

Conwy Families First Research Report



Executive summary

Families First is a new Welsh Government programme that aims to achieve better health and wellbeing, education and employment for families living in poverty. Each local authority is being asked to try new ways to enable everyone who supports families to work better together and so prevent families from developing more complex needs. A key element of the programme is support for families of children with disabilities.

1 Research methodology

There are four strands to the research undertaken to develop Conwy's Families First programme to allow us to 'triangulate' and compare the findings from the different methods.

1. Quantitative data collection: identifying vulnerable families by collecting data on vulnerable families known to the following services: Revenues and benefits; Social Services; Health; Education; Youth Justice Service and HOST (homelessness service).

Each service provided a list of parents, children, young people or families including names, dates of birth and postcodes so we were able to cross reference each list against the other; find out the numbers of families using multiple services and map the data to find concentrations of need in the county. Each service signed up to an Information Sharing Protocol which explained how the data was to be used and stored.

2. Consultation with professionals: We held two visioning days to inform the programme, one in February and one in October 2011. We also took ideas for the transition year projects and the initial Families First Action Plan from the work with the Core Aim Groups, and strategies developed by the partnership. Particularly the Play Strategy; Social Inclusion Strategy, Parenting Joint Commissioning Plan and Conwy Children and Young People's Plan 2011-14.

3. Qualitative data collection: This strand focuses on the lived experiences of vulnerable families in Conwy – their perceptions of their experiences and needs (and, in some cases, the professionals working with them). This included listening to their stories, their experiences of services, and their perspectives on what might have prevented or helped their situation (qualitative interviewing). The examples and perspectives provided in this study will bring to life the quantitative data about families in Conwy, and will help to shape future provision for them.

The study took place among 33 families and 12 professionals. The sample covered families with varying involvement from services, and with varying family circumstances, including children with disabilities. Due consideration has been given to quality and ethics, including transcribing, anonymising data, coding, and developing an analysis framework.

4. Service profiling: Investigating and mapping the services available to children, young people and families. Based on the data collected, the Families First Project Board will choose strands to be profiled, to identify duplication and gaps in service provision. For example, while the research shows a need for bereavement support services, it may be that the real need is to raise awareness about existing services or to improve coordination. If there is a need for a new project, this could be developed as a pilot with Families First Funding.

2 Findings

- There are 6,000 families in Conwy using one or more services (based on 13,300 individual records)
- 4,700 of these families use one service only, 900 use two services, 230 use three services and 100 use four or more services.
- 60% of the families are in receipt of benefits
- 97% of families using 5 or more services are in receipt of benefits
- Areas along the coast show the greatest concentration of need (particularly the wards of Tudno, Glyn and Kinmel Bay), with smaller pockets of deprivation spread throughout the rural areas.

Service areas and themes

Housing

- There are 220 families using Conwy's homelessness service, 4% of all the families.
- Homelessness was an issue for 15% of families who used five or more services.
- Housing issues were a common theme for the families interviewed, ranging from concerns about being able to afford appropriate housing, to the quality of the housing available, and the impact that this has had on the family. A number of families commented on the support and information available to them with regard to housing, and some suggested ways in which this could be improved.

Mental and emotional health

- Mental and emotional health features strongly in the interviews, ranging from parents' own needs, to the mental health of their children. A number of examples demonstrate the barriers to seeking and gaining support for mental and emotional health issues, including

lack of engagement with services, the stigma attached to seeking help, and the availability of services. The families also demonstrate the causes of mental and emotional health problems; for example, family circumstances, family breakdown, bereavement, domestic abuse, and caring for children with disabilities.

Education

- Fixed or permanent exclusion was experienced by children in 70% of families using 5 or more services and 45% of those families had one or more children in alternative education.
- Of those families using 5 or more services 39% have a child with Special Educational Needs and 30% with School Action Plus.
- Some of the families were completely satisfied with the education received by their children.
- Themes that emerged from families' experiences include school attendance and engagement with education (causes include negative experiences, family breakdown, motivation, peer influence, lack of confidence, unstable school placements, and lack of support); aspiration and overcoming stigma; and additional learning needs.

Social Services

- There are children in need (known to Social Services) in over 59% of families using 3 or more services, and 76% of families using 5 or more services. This is the services used most commonly by families after receiving benefits.
- The families interviewed have experienced varying levels of intervention or contact with **Social Services**, and had different stories to tell in terms of their experiences.
- Some of the families taking part in the study via avenues other than Social Services, give an interesting perspective on their expectations and perceptions of the service, whilst those who had more of a personal experience of the service raised the following issues: confusion around the child protection system, and the importance of continued support and intervention.

Parents' needs

- Parenting skills and support and other needs are a common theme in the study, with most of the families interviewed referring to it in one form or another.
- Although the families came from a wide variety of backgrounds, socio-economic status, and circumstances, parents generally felt that support with their parenting (formal or informal) would be beneficial.

- Families identified some issues that have prevented or encouraged parents to access formal parenting programmes (for example, stigma, lack of engagement, support to attend, and availability and accessibility). This list is reflected in the consultations carried out with professionals.
- The study also illustrates the importance of more informal parenting support, including the value of support from their extended family, support networks, and peer support.
- Parents often described their own needs interchangeably with the needs of their children, suggesting that they felt that their needs (met or unmet) as parents have an impact on the family as a whole.

Family breakdown and domestic abuse

- Domestic abuse featured in just over half of the families using 5 or more services, and in with around 700 of the families altogether on the database.
- Family breakdown and domestic abuse within relationships has been experienced by a number of those taking part in the study, with negative impacts on parents, children, and family circumstance (such as employment and financial situation, and children's emotional health and wellbeing, and education)

Money and finances

- There are around 3,200 families in Conwy in receipt of benefits or some kind, which is 60% of the families receiving one or more services and 97% of families using 5 or more services.
- The vast majority of families taking part in the interviews spoke about **money and finances**, the general theme being that they didn't have enough to provide fully for their families for various reasons and in various contexts.
- The majority of the families were in receipt of some kind of benefits, although this does not necessarily reflect the number of parents who were in employment (for example, parents may be in paid work but still receive disability living allowance).
- The study provides an interesting insight into the impact of poverty on families (for example, on their health and wellbeing, and housing). A number of the families shared their experiences of the systems that are in place to support them financially, including the importance of information and advice, and describing problems around "systems".

Employment

- The unemployment rate (Claimant count) in Conwy County Borough for November 2011 was 4.0%. The rate has remained above 3.5% for three years.

- This featured in the vast majority of the family interviews. In particular, families provided an interesting insight into the influencing factors on their employment, whether chosen or involuntary (for example, lack of confidence, alcohol dependency, finding a job, rurality and access, home circumstances, lack of flexibility, and lack of appropriate childcare). In addition, parents of children with disabilities identify the employment issues that they face.

Misuse of drugs and alcohol

- Substance misuse was an issue for 5% of the families on the database and 33% of those using five or more services.
- In the interviews families tended to describe the trigger or circumstances surrounding the issue. For example, drink as a way of blocking out difficult circumstances such as a partner leaving, and children being put into care; drug dependency following a bereavement; peer influence; and boredom / lack of provision for young people.

Information

- A recurring theme throughout the study has been the lack of **information** provided/available to families, and the lack of **communication between services and agencies**.
- Parents described how they acquired information through friends, family, and neighbours, rather than through professionals, or how they received information through professionals more by accident than by design.
- They felt that there should be a better system in place for where information comes from, and expressed frustration with the timeliness of information, and the need for communication and cooperation between services. Generally, parents felt that there should be one clear source of information available to them.
- This concern was also reflected at the visioning days held with professionals, such as this comment from the day in February “A lot of good work going on including specialist services and skills sets but there is a need to co-ordinate it better to increase information about it”

Children with disabilities

- There are around 700 families with a child with special educational needs on the database. This is 7% of all families and 45% of families who use 5 or more services
- A high proportion of families who took part in the study had children with disabilities, including children with physical disabilities and learning disabilities. Despite the wide range of circumstances described by these families, there were some clear common

themes: experiences of diagnosis and provision; respite; impact on money, finances and employment; impact on siblings; parents' fears; and stigma (experienced both internally and externally) associated with disability.

Concepts: Families' reasoning about their experiences

A number of interesting concepts have arisen from the study, which don't necessarily fit into one service area. These are overarching concepts which provide some useful insights into questions such as "why" and "how".

- Crisis or turning points / triggers (and intervention/prevention) is an interesting concept emerging from the study. A number of families taking part in this study have identified or reflected upon a turning or trigger point in their circumstances which has either changed things for the worse or for the better. These provide a useful insight into the role and importance of intervention and prevention. Crisis and trigger points include family breakdown, bereavement, domestic abuse, losing employment, losing accommodation, change in schooling situation, and diagnosis.
- The way that the families told their stories and the language that they used gives an interesting insight into their attitudes, and their coping strategies or mechanisms. Discourse analysis has provided a brief look at how different families see their situations, how they cope with them, and the varying levels of resilience. These included coping strategies such as willingness to ask for help, acceptance, remaining positive, taking one step at a time, gratitude, identity, reflection and hindsight, humour, fight/battle, and being realistic but hopeful.
- Parents taking part in the study often referred to their own childhood experiences, and how this has contributed to or influenced their situation in some way. This provides an interesting insight into the importance of breaking unhelpful cycles and patterns within families from one generation to another. Examples used in the study are around domestic abuse, being in care, and unstable / complex family circumstances.
- Families would often provide an evaluation of who or what is responsible for a situation (consciously or unconsciously) whilst telling their stories. They would try to make sense of why a situation has occurred, and where to attribute blame. While some families blamed external factors, others could see their own contribution and mistakes. Some families would take it upon themselves to solve a problem, even if it hadn't necessarily been of their own making, whilst others would feel that the responsibility lies completely with the services working with them. For example, peer influence, things to do, lack of suitable school placements, heavy case loads, lack of continued support, not asking for help, home circumstances, problems with 'systems' and lack of intervention/prevention prior to point of crisis.

- A common concept emerging from the study, “engagement with services” gives an important insight into the success or failure of interventions and provisions. Families often described their own, or their children’s attitude towards services, positive or negative, and how this impacted on their situation. Establishing a good relationship with professionals was often seen as a key factor.
- The majority of the families taking part in the study referred to their support networks (or lack of). References include family and friends, as well as support from services, community groups, or informal groups. These were seen in the context of their ability to cope with their situation. Many described the loneliness and isolation they felt as a result.

3 Next steps

The data collected has been used to inform the overall focus of Conwy’s Families First Action Plan and detailed information will be used to inform the development of Families First funded projects including Team Around the Family. The themes will also be used to focus future Children and Young People’s Partnership project development, research and service profiling. The findings will be shared with partners and other services and will provide an ongoing resource for them. The data around vulnerable families can be refreshed periodically to provide up-to-date information about local need and the qualitative research methodology we have developed can be adapted for further in-depth research into specific themes.