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INTERVENTION
FOUNDATION

Improving support for families facing multiple and complex problems

October 2021

At the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) we champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of all children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

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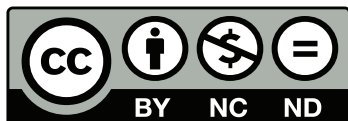
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Introduction

The announcement in this month's spending review of an extra £200 million to expand the Supporting Families Programme over the next three years is a welcome and much-needed injection of cash into an early help system under significant strain.

The right support can help families to manage a range of challenges.

It can improve family relationships and wellbeing. It can support children's development, leading to improvements across a range of important child outcomes, including mental and physical health, and educational attainment. And it has the potential to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect, keep families together, and avoid the need for children's social care services to become involved.

This additional investment creates an important opportunity.

As well as providing vital resource to increase the capacity of services, funding the programme for three years also offers an opportunity to build much-needed knowledge. It enables us to test the specific questions of how, and to what extent, targeted whole-family support can improve outcomes for children and families, reduce the risk of child maltreatment, and in turn reduce demand and financial pressures within the children's social care system.

Our view is that this investment needs to do three things.

1. Build

It needs to increase the reach of the Supporting Families Programme so that more of the families with the most complex problems get the support they need.

2. Strengthen

It needs to strengthen the programme to make sure that this help matches their needs, is delivered by highly skilled and appropriately supported professionals, and is evidence-informed.

3. Learn

It needs to ensure that we get to the end of the Spending Review period with a far better understanding of what works to reduce the risk of harm and wider poor outcomes for children.

1. Build

Increasing the reach of the Supporting Families Programme

“This new investment recognises the important role that the Supporting Families Programme can play in providing broader whole-family support for families who may already have children’s social care involvement.”

This new investment needs to enable more support to reach children and families with multiple and complex needs, allowing them to access the kind of strengths-based whole-family help from a range of agencies that the Supporting Families Programme provides, and which we know can make a difference.

These families include those where there may be a level of risk to a child, some of whom may already have a social worker. Many children will have been identified as children in need under section 17 of the Children Act because of multiple family problems: domestic abuse or serious parental conflict, substance misuse, or mental health problems, typically against a backdrop of poverty or economic stress.

These families need skilled help and support to manage these pressures. However, in the context of high caseloads and increasing demand, the focus of social work services is often predominantly on managing risk to the child. Social workers often do not have the capacity to provide intensive, whole-family help.

This new investment recognises the important role that the Supporting Families Programme can play in providing broader whole-family support for families who may already have children’s social care involvement.

2. Strengthen

Maximising the impact of the programme for children and families with multiple and complex problems

“We need to maximise the impact of the programme by making sure that Supporting Families keyworkers and other practitioners within the non-social work children and families workforce are valued and supported.”

We know that the whole-family focus and practical, holistic support offered through the Supporting Families programme can make a difference for families with multiple and complex needs. We also know that these families often need more intensive support with family functioning and family relationships, which needs to be delivered by skilled and highly trained professionals.

We need to maximise the impact of the programme by making sure that Supporting Families keyworkers and other practitioners within the non-social work children and families workforce are valued and supported.

The evidence is clear that professional skill is often crucial to whether support for families facing multiple and complex problems has an impact.

Our view is that the programme could have an even greater impact if there was central support and investment in training and professional development for these practitioners. This should include identifying the strongest practice models and ‘common elements’ of effective approaches, and a review of current training and qualification routes for Supporting Families keyworkers and others within the non-statutory children and families workforce. Consideration should also be given to the development of new, evidence-informed training and development routes or national professional standards.

At the same time, we need to draw the links between workforce development within the Supporting Families Programme and professional support for social workers. These are not separate fields of practice, and there may be scope for a long-term vision that encompasses shared practice models and shared professional standards right across the statutory and non-statutory children and families workforce.



“The Supporting Families Programme could potentially achieve more if the support provided by keyworkers was complemented by high-quality specialist interventions that have been shown to be effective.”

The evidence relating to early intervention in the UK is still at an early stage. Nonetheless, when we do know what works, it is important these services are available. The Supporting Families Programme could potentially achieve more if the support provided by keyworkers was complemented by high-quality specialist interventions that have been shown to be effective. While support from a keyworker will be sufficient for some families, it is unlikely that any one service will substantially reduce the risks to children where families are facing complex, multilayered problems, and so some families will need additional, specialist help, such as mental health or domestic abuse support. Keyworkers need to be able to draw on a portfolio of effective approaches that address

family difficulties, but the availability of approaches that have been shown to be effective varies considerably from place to place, and some interventions commissioned by local areas have not been robustly evaluated, or evaluated at all.

There is a host of understandable reasons why evidence-based interventions are not more widely available, including misgivings about cost, a preference for locally developed and potentially long-established services, and concerns about how easy or otherwise they are to implement within the local context. Increasing uptake of these interventions requires a significant amount of central incentivisation and support, but we would argue that this is a wise investment. Achieving outcomes and supporting change in families where problems are complex and potentially longstanding is hard. The reality is that many approaches will not deliver the expected outcomes, and we cannot just assume they will.



Evidence-based interventions have been tested and refined in response to evaluation findings over years and sometimes decades. They are designed to be flexible and responsive to local contexts, and practical implementation support is often part of the package. Where these programmes exist, they are often our best bet.

“Achieving outcomes and supporting change in families where problems are complex and potentially longstanding is hard. Increasing uptake of evidence-based interventions requires a significant amount of central incentivisation and support, but we would argue that this is a wise investment.”

3. Learn

Making a commitment to evaluation

“Put simply, we do not yet have the evidence we need to inform national and local decision-making about how best to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect in families where there are multiple and complex needs.

There are some significant gaps in our understanding of how best to support children and families with complex needs. The expansion of the Supporting Families Programme creates an important opportunity to develop some of this much-needed knowledge. A rigorous evaluation, published in 2020, showed that family support led by a keyworker and focused on working with the whole family is effective, including for families with a child identified as a child in need.¹ The evaluation did not tell us enough, however, about what it is within the programme that works, how it works, or who it works for. We must take this opportunity to start answering these questions.

Beyond the Supporting Families Programme, we face a similar challenge. There are big gaps in the available evaluation evidence in some critical areas. There are only a handful of interventions that have demonstrated a causal impact on the risk of abuse and neglect, for example, and we currently know very little about how best to support families suffering domestic abuse, or how best to work with families where parental substance misuse is a factor.

Put simply, we do not yet have the evidence we need to inform national and local decision-making about how best to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect in families where there are multiple and complex needs, or how to improve wider outcomes for this group.

¹ The evaluation showed that the programme reduced the risk of children identified as children in need becoming looked after by around a third. Other findings include that at 19–24 months the number of children continually looked after was around a third lower for families receiving Supporting/Troubled Families services than in the comparison group. The economic evaluation of the programme showed a benefit:cost ratio of 2.28 when all monetisable benefits were considered, and the programme broke even on savings to the children’s social care system alone.



Family support has not seen the investment in high-quality evaluation that is needed to understand what works in the UK context. It is difficult to build high-quality evidence of impact for approaches that have been developed locally without support and investment from government or other funding bodies. The strong evidence that does exist in other areas – for example in relation to specific parenting programmes or models, such as multisystemic therapy – largely reflects where government has supported serious testing and evaluation in recent decades. The Children’s Social Care Innovation Programme has recently generated some evaluation in this area,² but more focus on measuring impact is needed across the board.

In addition to identifying and evaluating the most promising UK approaches, we may also need to develop, pilot and trial new interventions, for instance to find new ways to reduce the impact of domestic abuse or harmful parental conflict, parental substance misuse, or parental mental health problems. And this is not just about individual, clearly defined or ‘manualised’ programmes and interventions. We must also build our understanding of the effectiveness of wider practice models and approaches used by frontline practitioners working with children and families, as well as approaches such as multi-component interventions, which seek to address different risk factors or outcomes, area-based or geographically targeted interventions, and whole-system approaches designed to improve joint working between different agencies.

Then, this learning needs to be shared and applied. We need to use what we know to support local service improvement – ensuring that different types of evidence, knowledge and data

² See: <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-report/learning-from-innovation-summaries-of-the-childrens-social-care-innovation-programme-round-two-evaluations/>



are available and used to inform local decision-making. This includes equipping local areas with the skills and capability to evaluate 'home-grown' interventions more effectively, which in turn would contribute to an expanding body of evidence. We need to continue to help local areas to improve the quality of their local data and to make stronger links between understanding the needs of children and families, the support that is being offered in response to these needs, and the outcomes that can realistically be expected.

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Conclusion

Through this investment, the government has recognised the potential of early help

And particularly of the Supporting Families Programme, to improve the lives of children and families facing the toughest challenges, to keep families together, reduce risk to children, and manage demands on children's social care services.

The investment is significant, and it is essential that we capitalise on the opportunity that it presents.

This is the moment for a serious and sustained focus on both using the evidence that we do have, to make sure the programme is as strong as it can be, and on testing and understanding the impact that effective family support can achieve.