

Listening To Families Project

Executive Summary

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Produced by **Third Sector Leaders** with the support of **Kirklees Council**

Working in partnership with:

Action For Children

Lifeline / OnTRAK

Pennine Domestic Violence Group

WomenCentre

Yorkshire Children's Centre

Our grateful thanks to the families who shared their stories.

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Foreword by Clare Mulgan**Head of Stronger Families Programme, Kirklees Council**

The Stronger Families Board welcomes this report.

It reminds us of the challenges that individuals and families face and of the importance of providing the right support at the right time, in the right way and that change takes time.

The Stronger Families programme in Kirklees is making a difference to families' lives and is improving the coordination of services to reduce duplication, avoid gaps and make best use of the available resources.

The voluntary sector has an important role in this programme, reaching some of the most vulnerable and isolated families and providing flexible ongoing support. This project is an example of how partnership working, innovation and information sharing can produce new learning for anyone working with vulnerable families.

I recommend this report to all those working with families in Kirklees and to the Stronger Families Board.

Clare Mulgan

December 2013

Introduction by Tom Taylor

Chair of Third Sector Leaders

The governments 'Troubled Families' programme aimed to change the lives of 120,000 families across the country. Families were targeted who had children missing school, who were engaged in anti-social behaviour and who were also claiming out of work benefits.

In Kirklees, the programme was renamed 'Stronger Families' and a fourth criteria was added to the governments list, reflecting local needs.

The 'Listening to Families' project aimed to ensure the voices of the targeted families were heard by those planning the programme and designing services and support. All those involved meet two of the four criteria.

The project gave these families the opportunity to tell their stories, reflecting on their lives and their experiences of statutory and third sector services.

This final report contains 40 stories from a wide range of families with different life experiences. Their stories are frank and revealing, both in terms of how people perceive their own situation and how they perceive interventions from service providers.

Contributors have given an honest appraisal of the challenges they faced in their lives and we hope this will help us understand how things can go wrong for a family. More importantly, they have talked about how they started to turn their lives around and the interventions from services that worked for them.

When you read these stories, patterns emerge. They are not the sort of patterns you find when you examine statistical data; the patterns from these stories tend to pick out the impact of human relationships on the effectiveness of the Stronger Families programme.

Evaluations of interventions repeatedly identify the quality of the relationship as a key success factor. But relationships are hard to measure and so may not feature in performance targets. One of the messages from the report is that it is not simply a question of what support is offered, it is also about *how* that support is offered.

Throughout this project, we built on existing relationships and aimed to deepen and strengthen them. Workers in local voluntary organisations, who were known and trusted by families, were the ones who listened to their stories. The experience was powerful for both workers and the families and enhanced their relationship. The project provided an experienced writer and counsellor to support workers and to ensure each story had enough detail and was presented effectively.

The Listening To Families project has carried out extensive qualitative research on the Stronger Families cohort and this report is the culmination of that research. It provides families perspectives on what works for them and why, and as such it is a valuable resource that we believe can help service managers and direct workers to shape services.

Tom Taylor
December 2013

Listening To Families Project

Executive Summary

The Listening To Families project was set up to:

- improve our understanding of families' experiences of services and support mechanisms, including support mechanisms within their own communities
- help identify ways to improve commissioning and service design

The project asked professionals from partner organisations to interview families they were working with about their life experiences. These interviews were then edited into a collection of personal stories.

The interview process was not part of a wider strategy or intervention policy and it was not focused on delivering to any specific target or outcome, other than to improve our understanding. A number of professionals commented that this felt different to their usual role and that it helped them relate to people as individuals with their own stories.

Some of the families also commented that it was an unusual experience to be asked their opinion and to feel that their views were being respected. The process of telling their story established a level of trust, giving them the confidence to open up.

The stories they shared with the project have increased our knowledge of the characteristics and needs of Stronger Families. They have also helped to identify common experiences and responses that suggest potential changes to the way we engage with families.

The project worked with five partner organisations; Yorkshire Children's Centre, Pennine Domestic Violence Group, WomenCentre, Lifeline/OnTrak, and Action For Children.

Common Experiences: Trauma

The majority of the individuals who shared their stories spoke about emotionally damaging experiences, usually in childhood.

Learning Point: Understanding the impact of those experiences can help professionals to engage successfully with families. When you know that an individual is vulnerable and insecure in their relationships, you develop an empathy that can help you cope with their challenging behaviour, such as a lack of trust or angry responses.

Serious Neglect and/or Abuse; Bullying:

Story 1022 - Kevin was sexually abused by his mum's boyfriend.

Story 1048 - Tina was raped when she was eleven.

Story 1012 - Aged two, Rose was diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection, although she has no memory of what happened.

Story 1014 - Sally was neglected and abused by her mother and step-father.

Story 1025 - Taz, her sisters, and her Mum were all physically abused by her father.

Story 1020 - Anna was bullied at primary school because she cared for her disabled mother.

Childhood Loss: The death or departure of a significant person in their lives.

Story 1018 - Julie was brought up by her grandparents after being placed under a care order. Her behaviour deteriorated shortly after her grandfather died.

Story 1030 - Daniel's behaviour deteriorated when his older brother died of a drugs overdose.

Story 1016 - Jade was very close to her grandfather and he used to take her horse riding. Her behaviour and school attendance deteriorated when he died.

Story 1015 - Laurie lives with his mum and step-dad. He became involved with drugs and petty crime when his grandfather died.

Common Experiences: Conflict In Relationships

Story 1035 - Zoe was in a conflictual relationship with her former partner and now argues with her son, Lewis, over his behaviour and school attendance.

Story 1036 - Kathy had a volatile relationship with her mother and has been involved in violent incidents with the police.

Story 1040 – Lilly received an ASBO and was made homeless after repeated arguments with her boyfriend. This has affected her child's school attendance.

When Do Interventions Work?

There appear to be key behaviours that have the potential to create an effective intervention. The reverse is also true; if those behaviours are absent there is the potential to damage the relationship and render the intervention ineffective.

Learning Point: We need to listen to what families are saying.

Story 1004 - Sally and her keyworker have worked closely for three years. She feels she can finally trust someone to believe her and listen to what she has been through. They put together a plan of action so she could keep her daughter safe, reduce her medication, and gain some normality, which was snatched away from her at such a young age.

- Story 1033 - *'At least you listened and were straight and honest, and offered support that was for me and the family. You knew we came as a family, not individuals.'*
- Story 1017 - *'I am very thankful to the people who have actually understood us and helped us. It took time to listen – nearly a year of CAF meetings, but it worked in the end and I know who I can trust and turn to for support.'*
- Story 1025 - *'Thank god I had a Doctor I could talk to. When I was a child I never had anyone to talk to about my feelings. I trust the advice my Doctor gives and he made referrals to a psychologist and counselling for me when my depression was really bad.'*
- Story 1029 - In response to being asked for any other reason he likes his new school, Joseph shared: *'I like being trusted. I like it when people listen to what I have to say instead of always blaming me for things that are kicking off.'*
- Story 1045 - She told me how he is someone she can trust and does not push her to do things that she is not ready to do in recovery. He has a good awareness of a client's right time to make a change. He is very flexible and does his best to accommodate her needs.

Learning Point: We need to treat families with respect.

- Story 1010 - *'She was ok to start with, but then was being really judgemental and disrespectful. She and other professionals have us sign agreements where we are supposed to be respectful to each other. I am to them, but they aren't to me. I feel like they judge me all the time.'*
- Story 1039 - *'They gave me the opportunity of a job when no one else would. I began in prison as a volunteer and then carried on as a volunteer on my release, which has led to me working for them now. The reason I am grateful is because they made me feel like I was worth employing and could build trust again.'*
- Story 1027 - Maryam talks about the staff at KABWWA being very friendly, understanding, supportive and she believes they respected her wishes. Maryam says KABWWA was the best place she has ever lived in.

Learning Point: We need to demonstrate that we can be relied on.

- Story 1043 - *'I don't like it when I think someone has understood my problem and then they leave my life and someone else tells me that they're taking over that person's job.'*
- Story 1022 - *'I think I have got better because, well, I know I grunt every morning when you say 'hello' but it's just that I am not used to feeling welcomed. I know you care Miss and I like the smaller classes. I know I have sometimes messed about but then I began to trust the tutors more as they helped me*

with my UCAS application. And you have stayed all this time as well. That helped me because last year there was a lot of new staff and when you arrived I thought you'd just leave after a while.'

Story 1019 - 'He will never hand his mobile phone in because one time in his old school, when I ended up in hospital, Jonny left a message for JonJo and the reception didn't pass it on. JonJo was really upset when he found out and now he has his mobile phone. We have this agreement that if I'm not well, I'll text him or someone will ring him on his own phone and then no-one else can be responsible for letting him down.'

Story 1036 - 'Unfortunately because of funding, I had to lose the support of Horton Housing, if I was to have support from another agency. I was really upset about this because I had developed a good positive relationship with Horton and built up trust with them. She had been seeing me weekly.'

Story 1042 - 'I hope the Family Intervention Team will help support my son. But this will need his Dad's co-operation. I've worked with so many different people and put my trust in them. But I've built my hopes up only to be let down.'

Story 1004 - 'I have always been in touch with June at the Sweet. She has been my worker at Sweet. I've had her for the last seven or eight years. She has always been in touch with me. She has always rung me. Even now, I've spoken to her yesterday. She called me and said if I need anything, or if you want a chat or anything. She has always been there.'

<p>Learning Point: We need to demonstrate we have faith in a family's potential.</p>

Story 1005 - Sue began to work with Horton Housing who she says were 'full of encouragement'. She says that her worker would always see good things in her and encourage her to see them for herself. She inspired her to believe in herself. Sue believes that these words of encouragement were the beginning of her way out of her desperate situation.

Story 1036 - 'We have both just completed the LAB Project in Huddersfield and gained certificates. Sarah has signed up to do two courses in security to try and get back into work, thanks to the LAB tutors giving her motivation and encouragement.'

Creative Interventions

The Listening To Families project also asked families to suggest a 'mini-plan' purchase that would help them to sustain change in their lives. There were a number of reasons why this stage was included in the process:

- To demonstrate we valued their contribution and the time and effort they put into the project
- To reward them for their work and establish or encourage a work ethic in families where this was an issue
- To learn from them about what they thought would help them, without restriction
- To expand our own horizons and discover ways of helping people overcome the challenges in their lives that have never previously occurred to us

The families had a clear idea of their own needs and came up with a wide range of proposals, some of which service providers would not usually consider. We did have concerns that people outside the project might look on these interventions as a waste of money or inappropriate. But each mini-plan was a small amount of money in comparison to the total cost of the services provided to these families.

We also wanted to take the opportunity to demonstrate our trust in, and respect for, the families, as it had become clear from our work that this is a key factor in helping them take control of their lives. Follow up interviews suggest that their plans were right for them and led to improved confidence and motivation to change.

Perhaps the overall positive experience of engaging with the LTF project in its entirety i.e. telling their story, being listened to, and then having their contribution valued, is what helped. Further follow up work to re-interview families would help us understand whether or not there has been lasting change from this and other interventions.

Story 1020 - A washing machine. 'For months I've been having to get taxis to and from the launderette and I was getting stressed a lot. As you know, I have this disability and not being able to do the washing at home was just making me lose my temper with Anna. So I think the biggest difference this has made is that I am happier and that means Anna is more positive too. Thank you.'

Story 1043 - A family holiday. 'This mini-plan has been brilliant for us as a family. My daughter has continued to work with CAMHS. She can sometimes still get sad about her Mum dumping her, but she seems a lot happier being with me and my Mum. I've noticed she doesn't stay in her room to be on her own as much... She started at college in September to study Hair and Beauty and she's just so focussed. It's been good to watch her grow in confidence and I think the mini-plan that has allowed us to be happy together over a holiday period has really helped. We're so grateful so thanks.'

- Story 1019 - Motorbike lessons and helmet for her son. *'This mini-plan has helped me in a way that I didn't expect... I am finding that JonJo is speaking to me more about his anger and how he just feels he wants to protect me, but that he feels like he has failed because he can't stop his Dad being violent. I have been able to explain to JonJo that none of this is his fault.'*
- Story 1017 - A computer. *'The mini-plan has had an incredible result – more than we could have thought to begin to ask for. Since his new PC has kept him focussed, Martin has started taking on more responsibility. He has even started travelling independently to and from school on the public bus. This is an amazing achievement for him. I am really proud of him and I now feel hopeful that Martin will continue to grow in confidence and be well prepared for going to college on his own next year. Thank you for everything you've done.'*
- Story 1002 - Clothes for children. *'I really enjoyed choosing clothes for the kids; I never have the money to do that. Knowing they will have coats and boots for the winter and thick pyjamas to keep them warm and toasty and that they are all new, not second hand, and that they fit. I got a smart outfit for them to wear at Christmas. I can't wait to see their faces. I feel so happy and excited.'*
- Story 1039 - A pram. *'The prams have made a huge impact to my day-to-day routines. I now feel I can take my little boy out in a safe manner... It has also been a great way in which I can spend time with my son. We go for walks, which has also helped with my new exercise routine and my mental health... being able to say I bought his pram was a massive thing for me emotionally as I feel that I am taking the right steps to be a good mum and focus on my child.'*
- Story 1040 - A bed for her son. *'Talking about my story made me realise how far we have come; my son now has a home and through completing the mini plan we have stuff in that home... I feel positive about my future and having a safe place to live has really helped me realise I don't wanna be homeless again... I think I have started to see how crazy my life had become for me and for my son. I am just grateful for services and their help in keeping us together and helping me get back on track...I am going to concentrate on getting my son's school attendance up..'*
- Story 1042 - Household items and gardening tools. *'My son loves his new gardening project and we are moving soon so we will be taking all our new furniture as well as plants with us... I think he was so happy to finally have a comfy bed as he struggled to sleep in the old bed in our rented house. The gardening tools has helped us spend some time together which is helping our relationship grow stronger. We talk more and that time makes us communicate more. I can't thank the project enough for listening to me and helping me provide the basic things for my son.'*

Storytelling

We also received feedback from families on the storytelling process, which suggests that taking part in the project was a positive intervention in its own right.

Story 1042 - 'Doing the work has also helped me be open about how being a mum is hard sometimes, and has helped me realise how people want to help. I have had agency involvement for a long time but I can honestly say this is the first time I have ever been asked what I thought about them.'

Story 1019 - 'In the long term, I think that this process has helped me make my mind up that I have to find the courage to move out. I have mentioned this to my daughter and she has told me that I can move in with her if and when I feel ready or brave enough to leave their Dad. I just want to say thank you for listening to me.'

Story 1005 - Writing this story, Sue says, has been emotional and challenging. She has never shared with anyone some of the things that she has spoken about here. But it is something that she believes has been really worthwhile and now feels she is one step closer to being able to accept herself and feeling proud of who she has become.

Learning From The Process: Supporting Interviewing Skills

Researching and writing personal stories requires specific interviewing skills. It is a different approach from the techniques used in the majority of interviews carried out by professionals working in this sector.

Professional interviews tend to focus on factual questions related to the family's current situation. Those interviews often rely on a pre-prepared list of questions designed, primarily, to gather information to help make decisions based on a range of possible interventions. The LTF project wanted the questions to be broader and deeper, and more intuitive.

The interviewer was encouraged to co-create the family's life story, exploring their opinions and feelings, not just facts. The workers on the project were encouraged to follow the flow of the conversation, to go wherever necessary to find out what might make a difference to the person they were supporting. Many professionals expressed surprise at the positive difference this approach made to their relationship with the family.

The project employed a professional writer to provide group and one-to-one support to facilitate this way of working. This support focused on interview skills and story-telling techniques. Feedback was then provided after the first interview and notes were shared on the first draft of the story.

Learning From The Process: Showing Respect and Valuing Families

The Listening To Families project modelled an approach that put respect for families at the heart of the work. The storytelling process was designed to demonstrate to the families that we valued their ideas and opinions. We have concluded that this approach has the potential, in itself, to create an effective intervention.

It is important to keep in mind that the families who participated were selected by the partner organisations and, understandably, they tended to choose families who were considered more likely to engage with the process and stay with the project though to the end.

It may be the case that this style of intervention works well for families that have a strong commitment to changing their lives and who are also starting to get on top of the challenges they face. It is not clear it would be as effective with families who do not want to engage with services.

But from the stories recorded, it seems clear the experiences of these families are common experiences. This indicates that the interventions and approaches that worked for them are likely to work for those families who not engaged with services; it is just a question of how long it would take.