University of Worcester

Institute of Education

Evaluation of Blaenau Gwent

Supporting Change Programme

Final Report June 2019

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Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by Children's Services, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, aiming to provide an evaluation of the Supporting Change Team (SCT), in order to inform future practice and service development.

The research follows a mixed-methods approach, analysing both quantitative data collected by the Local Authority and a range of qualitative data, including focus groups with staff, a workshop with children and semi-structured interviews with parents, carers, senior officers and other key partners. It also includes a thematic review of previous relevant literature.

Following the programme evaluation, the report presents a number of key findings. These include commendations for both the team itself and the programme design, including the ways in which team cohesion and consistency benefit service users. The effectiveness of the SCT's extensive training programme is highlighted, along with the intensity of the programme and its options for flexible, bespoke interventions where necessary. The report also recognises the SCT's focus on reframing practice, namely shifting away from a risk-based approach and towards a more positive strengths-based model. A range of positive measurable outcomes for families are also identified, including, but not limited to, enhanced relationships, increased confidence and skills and examples of rehabilitation from Care.

The report offers twelve main recommendations. Most importantly, it recommends that funding be made permanent or long-term to ensure the continuation of the programme. It suggests that the threshold for intervention be considered, with the possibility of earlier intervention, should resources allow. Communication with partners is already strong but could be enhanced. The various new roles should be embedded into the programme and evaluated at a later date. Improvements could be made to sustain changes post-intervention, including enhancing effective exit strategies for families and developing a report at the end of an intervention to inform and support ongoing work. Training on bereavement, loss and change is also recommended in order to fill the gaps in existing training.

In terms of future practice, the report suggests that the programme has potential to be rolled out across the region, with support from neighbouring authorities and Welsh Government. Similarly, good practice should be shared with other Children's Services and partners, both regionally and nationally.

Future research might include a project on families' readiness to change and supporting those working towards positive change.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to thank the managers and staff of Blaenau Gwent Supporting Change Team for their welcome, engagement and co-operation throughout the evaluation process. The researchers were impressed by the motivation, enthusiasm, knowledge, skills and personal qualities of the Team. Moreover, we would like to thank the Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (BGCBC) Senior Officers and Key Partners who gave so generously of their time and perspectives.

We are indebted to the parents, carers, children and young people who participated in the evaluation. All were keen to tell their stories and to provide input to the evaluation of a service which they clearly value highly.

We look forward to continuing to work with you in the future.

Project team

The research project team is based within the School of Education, Department for Children and Families at the University of Worcester and consists of two experienced researchers with a combined background in education, early years, social work, family intervention, management and evaluation.

Alison Prowle, *Senior Lecturer, former teacher and senior manager within local authorities and 3rd sector organisations.*

Alison has extensive experience of designing, managing and commissioning family support services. Since joining the Department for Children and Families, Alison has specialised in positive parenting, integrated working, strength-based practice and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). She is experienced in researching with vulnerable participants and has participated in and led a number of research projects, including an evaluation of Blaenau Gwent Families First (2018) and an evaluation of support for kinship carers (2017).

Rosie Walker, *Senior Lecturer, Social worker, Guardian ad Litem, Manager of Children's Centres.*

Rosie has extensive experience working as a social worker and manager in diverse roles and communities. Specialising in parenting, safeguarding practice and quality in Early Years, Rosie is the author of several articles and text books. She has acted as Partnership Coordinator of the FDA Early Years and Acting Head of Department for Children and Families. Professional interests include practitioner small scale

research and safeguarding children and families. Rosie has led a number of similar evaluation projects.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback on the findings of the evaluation of the Supporting Change Team, in order to inform future practice and service development.

Background

In 2017, in response to rising numbers of Looked After Children (LAC) within Blaenau Gwent (BG), work was undertaken in relation to developing a 3-year strategy to safely reduce numbers of Looked After Children within the Borough.

Initial research undertaken by the Service Manager scoped the potential for developing a team to work with children at the edge of care. The team's remit would be to work intensively with families with the aim of preventing children entering the care system or, to work intensively with families to support rehabilitation and discharge of Care Orders for those children placed at home via Placement with Parents Regulations. Upon completion of the scoping exercise and identification of funding sources, political approval was given to proceed with developing the team. The agreed objective was for the team to "pay for itself" within three years (as measured by realised savings and cost avoidance). The model adopted was based upon a practice model which is working well in Gwynedd (which shares some of the same challenges with LAC as Blaenau Gwent). This model involves the Supporting Change Team (SCT) working alongside the case holding social worker to deliver intensive interventions with the aim of preventing the child from entering the LAC system and reducing "revolving door" referrals.

The Supporting Change Team (SCT) became operational in January 2018. An initial eligibility criterion was included but subsequently expanded to include facilitation of Family Group Meetings for the prompt identification of potential kinship carers within a family in the event that children require removal from parental care. Since its establishment, the team have received 97 referrals (as of 7th November 2018) and have worked with 147 children.

In June 2018, an initial evaluation was undertaken by the Service Manager. The subsequent report was presented to Social Services and included analysis of quantitative data (such as numbers referred and worked with, legal status of the child at referral and end of intervention). This was supported by six qualitative case

studies which detailed presenting needs, interventions and outcomes. Feedback from children, young people and families also informed the report. This report highlighted the intensive nature of the interventions and the high level of satisfaction from service users. While there are methodological difficulties in identifying definitive cost avoidance figures, it was deemed highly likely that without the intervention additional numbers of children would have become "looked after". Upon this basis, the Scrutiny Committee were highly supportive of the project.

It is now deemed timely to undertake an external evaluation in order to provide an objective lens on the project, to identify what is working well and to provide a steer for further development. The Department for Children and Families within the School of Education, have thus been approached to undertake this evaluation, owing to their previous experience of evaluating the Families First programme within the Borough (*HCA17180036* June 2018). The Service Manager was keen for the evaluation to be completed within the first quarter of the financial year 2019/20 (June 2019), so that the findings and recommendations could be used to inform the project's development moving forward.

Aims

The aim of the project was to provide an evaluation of the work of the Supporting Change Team during its first year of implementation.

This was achieved by undertaking the following objectives:

- A thematic review of extant academic literature;
- Analysis of quantitative data routinely collected by the Local Authority;
- Researching staff perspectives via focus groups;
- Researching the perspectives of children and young people using The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001);
- Semi structured interviews with parents/ carers;
- Semi structured interviews with senior officers within the LA and key partners such as Children and Families Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) and the legal service;
- Analysing the data to provide key findings and recommendations.

Findings from Previous Research

The current emphasis on and cost of protecting and looking after children is in danger of out-stripping the time social workers have to offer and the resources of Local Authorities (Featherstone *et al* 2018). Therefore, there is a pressing need to reshape services. The Supporting Change Team is one such initiative which is working towards assisting families to turn their lives around to provide at least good enough parenting. As Tew *et al.* (2016:61) asserts there is an 'urgent need to research and learn from the experience of those localities that are at the forefront of implementing new approaches and ways of working', hence the importance of this evaluation to inform future practice and confirm the value of the service both economically and for the wellbeing of children and families in Blaenau Gwent and beyond.

Such a service requires professionals and families to work closely together to support each other to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that meet the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts (Schiettecat *et.al.* 2016). This evaluation seeks to consider how well the team is working to provide sustainable services which recognise and build on the child's and family's strengths and resources and can foster the resilience of both the child and the family. This is pivotal in ensuring risks for children are identified and family coping is supported (Foster *et al.* 2011)

According to Madsen (2009), the development of a real partnership with families is the foundation of effective practice. Turnell and Essex (2006) cite a significant body of research documenting that the best outcomes in child protection cases arise when there are strong working relationships between a family and its helpers. Within the Supporting Change Team this is carried out within a strengths based approach which is applauded by Featherstone, *et al,* (2014*:* 1737) and Institute of Public Care (2012) who highlight the need to develop services that take a strengths-based approach with families facing considerable adversity and 'locates workers as agents of hope and support' as they primarily intervene to avert the risk of children coming into care. This is in contrast to the risk averse strategies that have been traditionally prevalent (Williams, 2019). Pott (2017) explains the social workers need to build trusting relationships but it is difficult for families to trust governmental agency social workers who have legal obligations and public responsibilities that emphasize the need to protect children from harm. The Supporting Change Team's remit is to provide a service that does not carry the same role as the social worker and can work intensively with families over a defined period. This strengthens support around

the parent, and acts to provide a buffer so that the parent can engage more confidently with child protection service systems (Darlington *et al*. 2010).

The team is comprised of a diverse range of practitioners with a range of skills to offer families. This dovetails with the locality social care teams to provide an integrated system of working. The value of this is in allowing practitioners from a particular field to understand and be critically aware of what different agencies do, 'which in turn enables practitioners to work more efficiently with individuals from different professional backgrounds' (Ang, 2012: 295). To work successfully, systems must rely on a cross fertilization of professional skills and an interface between different agencies, for the benefit of children and families (Gasper and Walker in press 2020).

As McWilliam *et al* (2016) highlight, sustainability of services is more likely to work where the most relevant implementation frameworks are chosen, and provide tailored, flexible strategies and tools embedded within the locus of social care specifically to suit the family.

It is within the backdrop of this body of evidence-based practice that the evaluation of Supporting Change Team has taken place.

Evaluation Approach

The methodology for the project was co-constructed with SC manager using a mixed methods research approach, with equal weight given to qualitative and quantitative elements. The quantitative data (and some limited qualitative data) was provided from the LA in the form of reports and performance data that are routinely collected for internal purposes.

The data collected by the LA was complemented by qualitative primary research undertaken by the research team with the aim of allowing different perspectives from stakeholders. Staff focus groups provided opportunities for staff to reflect upon the project whilst interviews with parents and key partners allowed the research team to elicit service user and partner perspectives. In order to capture the perspectives of children and young people, the researchers used an adapted version of the Mosaic Approach. This is a participative, multi-method approach for working with children and young people. It combines a range of different ways in which children can contribute their views (e.g. through art and craft-based activities and via group discussions).

Hence, the main research instruments comprised of the following approaches:

- Documentary analysis (including reports and routinely collected performance data – provided by LA);

- Semi-structured interviews with parents/carers;
- Focus groups with staff (SC keyworkers and case holding Social Workers);
- Semi-structured interviews with Key Partners;
- Multi-method participative approaches to collect data from children and young people using the Mosaic Approach.

The participants for the project were selected by the Supporting Change Manager and involved the following:

- Nine BGCBC Supporting Change Staff (who were invited to participate in a focus group);
- Seventeen BGCBC case holding Social Workers (who were invited to participate in a focus group);
- BGCBC Senior Officers (including Director of Social Services, Head of Service, Service Managers and Team Managers);
- Key partners, e.g. CAFCASS Education Welfare Officers (who were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview);
- Twenty-three parents and carers who have experienced input from the Supporting Change Team and who were willing to take part in an informal interview;
- Four children and young people, aged between seven and fourteen, who have experienced input from the Supporting Change Team (the children were invited to take part in an interactive workshop using age-appropriate methods to capture their perspectives).

It is important to note that all parent /carer participants interviewed had very positive things to say about the service. However, this reflects the voluntary nature of participation in the evaluation rather than any intrinsic bias in the sample. Indeed, parents/carers were very keen to emphasise that they were willing to give up their time because they valued the service they had been given by the SCT which, in the words of one parent participant, *"helped me to turn things around for me and the children" (*Parent).

Ethics

Ethical approval was secured from the University of Worcester Research Ethics Committee. The following ethical considerations were fulfilled:

Informed consent / assent
The team considered consent as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event and were vigilant that consent was in place throughout the project. The right to withdraw was explained and emphasised to all participants. Participant Information letters and consent sheets were developed for all participants.The team were vigilant in identifying and responding to signs of discomfort or distress in participants.

Confidentiality

Participants were informed that all information presented as part of the evaluation would be confidential and anonymised prior to publication.

Participants were made aware of exceptions to confidentiality where disclosures were made which raised concerns relating to the safeguarding of children or protection of vulnerable adults.

Data Security

Safe and confidential storage of data using a locked filing cabinet and encrypted memory stick.

In line with good research practice data will be kept until the end of the dissemination process.

Working with Vulnerable Participants

Owing to the potential vulnerability of the participants, there was an element of risk that participating in research may highlight distressing events or emotions. However, it was anticipated that any distress would be in relation to their life situations, rather than the research specifically. All of the families had keyworkers who were able to provide direct support and signposting as an integral part of their role. These practitioners working with the families are highly skilled and experienced in supporting vulnerable families and were able to provide appropriate guidance and support should it be required.

Other Ethical Considerations

The research team worked with project managers to design research questions and tools to carefully avoid intrusion.

The evaluation was completed in full adherence to professional codes of practice:

- British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition (2018); and
- British Association Social Work (BASW) The Code of Ethics for Social Work (2014).

The researchers were also keen to highlight examples of good practice that emerged from the evaluation. The Supporting Change Manager was the key point of contact for this aspect.

Evaluation Findings

There are a number of significant findings from the evaluation study which highlight aspects that are going well within the programme, as well as areas for future development. The findings are presented under the following headings:

- Programme design and implementation
- Leadership and partnership working
- Outcomes for families
- Other emerging themes

The next section of the report considers each of these aspects.

Programme design and implementation

The programme is well- designed and fit for purpose. The biggest asset of the programme is undoubtedly the staff team.

Supporting Change Team

Much attention was given by the Service Manager to recruitment of staff, based upon knowledge, experience, skills but also dispositions and personal/ professional qualities. All existing staff came into post at the same time, thus facilitating exceptional team cohesion. This has created a strong team with a diversity of skills, experience and professional interests which are recognised, valued and shared within an ethos of collaboration and excellent client relationships. The team has been stable in terms of consistent staffing since its inception, which is a remarkable achievement considering that contracts are not permanent. This has been beneficial to families and children as well as for other professionals and agencies in developing close working relationships. Co-location of the team with other teams has also fostered good and time-saving working practice and relationships.

Supporting Change staff are exceptionally motivated, enthusiastic, passionate about enabling families and committed to their own professional development. They are ambitious but realistic in their aspirations for families and are committed to listening to the voices of parents and children. Appropriate attention is given to self-care and caring for one another, recognising the emotional toll of family support work.

> *"The worker actually listened and took in what I had to say. They were non-judgemental allowed me to regulate myself more than the situation"* (Parent)

Leadership and partnership working

Leadership of the team is robust, responsive and respected by staff and key partners. Effective and collaborative relationships have been established with the Locality Teams, 14-19 Team and Children with Disabilities Team. These relationships have facilitated flexibility, joint problem solving within a culture of openness and professional challenge.

Training programme

At the outset of the team's development, an extensive training programme was implemented. This has helped to create a joint ethos of strength-based working with families, an awareness of tools available to empower and support families and has enhanced consistency of approaches and developed the professional confidence of staff. Other teams within Children's Services recognise this investment in training for the SCT and would like to see it rolled out across the workforce.

Relationships with the families

Relationships with the families established by the SCT are exemplary. There is an unyielding emphasis on identifying and building upon individual and family strengths, involving families in finding their own solutions and supporting families to make positive changes.

"*My worker was nice and smart and gave me good advice*" (Child, aged 7)

"*I can't think of anything negative - they couldn't do a better job*" (Parent)

"*I can't praise them enough*" (Parent)

Changing practice

The team regularly challenges stereotypes and questions their own assumptions thus demonstrating reflective practice. It is clear from interviews with partners and the focus groups with case-holding Social Workers that the SCT is influencing others. They are working with the families to view families differently and to adopt strength-based practices.

The team has gained experience in the management of risk over the past 18 months and in being motivated to gain the best outcomes for children are not afraid to say when a child is not safe and must be removed from parents. However, their approach has also enabled risk to be balanced and confidence given to other professionals in managing risk so children can remain at home where safe to do so. The change from a risks based to a strengths approach has meant that risks are less hidden now and are discussed openly with families so parents can recognise both. This was evident in the contribution from parents during their interviews. Participants across the team, other teams, managers and other professionals interviewed highlight that there has been a shift away from previous risk averse practice and this

has been embedded by the team in collaboration with other professionals. The impact of this has a reframing of practice which has helped to keep families together.

Additional Specialist Roles

Owing to the success of the current programme, funding has been secured for additional specialist roles. This will include psychology input, which will enhance the team's capacity for therapeutic intervention. A Community Connector role, based on a model that is working well in adult services, will enable the team to strengthen community links and facilitate exit strategies for the families. Education roles will enhance capacity for direct work with children and young people in education settings.

The programme

The next set of findings relate to the programme itself.

Intensity

The intensive nature of the family support provided by SCT is a strength of the programme. The intensity varies according to the needs and engagement of families. A good example of this, is where the team have supported the development of consistent and wellbeing enhancing routines within the family, which at the outset of the intervention necessitated daily visits.

Emphasis on direct work

The streamlined paperwork creates capacity for staff, thus enabling them to concentrate on direct family work.

Interventions are based upon an initial 12-week intervention. This is clearly communicated to parents and appears to work for most families. However, there is a recognised need for flexibility, particularly in the small number of cases where the family has found it difficult to engage. The team are able to provide clear examples of where, with agreement, the intervention has lasted beyond the 12 weeks, in order to provide better outcomes for the family.

Within the design there is appropriate attention given to providing evidence-based practice and using well evaluated approaches and models. There is an abundance of evidence that Circles of Security (CoS) and Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) are making a real difference to parents.

However, there is a recognition that "one size does not fit all" and the Team are creating bespoke interventions where necessary. There is a recognition that family work needs to be tailored to individual needs, culturally sensitive and to work within the engagement patterns of the family. Hence, the programme provides a responsive approach which tunes into family dynamics and works collaboratively with the family to enable positive change. There are both formal and informal

mechanisms available for reflective practice to ascertain what worked and why and to allow this to inform the Team's practice.

The direct work with children is making a difference to both children and families. Children were able to give clear examples of strategies they had learned and parents were complementary about the impact of the work with children, particularly around naming and controlling emotions.

"Supporting Change provided a safe place for me to be honest about my situation and to see that it was not acceptable to be in that position and to change it." (Parent)

Empowerment and ownership

During the interviews with parents, it became evident that parents had a good understanding of their situations and an ownership of the challenges they faced. In most interviews, parents demonstrated that they were very clear about the changes they needed to make. It is important to note that all the parents within the study reported that they feel supported not judged within the programme and that they are aware of the strengths-based approach. All were able to identify their own strengths and many were confident of their ability to move forward.

"The team made a big difference – I was treated with respect and dignity not like a criminal. I was able to be relaxed. They were discreet and I cannot praise them enough" (Parent)

As a result of the interventions, a number of parents reported improved relationships with other agencies (especially school and social workers). There was a real sense that the SCT, through their work with the families, was supporting a repaired image of social care.

Whilst the team have made significant steps towards developing robust exit strategies for families at the end of their 12-week intervention, more needs to be done to ensure families are able to sustain the changes made. The planned Community Connector post will enhance capacity in this area, by locating and utilising community-based provision to support families and tackle isolation.

Outcomes for families

The evaluation identified that there the SCT is very clear about the importance of securing positive outcomes with the family. From the outset of the SCT involvement, families are involved in identifying their own desired outcomes and considering what needs to happen in order to make those changes a reality. The team helps the family to set realistic and achievable goals, to cope with setbacks and to make "resilient moves" (Hart, 2016)

The evaluation highlighted the following outcomes for families:
- Very clear examples of where families have been enabled to stay together safely;

- Examples of rehabilitation from care;
- Multiple examples of where parental confidence and skills have improved;
- Clear examples of improvement in family relationships;
- Enhanced understanding and ownership of problems and issues;
- Examples of improved relationships with other professionals, notably social workers and school-based staff;
- Children reporting improvements in positive family time;
- Most families reporting wishing they had SCT earlier in their journey.

"The group work gave me confidence and coping mechanisms as a parent."
(Parent)

"The worker was very honest about what needed to be done." (Parent)

"The team helped me to have a bit better relationship with my social worker"
(Parent)

Cost avoidance and cost saving

In line with the stated aim at the establishment of the SCT, statistics to date provide compelling evidence of cost avoidance (projected with caveats to equate to five thousand and twenty four thousand, nine hundred and forty pounds), and potential cost savings of one million, seven hundred and eleven thousand pounds on the assumption that children would have been taken into care if not worked with by SCT (Reports to Scrutiny, 2018). Whilst there are a number of assumptions evident within the analysis, it is clear that the project is generating significant savings which, provided the children remain at home, will accumulate year on year.

Securing sustainable change

From the analysis of performance data provided by the Authority, it appears that in approximately two thirds of families, the intervention is deemed successful as measured by the identified outcomes. Within the context of securing lasting behaviour change, this success rate is higher than the average. However, it is important to note that in order to secure these outcomes, some families will need more than the designated 12 weeks or may need "top up" interventions or revisits. This is entirely consistent with the prevention literature, and as such needs to be considered as part of the programme's design.

The team has made significant strides in developing appropriate exit strategies for families. However, despite the team's efforts, a number of participants (including parents/ carers) highlighted a lack of community-based provision which could contribute towards these exit strategies. This clearly represents a significant risk to the sustainability of SCT interventions. Work is ongoing at a strategic level to address this issue and should continue to be prioritised.

In the small number of cases where the intervention is not deemed "successful", it appears to be connected to families' "readiness for change". The team have made

excellent use of The Bruce Thornton Readiness for Change screening tool, which is giving a clear indication of where the family is at, and therefore how likely an intervention is to succeed. However, it is widely recognised that there is a paucity of well evaluated tools for moving families' readiness for change forward. There is therefore a need for a systematic research project in this area, which the team would be well placed to participate in.

Furthermore, it is important to note that where the SCT intervention has not succeeded, it has often provided the necessary evidence to enable the right decision to be made for the child, and hence this should be viewed as an appropriate outcome.

Timing of SCT intervention

The team currently mainly operates within a very boundaried threshold for intervention, defined as "edge of care". The families accessing the service have multiple and complex needs and in many cases have failed to engage positively with other services. This provides a clear remit within which the team operates, namely to avoid children entering the *looked after* system and remain safely within their family. However, it is clear from the evaluation that there is potential for the team to extend beyond this remit into an earlier intervention model. Similarly, a number of cases have demonstrated the Team's potential to intervene beyond care proceedings in order to assist children in care to return safely to their family homes. Any extension in remit needs to be carefully managed in order to avoid pressure on the service, which could compromise the intensity of approach which is currently working so well.

Other Emerging Themes

A number of additional themes emerged from the evaluation.

Presenting needs

A number of the families we met with identified that bereavement, loss and change had been a catalyst for family breakdown. There is a need for staff training related to this aspect, which can then be used to support the families' understandings of the impact of loss on both parents and children and also strategies for resilience when sad things happen.

Similarly, for a significant proportion of families, understanding and developing healthy relationships has provided a focus for the SCT intervention. Working with partners in health and education could provide capacity to proactively raise awareness of these issues within universal services (e.g. PSHE programmes in school).

The local Judiciary

The evaluation raised a number of issues related to decision making and ways of working of the local judiciary. However, these are beyond the remit of this report.

Intergenerational cycles of multiple adversity

The high levels of need within the Borough are well documented. There is a recognition within SCT and Children's services more broadly of the challenges and limitations of once off solutions when tackling entrenched behaviours which are passed on inter-generationally.   Whilst the team is effective in changing individual behaviours, breaking cycles of deprivation will require concerted focus from Government, Local Authorities and their partners.

Recommendations

The evaluation has highlighted the success of the Supporting Change Team in meeting its identified aims and providing a needs-led, responsive service that contributes towards enabling families to make and sustain positive changes and ultimately to stay together safely.

Nonetheless, following the evaluation, a number of recommendations have been identified. These are designed to build upon the current success of the project, enhance its impact and position the project positively to meet future challenges.

Recommendation 1: Secure permanent or longer-term funding for SCT Project.
The current fixed term funding is a risk to the service. Posts are offered on a fixed term basis, which provides a challenge to team stability. Partners have highlighted the importance of continuity of service provision when referring in and knowing what is available.

Recommendation 2: Consider threshold for intervention.
As identified earlier, there is much potential for the extension of SCT's remit in order to provide earlier intervention or to enable safe rehabilitation from care. However, this would need to be carefully considered in order to prevent the service from becoming overwhelmed and thereby compromising the intensity of intervention which is a hallmark of the project's current success.

Recommendation 3: Clarify the 12-week intervention for partners.
It is clear from discussions with staff and managers that there is flexibility within the 12 weeks intervention to facilitate engagement and to continue beyond 12 weeks on an agreed needs-led basis. This flexibility, and the circumstances within which extensions can be agreed, need to be clarified for partners.

Recommendation 4: Develop a written communication to clarify the parameters of the team's work.

Whilst there was excellent understanding of the team's remit at Team Manager level, some social workers and partners were unclear about exactly what the team could and could not offer. Moreover, there is an opportunity to showcase the varied skillsets and experience of the SCT.

Recommendation 5: Embed and evaluate the new roles.

The proposed Community Connector, Psychology and Education posts will provide additional capacity and potential for specialisation as well as influencing practice across the team. Further evaluation of the new roles will be necessary.

Recommendation 6: Enhance exit strategies for families.

Work with partners and communities to develop effective exit strategies/ community based support for families. Networking and mapping provision could be an initial priority for the Community Connector Role.

Recommendation 7: Clarify reporting arrangements at the end of an intervention.

Whilst the team feeds into the Social Worker reports, there is scope for a report (or meeting) at the end of the SCT intervention. This would support ongoing work with the family and also assist in identifying appropriate exit strategies

Recommendation 8: Commission training on bereavement, loss, change.

There is a gap in training related to Bereavement and Loss. There is also potential to work with partners in universal services raise awareness of issues around bereavement in a proactive way (Brown, 2003)

Recommendation 9: Consider working with neighbouring authorities to roll out SCT across the region.

One partner, working across 5 County Boroughs identified that it would be useful if SCT was available across the region. It was her perception that the SCT model was providing a more responsive service than that available elsewhere in the region. There is scope to work with Welsh Government and neighbouring authorities to provide a consistent approach.

Recommendation 10: Share practice within Children's Services, with partners and beyond.

The evaluation has highlighted some excellent practice. Make use of opportunities to share practice with partners and develop consistent approaches across services locally and regionally.

Recommendation 11: Give consideration to approaches for gauging Families' readiness for change.

Potential exists for a systematic research project considering ways of helping families who may not yet be ready for change, to move forwards. This would require research funding and an academic partner.

Recommendation 12: Develop a suite of good practice vignettes.
Work with University of Worcester researchers to develop a booklet of good practice vignettes to be used for promotion, reporting and training purposes.

Conclusions

The report highlights that the Supporting Change Team (SCT) has greatly enhanced the capacity of Children's Services to provide a strengths-based approach to supporting families at the 'edge of care'. There is no doubt that the programme has been carefully designed and implemented to provide high-quality, needs-led services that are valued by families and partner agencies alike.

The team present as knowledgeable, motivated, innovative and resilient. Excellent working relationships are quickly established with families, who are subsequently supported and empowered to make positive changes to their family life. The interventions are bespoke, intensive, flexible and make good use of existing evidence from research.

The recommendations of the report are intended to further strengthen the provision and prompt its extension and rollout.

The research team would like to extent once again their thanks for the involvement of staff, partners and, most importantly, families, who were so generous in telling their stories. We look forward to working with you in the future.

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