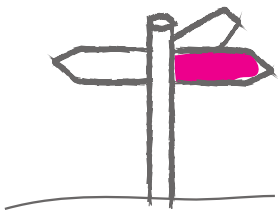# 'In practice'
Building Community Resilience

A guide to assist practitioners who wish to help the families they support develop healthy outcomes both socially and emotionally

David Carrington

Preface

This *In Practice* paper will assist practitioners who seek to build the resilience within communities.

This paper forms part of the Big Lottery funded Improving Futures programme to share the learning from 26 projects across the UK. The £26 million programme provided up to £900,000 to 26 pilot projects across the UK, to test different approaches to improve outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs. The evaluation and learning arm of this project is carried out by Ecorys UK, IPSOS Mori, Professor Kate Morris and Parenting UK (part of Family Lives).

Key recommendations:

1. **Encourage peer support.** If possible, recruit a person who has been through the support process to support a person who is facing similar issues.

2. **Enable** conversation across the community. This can be achieved by hosting parent forums or community interest groups in 'neutral' spaces that the family can feel comfortable in.

3. **Consider** partnerships with other local organisations or services to strengthen the offer to families and communities.

4. **Think** beyond the life of your project and what can be done to make things sustainable when you and your project staff and spaces are no longer there.

5. **Try to recruit** 'community champions' as early as possible who can help navigate community issues, help you find appropriate spaces to engage and can be a continual source of support beyond the project's life.

Introduction

This paper will explore the importance of the community when attempting to effect positive change within communities. The Midlothian project found that socialisation and peer support were key to working with families in a community context, and the Inverclyde project determined social isolation to be a 'significant problem' and thus made it a core focus of their project. Throughout this paper we will draw on the experiences and observations of the Improving Futures projects to benefit your work with families and communities.

To inform this learning paper we:

- iinterviewed project managers from all 26 Improving Futures projects specifically about lessons learnt relating to supporting families to access community support;

- reviewed evidence from our case study visits with all 26 Improving Futures projects, which included interviews with practitioners and managers from the Improving Futures projects and local partners and interviews with families;

- reviewed available literature about effective support for supporting families to access community support and to build community resilience;

- discussed community support with two Family Advisory Panels. These panels consist of family members (sometimes supported by project workers) who use services in various projects across the UK. This is an opportunity for us to speak directly with families to help inform and refine the findings of the evaluation. . In July 2015 two family advisory panels were held, one in the north and one in the south of England, and were attended in total by fifteen families from England and Scotland. Three project workers were also in attendance to offer assistance and translation where needed.

In relation to the theme of this paper, if we are to focus on two primary concerns that arose in the Family Advisory Panels, they would be:

1. Loneliness and social isolation: these were common experiences for all family members with strong, at times acute, consequences for wellbeing. Families described the projects as critical in helping them build networks, either with other families or with services.

2. In line with the Family Advisory panels, a number of the Improving Futures projects have reported that prevailing economic and social conditions have placed a great deal of strain on families, such as putting pressure on family finances or reducing their access to services.

Both of these points impact strongly on a family and their capacity for community engagement. For example, the cost of community activities such as visiting a leisure centre or going to cultural events can be prohibitively expensive to families. Being unable to participate in such events can affect wellbeing and result in social isolation.

It was noted in the Improving Futures Year 2 Evaluation Report that:

> Isolation, loneliness and anxiety all presented as key issues for parents participating in the qualitative interviews. For many, having access to emotional support from their key worker was significant and made a difference to their mental well-being. In other cases, reducing their isolation through attending group trips and sessions was important: one parent described how the crucial aspect of support for her was the new friendships she developed through the group sessions.
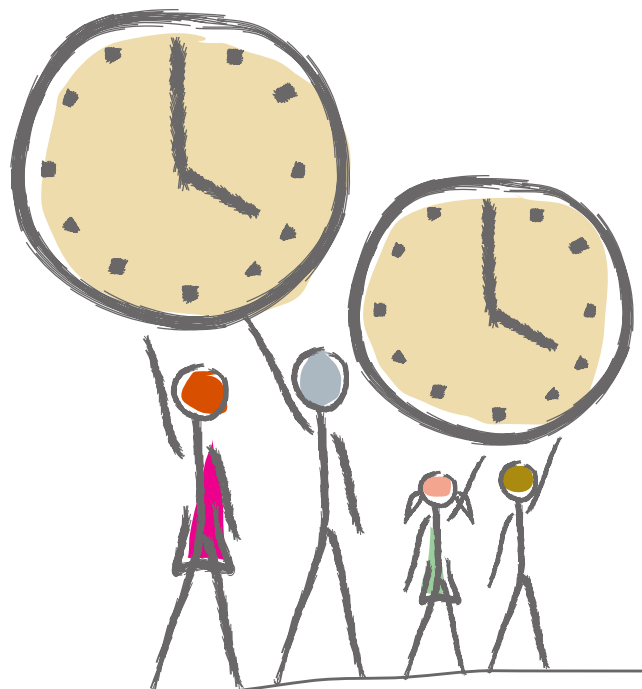>
> (Ronicle et al, 2014, p.iii)

The social isolation can also be symptomatic of other challenges the families face. The Cardiff 'Eleri' project noted a link between mental health and a family's capacity to engage with the community. The project found that the knock-on effect of a parent or parent's anxiety or depression was that the child was also prohibited from engaging socially. The project felt that this could have significant implications in the future.

A potential barrier to entry has also been explored through the concept of "social capital" (i.e. the collective value of a family's social network and the support people from that network can offer in times of need) and its impact on community cohesion and co-operation. In the report Think family: a literature review of whole family approaches, Professor Kate Morris explores the state of being well-located but socially isolated:

> Thus, a family may potentially be well located in terms of infrastructure (local school, shops, community centre, etc) but lack access to social resources and support, perhaps due to insufficient normative structures at a local level (eg no shared sense of belonging, lack of physical safety), being excluded by the normative structure (eg due to different ethnicity or perceived lack of 'respectability'), or not having internalised the requisite attitudes or beliefs that would enable them to join in and reach out within the networks that are available.
>
> (Morris et al, 2008, p.11)

Strengthening the community

Community cohesion is important and empowering local community stakeholders to take ownership of local issues has been important to a number of the projects. The case study below provides an example of how the Croydon 'Family Power' project has used the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model to strengthen community cohesion.

Case study

Language may also be a barrier to engagement, and the 'Families First' project in Hackney focussed on this, explored in detail in the Improving Futures Year 2 Evaluation Report:

The Improving Futures projects found a number of innovative ways to strengthen their local communities. For example, the Croydon 'Family Power' project utilised the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model and implemented numerous initiatives to make the community they worked in a more connected and safer space.

Using the ABCD model, the project sent its staff and volunteers to local 'bumping-into' spaces, such as supermarkets and GP Surgeries where they were likely to meet members of the community. They would engage these members of the community and discuss local issues. Through these community conversations project staff and volunteers met many like-minded people who could come together to tackle community-level problems.

The project also trained 'community builders' who could take ownership of local issues. In one instance a group of women formed a group primarily to tackle shared employment concerns, but after meeting a number of times the group's shared concerns around online sexual exploitation and community safety prompted them to arrange an event for other parents around these issues.

The project worked with local business and supermarkets to raise awareness of community issues and asking them to play an active role. The ABCD model that the project utilises has been highly beneficial to community safety and cohesion.]

The Enfield project established a volunteering programme so that parents and families could get directly involved in their community. The project developed a volunteering programme which offered parents various opportunities to get involved in the community, e.g. offering peer support to families and, in some cases, translation and interpretation services. All volunteers were inducted and trained by professionals. The project also ran parenting support groups to give families the chance to meet with one another and develop their support networks.

The Fife Gingerbread project found similar strengths in adopting a volunteering programme, noting that working on parent relationships with schools not only developed a key relationship in a child's development, but also embedded the parent in their local community. In response to this the project established many of its activities in schools because they could reach the parents who would already be in attendance.

The Neighbourhood Alliance handed power back to the community through the implementation of a number of parent-run family support groups. These groups were met with a positive response from stakeholders and the project had strong hopes that the groups could be sustained beyond the Improving Futures funding.

Core to the delivery model in the Tyne Gateway project are the Family Entrepreneurs, which are described as "barefoot professionals". These are people from the community who are trained and act as key workers. They have experienced difficulties themselves, many of them have received support through Tyne Gateway before. The idea is that they can relate better to the issues experienced by the families, but also care about their communities being strong communities. "They engage with these communities like no-body else [c]an. They bridge between the communities and statutory services."

UTILISING COMMUNITY SPACES

Placement is crucial and can be the difference between engaging with a family or failing to entirely. A number of the Improving Futures projects found that embedding themselves in commonplace community spaces such as: community halls, churches, and, in one case, green spaces, enabled them to work with families on 'neutral' territory.

The Denbighshire 'Bridge Project' launched a project within a community church centre to combine support for individual families and support to strengthen the local community. The project took note of the levels of poverty in the community and tackled this by launching a programme in a community church centre to help parents learn new skills. The project enabled parents to develop confidence and self-esteem and reported that some people who took part in the programme went on to secure paid employment due to the skills they developed.

The Dundee Early Intervention Team placed an onus on not taking families out of the local community, instead it sought to work with them in familiar surroundings and utilised the local assets and strengths. They noted that most of their work took place in the family home and they placed great importance on building local networks to reduce social isolation.

COMMUNITY RISK FACTORS

The projects were asked to consider the community risk factors in relation to their work. A number of the families that the Teulu Ni project supported lived in places with high levels of crime. The project noted that some families had loved ones serving sentences in prison and that drug dealing had also impacted negatively upon some families.

Other projects reported risks ranging from pay-day lenders, 'boy racers' and drug and alcohol abuse. The Fife Gingerbread project established some activities around road safety and delivered those within the community. The project also implemented a risk assessment policy to ensure their workers' safety when visiting a family for the first time.

The Denbighshire 'Bridge Project' reported that neighbourhood feuds and other risks complicated the services they delivered. However, the project found that by employing support workers who knew the local areas in question they could circumvent any potential problems before they arose.

The Cardiff 'Eleri' project decided to tackle anti-social behaviour through an initiative titled 'Bright Young Things'. Running throughout the summer months, 'Bright Young Things' runs events with the local police and fire services so that the local community can engage with the services in relaxed, informal settings. The purpose of the initiative was to improve relations between the services and the local community.

However, when assessing any community-level risk factors, a member of a project warned against any pre-conceptions one may have of a certain community. The project found it best served the community by treating every person as an individual whilst still utilising the whole family approach.

UTILISING COMMUNITY ASSETS

The Dundee Early Intervention Team noted the importance of utilising community assets. Via local volunteer networks the project worked on the following initiatives:

- A number of parents from families that the project support decided to share information about local services available in the community with other parents by going into libraries and shops. This is a good way to utilise community assets because it is a sustainable approach and can last beyond the lifetime of the project.

- Increasing participation of Early Years Forums by encouraging families to attend meetings and become involved in what is happening in their local communities.

The Cardiff 'Eleri' project supported families so they could visit community assets such as libraries and swimming pools. The project noted that this had a significant impact on social isolation and helped to boost emotional and social wellbeing for families. The only barrier to this method was transport costs and some families on limited incomes would have found it difficult to visit these places frequently.

Other projects have utilised community assets to respond to emerging needs, such as the Wolverhampton project which supported parents to set up a crèche within the local community to meet childcare requirements (see case study below).

Case study

The Wolverhampton project was pleased to note that they enabled the implementation of crèche provision within the local community. The project used a portion of their budget to train a mother who had shown an interest in re-training so that she could help facilitate a community crèche for other members of the community. The Wandsworth project also invested in a similar initiative by facilitating volunteering sessions at local children's centres to aid the development of skills of mothers who wished to do childcare training.

It was noted in the Improving Futures Year 2 Evaluation Report that:

> Almost half the projects are utilising community volunteers to support families. Projects reported that these were effective at engaging 'hard to reach' families, as families could relate to the volunteers because they often came from the same communities. The volunteers also acted as positive role models for families. Recruiting and retaining volunteers was cited as one of the main challenges.

(Ronicle et al, 2014, p.16)

LOCATION

Think about who you are trying to reach and then consider the placement of your service and how easy it is for families to access. Are there good transport links? Is it within walking distance of said transport links? Will people with access issues find it difficult to reach you or will you be offering a home-visit service? The Midlothian project noted that the transport links in their service area were sub-par so they took that into account when planning activities, services and, crucially, budgeting.

The Telulu Ni project works in rural areas experiencing deprivation, and found that utilising a mobile unit via an external service enabled them to take their services directly to families in need. This was especially useful when trying to reach families where transport costs would have been a barrier to entry.

The Denbighshire 'Bridge Project' circumvented rurality issues by placing their support in local schools, a venue they found that was accessible by all in the area which also acted as a familiar 'common-place' for all families.

The Hackney 'Families First' project utilised community assets such as school and community centres, and found these venues valuable when assessing how the programme has supported the local community. The project felt that venues such as this were beneficial due to the befriending opportunities that arose from meeting in these spaces.

Conclusion

Many of the projects' successes have come from utilising the knowledge of community stakeholders. These people, sometimes referred to as 'community champions', have been of great assistance to the project leaders and staff as they implemented services to aid the local community.

Conversely, having an outside view of a situation can be beneficial as you can spot cycles of negative or damaging behaviour and be impartial in tackling it. There is a balance between embedding yourself fully and maintaining a clear view - things that the projects have been aware of when doing their work.

When asked what role communities can play in helping to ensure that family support is sustainable, the Croydon 'Family Power' project responded: "*I think that the community has to have ownership of the local issues by being given the responsibility; enduring change comes from within… you can't impose it on people, you can only enable it*"

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