

# Strengthening families

PUTTING VOICES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE HEART OF TRANSFORMING LOCAL SYSTEMS



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# Acknowledgements

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# Foreword

FELICITY ALLEN - Deputy Director of Child Protection and Safeguarding

I am delighted to have the opportunity to write the foreword to this fifth edition of the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (SFPC) learning journal, which has the theme of 'putting the voices of children and families at the heart of transforming local systems'.

I have recently returned as Deputy Director of the Child Protection and Safeguarding Unit, having previously secured the programme's funding from HM Treasury in 2019, and it's wonderful to come back and see the amazing progress and impact of the programme.

Hearing and responding to the voice, views and experiences of children and families will be critical to the success of the reforms being implemented through our Stable Homes, Built on Love strategy. The articles in this journal provide powerful testimony and examples of good practice by local authorities involved with SFPC, and it is clear there is much learning from the programme which can inform the design and delivery of future policy and practice.

In Newcastle, for example, families have been at the centre of decision making through the Family Group Conferencing service which has significantly increased the numbers of children able to remain safely at home. Telford and Wrekin has reframed the approach to engaging with families, recognising them as experts in their own lives and becoming co-creators in service design and implementation. And in Redcar and Cleveland, building strong relationships with young people on the

edge of care or in care which consider their individual needs and support networks, has led to transformational outcomes as well as significant cost avoidance.

The journal also provides expert analysis from our project support partners on the successful implementation of approaches which 'work with' children and families, rather than 'doing to'. This includes: the importance of culture change; the critical role of multidisciplinary teams; developing a strong and effective workforce; and the role of leaders in putting children and families at the heart of systems. Finally, What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care share learning from the formal evaluation of SFPC about putting children and families front and centre of service development.

There is much rich experience and learning in this journal, and I would encourage all involved in services for children and families, whether locally or nationally, as a leader or practitioner, in design or delivery, to read and reflect on how it can impact and inform your own practice. A heartfelt thank you to all those who have contributed and continue to put children and families at the heart of your practice.



# Welcome

TALLY DAPHU – Learning Director, Innovation Unit

The Strengthening Families Learning Journal's fifth issue is dedicated to sharing the learning and successes of the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (SFPC) programme.

SFPC is a five-year (2019 - 24) Department for Education programme supporting local authorities to improve their work with families and safely reduce the number of children entering care. It features three sector designed and evidence based models which are being implemented across England: Hertfordshire's Family Safeguarding, Leeds' Family Valued, and North Yorkshire's No Wrong Door.

The current issue of the Strengthening Families Learning Journal explores how we place the voices of children and families at the heart of transforming local systems. Working alongside children and families and putting their views and opinions at the forefront of system transformation will lead to more positive outcomes.

We explore how we use storytelling as a compelling tool to support the adoption of innovative practices to drive positive outcomes for children and families and create a sense of community. We hear from adopter authorities, Redcar and Cleveland, Telford and Wrekin and Newcastle, to learn how their models work to build family networks and strengthen relationships. How culture change is achieved by adopter

authorities is examined, and how the innovations re-frame the way families are thought about. We also learn about the essential role of leadership in prioritising the needs of children and families in local authorities' systems and highlight the significance of working effectively in multi-disciplinary teams.

The Strengthening Families Learning Journal welcomes feedback and encourages readers to participate in a short survey to share their thoughts on this issue and suggest topics for future editions. The publication's [website](#) also provides access to previous issues of the Learning Journal and the Newsletter.

# Key Learning

Placing children, young people and families' voices at the heart of our work:

1

Storytelling about the positive impact of innovation amplifies voices not normally heard and motivates and unites professionals.

2

Involving young people and families results in better solutions because they draw on their strengths and resources.

3

A relational approach is when families are valued, listened to and treated with respect, enhancing chances of positive change.

Outcomes for families and outcomes for the staff supporting them:

4

Opportunities for closer connection between professionals equip them with deeper knowledge and skills to respond to families' needs.

5

Effective workforce strategies enable continuous learning and tap into professionals' values and motivations to make a difference.







# Stories of Success:

Communicating the positive impact of SFPC innovations on children, families and professionals

## STORIES OF SUCCESS: COMMUNICATING THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SFPC INNOVATIONS ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS

We're more used to constructing case studies to demonstrate impact or persuade funders, however, sometimes the experiences and perspectives of people can get lost. Capturing stories can help to reveal deeper insights into people's lives and uncover hopes and challenges that aren't known or apparent in the data. Importantly, stories enable expression of voices not normally heard.

### STORIES SHARE MEANING

Through telling stories, we can shed light on 'why change happens'. Numbers are important to understand how big a problem is or 'how much change' has occurred but they do not communicate what it *feels* like to work in different ways with families or what it's like for a parent to build a trusting relationship with a social worker or *why* it matters.

When listening to a story we naturally reflect and make connections with our own lives and experiences. In this way, stories share meaning and we gain new perspectives. Good stories are compelling, relatable, and sometimes universal. They're good at building empathy and engagement.



Luke Bevir – Learning Team, Mutual Ventures



We are all familiar with stories. From childhood our imaginations are captured by tales of magical places and fantastic creatures. When we read or hear stories, we imagine and inhabit new worlds and possibilities. This is the power of stories.

In the world of public services, we rarely think about stories as part of what we do. But we are often telling stories about our experiences and what's going on in the world.

### Reasons for gathering stories

- Making the case to partners, funders and politicians
- Bid Writing
- A tool for recruitment and induction
- Support learning and professional development
- Support development of content for communications and engagement - Website, social media, events
- Share learning about key principles and core features of your model
- Influence change - locally and nationally

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW SOLUTIONS

In the context of innovation in children’s social care, capturing and sharing stories can reframe the way things are done and inspire change. By engaging with our imaginations, we are reminded that it is possible to do things differently. Stories can help to translate complex relationships or tasks. We also get the opportunity to reflect on what works already and why.

*“We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change...Sometimes, the situation has changed but the stories haven’t, and people follow the old versions, like outdated maps, into dead ends.”*

REBECCA SOLNIT, WRITER

Stories can press the pause button and help to celebrate success. Arguably, children’s social care has too few opportunities to do this. In our Stories of Success workshop, participants noted that it was helpful to hear about the positive impact social workers have, when too often media stories fuel negative perceptions of the profession. This felt important, particularly when many work in high pressure and complex environments. “It can be motivating to hear these stories and remember that we are making a difference to children” (Programme Lead).

Perhaps storytelling can also be a tool for compassion and care for the social care workforce. When storytelling is part of supervision or learning and development, stories can aid reflection and facilitate connection between professionals.



PRINCIPLES FOR STORYTELLING

The best stories honour the voice of the storyteller. They are authentic and relay deep experiences. Storytelling can be personal and we must treat the process and output with care. We have produced a Stories of Success Resource Pack which includes ‘Guiding Principles’. These aim to support professionals to capture stories in a safe and ethical way. Many of us can recall a story or something that has been said in a certain way – stories stick. It’s vital that consent is given for sharing stories. The Resource Pack provides guidelines on consent as part of a step-by-step guide for capturing and sharing stories.

A POWERFUL TOOL

The Stories of Success communicate the transformative impact that the SFPC innovations are having on families’ lives.

[Read Helen’s Story. Family Safeguarding Stories of Success.](#)

[Read Susan and Anne’s Story. No Wrong Door Stories of Success](#)

[Hear from professionals in Darlington implementing Family Valued.](#)

Stories from social care professionals reveal how working in multi-disciplinary teams motivates them and changes the way they work together with families.

The Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Stories of Success project will culminate in a collection of stories that communicate the positive impact of the SFPC programme across the country. It also aims to embed storytelling as a powerful tool that supports the complex task of adopting innovation, and the culture change needed to realise better outcomes for children and families.





# Shifting power from services to families: Giving children and young people voice and influence in Newcastle



## NEWCASTLE: FAMILY VALUED



Kate Williams – Service Improvement Lead

At the heart of Family Valued is a commitment to working with children and young people so that their voices are heard and they are at the heart of decisions that affect them. **Relational and Restorative Practice** has been the foundation of the city's work with babies, children, young people and their families.

## SHIFTING POWER FROM SERVICES TO FAMILIES: GIVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE VOICE AND INFLUENCE IN NEWCASTLE

A key part of this has been developing how we seek, hear, and act upon their voices, on a range of levels. Newcastle's dedicated 'voice and influence' team work to ensure how children think is understood by professionals designing and providing services, and that children are involved in decisions which impact their lives.

Over the past two years, they have led a programme of engagement with children across the city:

- Regular strategic city-level engagement for young people to provide their views and feedback on plans for services in the area.
- Now in its 2nd year and receiving national recognition, the Newcastle Youth Fund supports young people to decide how funding is allocated for youth provision across the city and has resulted in plans to activate under-used spaces to deliver youth work, mental health support and employment advice.
- Young people affected by particular issues sharing their experience of the city including work with care leavers on the cost of transport resulting in the Council agreeing with the Metro and bus providers to give 360 care leavers, young carers, or young people who have English as a second language free public transport across the city.
- A series of special events, 'Toon takeovers', where children and young people are invited to take control of activities that are normally reserved for adults e.g. Council meetings, the BBC Radio Newcastle Breakfast show and writing for the Newcastle Journal newspaper.

At a family level, **Family Group Conferencing Service (FGC)** is one of the main ways we ensure that the voice of the family is at the very heart of our service so families are supported to use their own network to keep children safely at home. In many cases, the results are profound. We hear about how much families are willing to invest in children when given the opportunity. We have seen family members, who live 200 miles away, travelling to Newcastle for a family meeting to play their part in helping a child avoid entering care.

*“I was worried at first because of my other experiences, but this was nothing like it. Being able to have time together as a family was very different to what we have done before, leaving us on our own to make our own plan was the best thing. It really worked for our family, I would recommend a family meeting to anyone, one million percent. I can’t thank everyone enough. **I do not think Sam would be home if it was not for the family meeting**”*

**MUM FOLLOWING WORK WITH FGC. HER CHILD HAD BEEN IN CARE FOR 7 YEARS, BUT WAS ABLE TO SAFELY RETURN HOME**

**The outcomes for children who have worked with the FGC service tells us that it is having significant impact on keeping children out of care, demonstrated by internal data. Following FGC involvement:**

- 84% of children who were at risk of care, had avoided care in the subsequent 6 months
- Outcomes for children at 12 months remained positive; those who had avoided care in the 6 months post-FGC remained out of care at the 12-month mark also.

As a result of this success, Newcastle has secured funding for the service to work with families in the early help arena, preventing some families needing repeat referrals into Children’s Social Care. It will increase the use of family-led decision making across the system, shifting the power from services to families and helping them to use their own strength and resources.

Embedding the voice of the child into the services is part of the Family Valued commitment to relational working. Ultimately, the goal is to make children’s voices a conscious element of all services.

**A series of videos made with families who have used the FGC service can be accessed here:**



[Kelly’s story - YouTube](#)



[Adele’s story - YouTube](#)



[NCC Family Group Conferencing Summary - YouTube](#)







# The Dandelion Group:

Placing parents' wisdom at the heart of transforming local systems in Telford and Wrekin

## TELFORD AND WREKIN: FAMILY SAFEGUARDING



**Louise Spragg** – Principal Social Worker/Family Safeguarding Practice Lead

It is recognised that the child protection and support system can reinforce shame and blame, rather than focus on collaboration and support.

## THE DANDELION GROUP: PLACING PARENTS' WISDOM AT THE HEART OF TRANSFORMING LOCAL SYSTEMS IN TELFORD AND WREKIN

In Telford and Wrekin, there was a need to reframe our services and the ethos of child protection and family support. Many of the families we work alongside have experienced and continue to experience trauma. The implementation of the Family Safeguarding model provided the opportunity to re-examine our approaches across children's services and commence reframing our service provision, delivery and practice approaches, moving from an expert- professional approach to bringing the wisdom of lived and learnt experience together, fostering principles of collaboration to bring change.

Relationships heal and aid recovery. A relational approach is required for families to have the best possible chance of being supported to make positive change. A focus on strengths-based working, respect, relational engagement, and resurfacing power is provided in addition to aiding the relative poverty of families that we work alongside.

### PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

We formed a parental partnership working group with practitioners who are committed to changing the narrative and approaches in relation to child protection and support. The group explored the internal changes we can make to ensure parents are listened to, valued, and treated with respect. They looked at how we foster collaboration by ensuring that parents are not just recipients of services but are seen as experts as a result of their lived experiences. To build on this, we collaborated with colleagues from Relational Activism - an organisation who have pioneered co-production with parents and families. They provided the scaffolding and framework for our new parent participation group, the 'Dandelion Group', made up of parents with lived experience of our system.

Telford and Wrekin believe parents should be involved in the way support is provided for, with, and by them, their families and their community.



*“Parents should have opportunities to influence their local services and share their experiences.”*

*“It is essential that parents’ views and experiences are valued and built upon. Parents need the opportunity to feel their opinions are valued, they are included and an important part of the process.”*

*“Parents are vital as it is a service for them and will only ever work when designed and ultimately ran by them”*

**TELFORD & WREKIN MANAGERS**

The group developed at strength, and they continue to provide practitioners, senior leaders, and partners with feedback from their own experiences of services, and how we can work together to bring about change. The wisdom from their experiences has aided the re-shaping of our services and created a shared vision for our implementation of Family Safeguarding.

**PEER ADVOCACY**

The next phase of this journey is for the group to be trained in peer advocacy to support other parents to voice their views to shape their family’s plan at the initial conference, in addition to ongoing work supporting the training and development of our practitioners.

Part of our ‘family first’ approach is promoting parent and extended family members’ rights, honouring them as experts in their own life. We acknowledge a family’s strengths and seek to strengthen their ability to meet their child’s needs, as well as work through any areas of difficulty. It is also important to acknowledge that even if a child cannot remain with their birth parent/family there is still the capacity to change for any future children they may go on to have. Our Dandelion Group parent experts continue to work with us to support our promotion of co-production and practice within our principals of compassion, positive regard, and collaboration.





# From missing episodes to monopoly: How developing strong relationships is helping young people in Redcar and Cleveland

## FROM MISSING EPISODES TO MONOPOLY: HOW DEVELOPING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS IS HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE IN REDCAR AND CLEVELAND

At Redcar and Cleveland, building strong relationships with young people and their families is an essential part of our approach. The No Wrong Door (NWD) team aspires to enable all young people to develop, build and sustain relationships with their family and loved ones. Ultimately, we want them to have lasting relationships that stay with them throughout their life.

In the last quarter, the Redcar and Cleveland NWD service worked with 54 young people who were at imminent risk of entering care. 18 young people were supported to closure, 13 young people were diverted away from care safely and remained with their family, 1 young person (who was already a child in our care) safely returned home and the remaining 4 young people were either children in our care at the point of referral or had to enter care during our intervention for safety.



### REDCAR AND CLEVELAND: NO WRONG DOOR SERVICE



**Jack Lindsay** – Deputy HUB Manager

Redcar and Cleveland have found that building strong relationships with young people and their families has been transformational in their approach to working with young people on the edge of or in care. Jack Lindsay, Deputy HUB Manager, shares Robert's story about how building relationships with social workers gave him the security and safety he needed to make a change in his life.

### ROBERT'S STORY

In April 2022, Robert was 16. He has complex additional needs and had been missing for over a week before he was located in a known drugs trap house. Robert went to live with his godparents whilst a referral to NWD was made.

Outreach staff worked quickly to build a relationship with Robert. Others had previously deemed him 'difficult to engage' and 'reluctant to work with professionals', however NWD had a different approach. Utilising the clinical expertise of NWD's in-house Life Coach (clinical psychologist) and Communication Support Worker (speech and language therapist), support was tailored to Robert's needs and all the adults around him worked hard to keep him safe.

Initially we saw a significant drop in his offending, missing episodes, and involvement with the police, however, the pull from exploiters at this stage was too much. Despite the best efforts of his parents, wider family and professionals, Robert's offending, missing episodes and risk-taking behaviours escalated significantly around Christmas last year.



RELATIONSHIPS GIVE US SECURITY AND SAFETY

Due to contextual factors, Robert was no longer safe to live at home and he came to live at the NWD residential home. Since then, we've replaced offending with baking and missing episodes with monopoly. The only driving Robert is currently doing is on a go-kart track!

Whilst we work on Robert's understanding of risk, relationships, self-identity, and ambitions, we also work with his support network with the aim of getting Robert back home safely.

His support network is involved in every decision, no matter how small. They are welcomed and valued and stand alongside us in wanting the very best for him. They share our wish for Robert to return home and live with them. The family unit remains closely connected as we share in our successes and learn together.

RELATIONSHIPS GIVE US CONFIDENCE TO CHANGE

Learning new things often involves feeling vulnerable. You might worry you're going to look silly and if you don't feel safe in the attachments you have with those around you, it's likely you will never try. When we meet a family at NWD, it isn't usually the first-time things have gone wrong. So how do we bring a sense of love and belonging to our children and families and make healing possible?

In social care, we often bring networks together for meetings, but do we enable them to just be together and share a space and co-regulate without expectations of agreeing a plan?

Security and belonging are an essential component of trying something new. Trying something new is how we learn what works for us. Some things will work and some things won't and if it doesn't, that's okay.

Robert's plans and interventions are pitched toward his developmental age, not chronological. We check his understanding and the understanding of his network, and we use visual aids to ensure everyone understands what is happening and what we are trying to do. This has been key in building a trustful relationship with Robert and his network.

Robert's Mum recently gave this feedback: 'He's had amazing support from you all, I can't thank you enough and hopefully eventually he will walk away from those wrong ones and maintain a relationship with better people.'

To ensure that this work continues we must show that not only is working in this way best for our children and families, but that it is financially viable. The below figures are cumulative.

In Q2 of 2022/23	In Q3 of 2022/23
74.5%	83.3%
of young people deemed to be on the edge of care were supported to remain out of care, with an estimated cost avoidance of	of young people deemed to be on the edge of care were supported to remain out of care, with an estimated cost avoidance of
£2.3 million.	£3.2 million.
These savings allow us to continue to work with people like Robert.	



# “When every bit of your system knows”. Making Culture Change Happen



**Emma Smale** – Learning Team, Innovation Unit



In this article, coaches from the Support Partnership reflect on the culture change needed in local authorities to successfully adopt Strengthening Families, Protecting Children innovations.

“WHEN EVERY BIT OF YOUR SYSTEM KNOWS”.  
MAKING CULTURE CHANGE HAPPEN

## RE-FRAMING ‘FAMILY’

There is little doubt that the innovations re-frame the way families are thought about.

- **Family Safeguarding** works in partnership with families. The strengths of parents, their networks and communities are focused on helping to identify solutions and realise change. This strengths-based approach takes a balanced overview of the family’s ability to meet a child’s needs. Family Safeguarding is about giving people agency to make changes for themselves.
- **Family Valued** sees families as the most precious thing in a child’s life, but that many are struggling with problems, such as poverty, poor housing and ill health that impact upon children’s development and welfare. This means that most families need help and support, and only a minority of cases involve protecting children from significant harm. This moves away from a concept of ‘problem families’ and contextualises what’s happening in people’s lives.

*“Family Valued is about everyone in a local system seeing children and families as a priority. To achieve this, there must be well-established relationships between organisations at a strategic and operational level, and these relationships must be nurtured.”*

## JOHN COPPS, SFPC COACH

- **No Wrong Door** adopts a strength-based and relational approach, always ensuring that the behaviours of young people are seen in the context of their previous life experiences. Accountability is shared by the multidisciplinary team, who also share risk across partners from social care to health, and with the police. The model builds on existing relationships and looks to the future – thinking about the adult that the teenagers they work with might become.



THE SFPC COACHES HIGHLIGHT 5 WAYS THAT  
A SHIFT IN MIND-SET IS BEING ACHIEVED IN  
ADOPTING LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

- 1

**Storytelling.** At its simplest, telling stories about the challenges experienced by young people and their families helps to surface what’s really going on, and develop a shared language about solutions. The SFPC coaches helped to ‘codify’ the core features of the models. By ‘simplifying complexity’, it becomes easier to communicate key principles and convey to everyone (including partners) how to work differently.

Stories appeal to our emotions and build the case for adopting innovation, alongside pressures such as the need for savings or improvement.

*“Through the **deep dive process**, professionals tell and create stories together which helps everyone own what’s going on... Storytelling engages the imagination, reminding you that change is possible ”.*

SIOBHAN EDWARDS, SFPC COACH

- 2

**Leadership.** Leaders play a vital role in creating the space for implementing a new model, creating permission for new ways of working, and helping to remove or reduce corporate and financial barriers. Read more about the role of leadership in successful implementation [here](#).
- 3

**Ownership.** Shared language and engagement in the process of change at every level of the organisation is viewed as important for shifting the way things are done. If ‘every bit of your system knows’ then there is a stronger commitment to see change through.
- 4

**Alignment.** Whilst brave decisions at the top of the organisation are seen as critical, so is alignment of vision and motivation amongst staff and partners. Working with what assets

and approaches an area already has, and the local rationale for change, such as pressure on budgets, helps to create a strategic fit for adopting innovation.

*“Giving a manual which says A, B, C is needed is not going to work in the long-term. Adopting innovation has to work with what’s already there”*

JANICE NICHOLSON, SFPC COACH

- 5

**Headspace.** Creating spaces for reflection and peer learning, such as 1-1 coaching and communities of practice, can act as ‘containers for challenges’ and help people to think creatively, away from everyday operational pressures. Coaching can model reflection and foster a learning culture which is essential for navigating the unknowns and uncertainties along the way.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Whilst it may be possible to implement a new model within two years, the SFPC coaches agreed that commitment to the values, principles and resources required to adopt innovation, needs to be longer term and ongoing. Evaluation and ‘real time’ learning is important to understand what contributes to positive outcomes for children and families over time. There is also value in attending to the wider ‘system conditions’ for change, such as building and maintaining a healthy workforce. This needs to include stable leadership at a local and national level. Only by investing long-term in children’s social care professionals, can we build the foundations for stronger relationships with families and communities.

**Coaching is a core part of the support offered to local authorities adopting and adapting an innovation. Read more about coaching for innovation in Strengthening Families [here](#)**



‘We’re setting the narrative for the rest of the system’.

Insight from professionals in multi-disciplinary teams.



Tally Daphu – Learning Director, Innovation Unit



Multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) have been held up as a model for better and more impactful practice for decades. Different agencies and professionals working together is associated with a number of benefits and more effective safeguarding of children:

- Increased information sharing
- Better knowledge and understanding of children’s needs
- A holistic picture of what’s going on in a families’ lives
- Having shared aims, helping to align resources and broker organisational differences
- Increased accountability and ownership across partners and agencies

‘WE’RE SETTING THE NARRATIVE FOR THE REST OF THE SYSTEM’.  
INSIGHT FROM PROFESSIONALS IN MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAMS.

The Government’s response to the Care Review, calls for an ‘expert led multi-disciplinary response’ in child protection and in family help, it is proposed that MDTs, led by local authorities, include social workers, family support workers, and domestic abuse practitioners to lead and provide direct support to families.

HOW THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, PROTECTING CHILDREN INNOVATIONS STRENGTHEN PROFESSIONAL AND PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

NO WRONG DOOR (NWD):

The team are co-located in a Hub and include a Life Coach (clinical psychologist), Communication Support Worker (speech and language therapist), Police Liaison Officer, along with residential workers, portfolio leads who work with families and young people on the edge of care, support staff and Community Carers. A Hub Manager is responsible for the whole team’s development.

FAMILY SAFEGUARDING:

A multi-disciplinary team is co-located consisting of social workers, child and family practitioners, domestic abuse survivor workers, domestic abuse perpetrator workers (staff from the National Probation Service), substance misuse workers, mental health practitioners, and psychologists.

FAMILY VALUED:

The Family Valued approach sees children in the context of a wider system involving all individuals and organisations that interact with them – schools, youth groups, GPs, children’s services, the police, local businesses, and community groups. Family Valued is about everyone in a local system seeing children and families as a priority. To achieve this, there must be well-established relationships between organisations at a strategic and operational level, and these relationships must be nurtured.



**INSIGHT 1: MDTs enhance practice and knowledge across services about children and family’s needs and circumstances.**

Telford & Wrekin have adopted the Family Safeguarding (FS) model. Grace Harris, Group Manager emphasises how not relying on phone calls and updates from other professionals, makes their work with families timelier. “We’re far better at safety planning, and crisis planning now”.

Grace speaks about the importance of a learning culture for multi-disciplinary teams, highlighting a need for practitioners to be “open minded as they come from different perspectives”. New insights about families emerge through group supervision. “You might not agree but everyone is supported to reflect and to do things differently”.

Louise Spragg, Principal Social Worker in the Telford & Wrekin team describes how knowledge is transferred between services – children’s social workers gain a richer understanding of mental health conditions, how domestic abuse is experienced, and the dynamics of substance misuse – helping them to hone their knowledge and refine their practice.

*“Family Safeguarding is opening up those reflective doors to really understand what other roles are.”*

Similarly, adult workers gain knowledge about social work roles and responsibilities – new insight and understanding transmits back into other services. Service Manager Paul Groucutt agrees,

*“I hear the richness that comes into the service from adult services workers”.*

**INSIGHT 2: MDTs can ‘set the narrative’ in the rest of the system about underlying needs and reasons for behaviours.**

In Warrington, No Wrong Door (NWD), Naomi Mackett is the clinical psychologist. She speaks about the “brilliant things you just don’t know”, for example, she has learnt about how thresholds operate in practice. The team’s combined knowledge and expertise builds as they learn about a young person through the lens of other professionals and services.

**NEIL MACLEOD, COMMUNICATION SUPPORT WORKER SAYS:**

*“One NHS service wouldn’t have all the knowledge...in speech and language services there’s a single assessment reflecting a point in time. At NWD I have more flexibility to build up a picture, get to know the child, bring in the psychological perspective and provide a more accurate assessment.”*

Neil now holds other professionals in mind when he writes assessments. He considers, how would a police professional read a communication profile ‘how might it affect their engagement with a young person’?

**INSIGHT 3: Co-location builds relationships between professionals leading to better relationships with families.**

In Warrington (NWD) it’s easier to ‘keep the child at the centre’ of their team because they have got to know each other and trust each other’s opinions. This contrasts with feelings professionals have about ‘others needing to do more’, often compounded by the pressure they’re under from high caseloads.

A distinction is made between engaging in lots of multi-agency meetings where conflicted or competing views emerge with the experience of being co-located.

*“Little bits of information emerge because people come directly to me”*

**AMY WALSH, POLICE INTELLIGENCE RESEARCHER EXPLAINS.**

**INSIGHT 4: Professionals in MDTs benefit from shared and specialist supervision.**

Specialist staff receive professional supervision from their respective employers as well as joint supervision with the Hub Manager.

**NEIL, COMMUNICATION SUPPORT WORKER FROM WARRINGTON (NWD) EXPLAINS THAT:**

*“You’re vulnerable when there’s lots of people who don’t know what you’re doing and trying to get them on side and see where you’re coming from. It’s important to have close NHS links.”*

He says that highlighting the communication needs of young people can lead to ‘lots of little wins’ because it is a perspective that is often missed in children’s social care.

The benefit of new or alternative perspectives from specialist professionals can lift the lid on what Naomi Mackett, Warrington’s (NWD) clinical psychologist calls “patterns of misunderstanding about what you’re able to do”.





## INSIGHT 5: MDTs need to constantly negotiate organisational boundaries and cultures.

Naomi illustrates this point by giving an example of a young man who has extensive developmental trauma and was with the NWD service in Warrington for two years:

*“CAMHS were saying it’s the home environment and not a mental health problem. Children’s social care were saying it was psychosis. It got completely stuck, with higher and higher levels of management being drawn in. Everyone wanted a solution, but there’s this feeling that other professionals needed to do more.”*

Lot of the misunderstanding and othering of professionals comes from the different way they’re trained.

*“When professionals are saying ‘I don’t think that’s us, it’s you’ there’s some real complexity that gets lost in the difficult relationship between services”.*

## INSIGHT 6: Relationships between partners need to be nurtured to make children a priority

In Newcastle, Family Valued has a sustained commitment from partners to make the city child-friendly. The ‘Evry’ Campaign is engaging 20 partners from health, education, business, cultural and charitable sectors to formulate an ambitious city wide, collective mission. ‘Evry’ has young peoples’ voices at its heart following over a year of engagement with 1,800 children and young people about their experiences of growing up in Newcastle.

The multi-disciplinary team in Telford & Wrekin (FS) have identified new opportunities for stronger and more consistent communication with partners at a strategic level, feeding into the safeguarding board and multi-agency anchors. The team advocate for replicating the MDT approach in their early help and return home teams.

It is heartening to consider that an opportunity to do this may be forthcoming with the government’s proposed reforms. Closer working, co-location and nurturing relationships with partners can ultimately benefit children and families because professionals focus more on working through complex problems together and are freed up from the organisational differences that can get in the way.



# Creating the conditions for social work to flourish: Best practice in developing a strong and effective workforce.



**Steph Gamauf** – Learning Team, Innovation Unit



A strong, skilled and motivated workforce is at the heart of effective children’s social care. Attracting, growing and retaining them is a vital part of embedding the innovative practice at the centre of the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme.

In a challenging climate where vacancy and turnover rates are high, there is a need to develop shared learning on workforce recruitment, development and retention. We are currently developing a learning report profiling 10 Innovator and Adopter local authorities to capture their views and best practice approaches. This article outlines some early findings.

## CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK TO FLOURISH: BEST PRACTICE IN DEVELOPING A STRONG AND EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE

### A VALUES-LED, WHOLE-SYSTEM APPROACH TO RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Values are at the heart of effective workforce strategies. This involves acknowledging that social work is a values-led profession, and that the motivation to make a difference in families’ lives is a key driver behind people’s choice to build their career in this sector.

Being clear and explicit about the significance of values can be an important pull to attract like-minded people. It starts with a deep commitment to listening to the voice of the child and the voice of their families, a recognition that families are the experts of their own lives and that many are struggling within a context of adversity instead of deliberately hurting their children.

There is a direct link between outcomes for families and outcomes for the staff supporting them. Fostering long term, trusted links between families and their social workers improves both impact as well as retention rates. There is a clear argument to avoid team restructures focused on what might be needed in the short-term, rather than investing in relationships over the longer-term.

The importance of relationships also needs to be reflected in system-wide partnerships. Fostering strong connections with partners across health, police and the voluntary sector is central to effective family support, whether it is finding accommodation or scheduling an appointment, as well as to promote vital specialist roles and second skilled staff into multidisciplinary teams. Our research clearly reminds us that it is values that are the thread, permeating everything from family support to team structures, recruitment and partnership approach.



**CREATING AN ACTIVE LEARNING CULTURE**

There needs to be a commitment to creating the conditions for social work to flourish. This includes comprehensive career and workforce development pathways and a recognition that learning is part of social work instead of an addition. Professional language and context are constantly evolving and it is important for staff to be able to keep adapting. It requires the building of learning cultures, already central to Family Safeguarding, Family Valued and No Wrong Door.

A learning and development offer that is carefully crafted enables professionals to reflect, adapt and change, and is essential for innovations to thrive. As part of this local authorities need to ensure that staff can continue to learn throughout their career and are not falling off a cliff edge after the first years in the social work profession.



**A SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEOPLE CAN THRIVE**

Social work is far from an easy profession and social workers are likely to confront challenging situations throughout their career. Whilst witnessing important, uplifting moments of genuine change in families' lives, other experiences can be triggering. Secondary trauma, the impact of being exposed to traumatic events occurring in someone else's lives, is common amongst social workers. Teams need space to recognise some of the everyday difficulties faced by professionals and create environments that allow for supportive, critical engagement, and questioning.

In light of caseload and reporting pressures, small changes can have a big impact. Transforming reporting procedures to focus on the essentials rather than descriptive detail and leading supervision spaces that create safety and trust, can lift some of the weight off professionals. A supportive work environment will inspire the best from people whilst providing them with the tools, networks, and support they need. Developing a culture of high support and high challenge has shown some excellent results in professionals' work with families across this programme. Using the same approach with professionals can ensure that they are able to learn, grow, and feel valued which is central to keeping them in their roles.



# Leadership that puts children and families at the heart of systems



**Jahaan Abdurahman** – Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Coach

*“I try to never, ever lose sight of children and young people, in terms of my conversations about impact, so I bring everything back to the reason why we exist to do the job.”*  
Assistant Director on Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme.

Leaders have a huge influence on practice and culture in their local Children’s Social Care system. A central aspect of this is to place importance on the voice and experience of children and families.

## LEADERSHIP THAT PUTS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE HEART OF SYSTEMS

In a recent [review of leadership attributes](#) on the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme (SFPC), we identified three key ways in which leaders purposely put the voices of children and families at the heart of transforming their local system:

- 1. Bringing impact to life, through sharing stories of children and families
- 2. Encouraging practitioners to make the voices of children and families a central focus in their work
- 3. Building purpose-driven partnerships focused on changing a whole system for the benefit of children and families.

### CENTERING THE STORIES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Effective leaders are skilled in storytelling. They tell and share stories in order to transform their local systems to best support local children and families. These stories, from and about children and families, do two main things. Firstly, they create a compelling case for change, where there have been failures in the system or missed opportunities which harmed children and families. Secondly, they paint a picture of a system that supports and cares for children and families in order to bring about better outcomes for them. Leaders bring - and encourage others to bring - stories into all stages of their work, ensuring that the voices of children and families are an enduring focus for everyone across the whole system.



**CULTURE AND PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE HEART**

Leaders build culture and practice that puts children and families at the heart of what they do. They ensure that decisions are made in the interest of children and families. This involves giving practitioners permission to always make the best decisions for, and with, children and families, rather than making the safest or easiest decision. Leaders model this themselves. To do this requires really listening to children and families to understand their experiences, perspective and needs. Leaders actively encourage different perspectives during the decision making process and value each individual contribution, including from those who would not usually be invited into the process, such as the children and families themselves.

Leaders enable a collaborative approach to decision making by creating an environment where practitioners feel safe and supported, through commitment to collective ownership of risk, and where challenge is welcome in order to reach the best outcome for children, young people and families.


**PARTNERSHIPS BUILT ON A SHARED COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Leaders build local partnerships based on the shared goal of positively impacting the lives of local children and families. They know that individual services can make a difference, but a cohesive local partnership is much more able to transform children’s lives because every part of the system - from health to leisure - affects them.

Leaders on the SFPC are transforming their local system in many ways; at the core of this work are the stories and voices of children and families. By telling stories, changing practice and culture, and building purpose-driven partnerships, leaders help to build a system that truly serves children and families.

To find out more about these SFPC leadership attributes, access the full report [here](#).





# What we have learned from evaluations about putting the voices of children and families at the heart of transforming local systems

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM EVALUATIONS ABOUT PUTTING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE HEART OF TRANSFORMING LOCAL SYSTEMS

### OUR RESEARCH

For each model, we interview young people and parents or carers who have experienced the new way(s) of working. The young people are of varied age and might have a child in need or child protection plan, be on the edge of or in care. Parents and carers also have a range of social care experience, some are parents and others are foster or kinship carers.


In 1:1 interviews, we encourage participants to share their experiences of working with their social worker(s), specialist or other practitioners and key elements of the interventions, including if they have seen a change in practice over time. From these interviews, we seek to answer our research questions around how well interventions are received by families, how well they meet their needs, and whether they feel the interventions changed their outcomes.

### WHAT ARE WE LEARNING AS RESEARCHERS?

We want everyone to benefit from richer learning about what works for professionals and families. Engaging children and families in the evaluation has been an ongoing challenge. We're learning all the time about how to align research needs with the realities of busy professionals in children's social care.

We understand that supporting us with data collection creates extra work for professionals who may not understand the benefits of participating in evaluation. We acknowledge that there are no immediate benefits to professionals but their support and participation contributes to wider learning about improvements to the system. We do provide a voucher to professionals and young people to thank them and acknowledge their time.

We are really keen to work with social workers and other professionals who have any ideas about how we can reach more young people, while minimising the burden on professionals! Please do get in touch if that's you!



**Ella Whelan** – Lead Researcher for the Implementation and Process Evaluation of SFPC, What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care (WWEICSC)

In 2019, the Department for Education asked WWEICSC to undertake a robust independent evaluation of the three models of social work practice (Family Safeguarding; No Wrong Door; Family Valued) that make up the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme.





WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM EVALUATIONS ABOUT PUTTING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE HEART OF TRANSFORMING LOCAL SYSTEMS

We have learnt about ways to increase engagement in our research, and make it more accessible. We have made a number of adaptations to our recruitment strategy as the evaluation(s) have progressed. For example, amending interview guides and developing graphic information sheets to make them more accessible. We also wrote biographies of our researchers to share with participants prior to the interview and offer different platforms, and flexible timing, to engage with us (Zoom, Phone, Teams etc.).

ONGOING LEARNING

For organisations implementing SFPC practice models it will be valuable to create systems of engaging young people in service development and ongoing feedback.

To facilitate effective data collection in local authorities it is beneficial to have a singular project lead whose role it is to organise and facilitate data collection and engagement.

We continue to think of other methods, or creative ways, to engage young people and families in our research. For example, following feedback from involved local authorities, we are considering presenting to Communities of Practice to introduce ourselves and our research to practitioners.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM EVALUATIONS ABOUT PUTTING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE HEART OF TRANSFORMING LOCAL SYSTEMS

THE FUTURE OF THE EVALUATION

We will continue to engage young people and families with experience of the models. We highly value their voice as it is vital for understanding the implications of both implementing and evaluating these kinds of system change models.

Given the imminent potential for large-scale reform in the children’s social care sector, it is urgent for this evaluation, and others, to continue, to actively place the voices of children and families at the heart of systems change evaluation.



Department  
for Education

The Department for Education (DfE) are overseeing and funding the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme. The DfE are working closely with each of the Innovator authorities to support them.

## Our role:

The DfE has commissioned a support partner for the Programme - a partnership between Mutual Ventures, Innovation Unit and SCIE. This support will focus on providing coaching to the local authorities leading the innovations ('the Innovators') and those adopting the innovations ('the Adopters'), technical support and a learning programme.



MV are a specialist advisory firm working exclusively in the public sector to implement national policy programmes across devolved government. MV bring expertise in areas such as:

- Strategic planning
- Organisational design
- Change management
- Financial modelling
- Programme implementation



IU are innovation specialists - supporting the design and delivery of public services innovation in the UK and internationally. They bring expertise in:

- Design of innovation
- Scaling innovation in children's services, health, mental health
- System wide change
- Leadership development
- Learning design and delivery



SCIE is an innovative, not-for-profit organisation committed to improving thinking and practice in social care. SCIE:

- Has extensive reach and engagement with the sector
- Provides learning design and delivery
- Researches, produces and shares evidence
- Supports and scales changes in leadership and practice



The Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme is being evaluated by What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care (WWEICSC). WWEICSC seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector.