**BUILDING RESILIENCE – FAMILY SUPPORT**

Across Wales, parents and carers currently have access to a range of family services delivered by partners in local government, health, education, social services and social justice. Support is delivered at different points in a child’s life (antenatal to teenage) and ranges from support for parents with low levels of need, such as informal structured group based parenting support and informal drop-in support; through to more targeted intensive support.

The work on mapping provision carried out as part of the Early Years Integrated System (EYIS) programme identified that for families that do not live within a Flying Start area, the provision of support is not joined up, is not universally available based on need and is not presented as a comprehensive package.

To support the development of an early years Toolkit a Welsh Government policy lead has explored how family support is approached within each LA, by engaging with the practitioners delivering it. This work has explored how we can reach more families in need of support in a timely way, through better alignment of the family support programmes in place. Ultimately the aim is to establish whether there are easily identifiable factors of a successful family focused support approach, and how these can deliver our vision for an early years system.

Support for families in need is a complex area as it is provided through multiple services, such as; the Healthy Child Wales Programme (HCWP) and Flying Start (geographically targeted), via multi-agency teams as part of Flying Start and Families First’s Team around the Family approach, via community organisations and it could also be commissioned by LAs via agencies such as Barnardo’s, Action for Children etc. Therefore, the approach taken to this is different within each LA across Wales.

Initially, the policy lead researched the Team Around the Family (TAF) model that each LA used. The policy lead then visited a range of LAs and commissioned agencies’ projects, to gain further insight into some of the approaches to family support; how families accessed it, how families’ needs are assessed and support determined, the range of roles involved in the multi-disciplinary approach and whether they felt co-location is essential within this etc.

These visits demonstrated that there were identifiable factors of a successful approach. The demand was different due to local circumstances, the terminology differed at times and they are all at different stages, but ultimately their ‘vision’ and what they are trying to achieve is the same – to provide the right support for families, when they need it, seamlessly.

The policy lead tested these findings further by inviting representatives from Families First and Flying Start to three focus groups that were held in North, South and West Wales.

The focus groups agreed that family support is a multi-agency approach of professionals coming together to provide tailored support for individual families when they need it. Below is a brief summary of the factors that all sessions agreed were the most important:

* A Single Front door (also referred to as a single point of contact) – even though not all LAs had one it was felt essential across all sessions; most felt a single place to go, particularly for practitioners to know who to refer to.
* No thresholds for support – some LAs set a threshold for support of 2 or more issues and others do not have a set threshold. The consensus across the groups was that there is never generally just one issue and therefore, LAs are turning away families whose problems can become entrenched and much more complex and expensive to resolve. It was strongly felt that there should be no threshold set; although there was a caveat on this that as families get further upstream with more complex issues then criteria/threshold of need may need to be applied in order to obtain the appropriate support, or to determine priority of need.
* Setting a timescale for support – The majority argued that you can never predict what a family’s needs will be or how many issues you uncover and the depth of them, so questioned attributing a timescale. However one LA stated that setting a timescale was essential to their model and helped focus interventions.
* A holistic family focussed assessment –there was a unanimous agreement that a thorough family assessment must be undertaken and that it should be undertaken by an appropriately skilled practitioner.
* Good understanding of local intelligence/local demand etc. and formal data/research/evidence –all groups felt that these go ‘hand-in-hand’. Local intelligence was felt very useful in getting to know the needs/demand of their ‘customer base’ and any ‘prevalent’ issues in the area, which makes it easier to meet the basic needs of families (e.g. debt problems etc.). More formal data was essential for planning and to justify decisions.
* A focus on resilience building – all sessions felt that building resilience was crucial in equipping families with the skills to cope in the future and enabling practitioners to withdraw – important in the prevention of boomerang families. There were different interpretations of early intervention – it was felt that a recognised definition would be useful, as even amongst practitioners.
* Co-location of multi-agency teams - the need for colocation depended on existing relationships and infrastructure. Where LAs that had struggled with relationships historically it was considered to be absolutely essential. These locations must be accessible to families in the form of community hubs and drop in centre’s etc.
* Evaluation and feedback on the service - there was a unanimous agreement that this was essential to a successful approach to enable improvements to each service. Distance travelled tools was the main mechanism cited.
* Workforce development and training - all groups agreed that having a highly skilled workforce is essential. However, there was a feeling that family support workers can be viewed as inferior to social workers. They feel support workers have skills and experience that is not valued and that there should be accredited training for them which would remove any professional snobbery.

There were also some issues/challenges raised at the focus groups – below are the one’s felt the most important:

* FS/FF working together/complementing each other – this was a huge issue in some areas. However, it was raised that WG guidance on these policies could be better integrated and that case studies on where this works well and practical tools/tips on how this can be achieved would be welcomed.
* Engagement of Health - There was a view that the pathfinder work would help, and one pathfinder in particular highlighting that this had definitely been an enabler for these relationships to build.
* Lack of awareness by families of what support was available and how to access it. Many LAs felt that a Single Front Door/Single Point of Access mitigated this issue.
* Language used in the sector could be confusing – particularly around early intervention and what this actually means, also with regards to early years and whose remit early years falls under etc. that is was such a cross-cutting policy but yet not viewed by many departments as their ‘remit’.
* Where family support/TAF sat under Social Services within LAs was raised as an issue, as it prevents families wanting to engage with interventions due to the stigma and them viewing interventions as if they have done something wrong.

The Families First and Flying Start team are now considering the summary and deciding upon next steps.