

Original Paper

Between Early Prevention and Statutory Intervention: Meeting the Needs for Targeted Support for Children and Families

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Abstract

The subject is services for vulnerable children aged up to fourteen years and their families in the Winchester area of southern England. The services comprise three group-work based programmes, each lasting for twelve months. Their review comprised a two stage study designed to scope future objectives for a host charity in its development alongside faith agencies. The first stage used a Delphi process to define the principal priorities of trustees. These were then rated and applied to a follow up client satisfaction survey across the three programmes for 40 families. The overall 55% rate indicated a positive response from service users with a multi-dimensional approach to resilience building strongly endorsed. However, the analysis also scoped three areas for improvement. Findings indicated first, that the significance of help with preparation for work and education is understated by trustees less familiar with employment shortfalls; secondly that family focused services should recognize the particular needs of fathers and not be slanted towards mothers and their children; and thirdly, decisions on social enterprise status must take into account potential disconnects between the values of service recipients and those of different socio-economic means in governance roles. These findings are relevant to comparable voluntary sector agencies.

Keywords

vulnerability, early prevention, children, governance, charity, social enterprise, targeted support

1. Introduction

Friends of the family are a long standing local charity providing a programme of three group-work services to support vulnerable families in the Winchester area of southern England. It operates from premises adapted specifically for its purposes by the Quakers and Salvation Army. It has the backing of the local multi-denominational churches together movement which includes all the main Christian worship venues in the area. The charity focuses on children up to the age of fourteen, where there are significant risks of domestic breakdown and/or child protection procedures, and the consequent use of legal powers by the local authority social services department (e.g., formal supervision or care orders). Its groups are for a total membership of up to 40 families, with participation in each of the programmes limited to twelve months. The invitation to undertake an evaluation of the charity's services came from its Chair, in advance of a period when the UK National Lottery and associated external funding sources are due for renewal. The evaluation was undertaken over a one-year period in 2016-2017, with this period including the initial dissemination of a draft report to trustees.

If, on the one hand, the need for continued commissioning was a key practical imperative for the service evaluation, then there were also, on the other, more conceptual forces that were influential in the request for validation through external research. These were expressed through two central government policies. The first of these, dating from WHO inspired public health policy developments, promotes the role of private and voluntary organizations in welfare and wellbeing services through the business management models of new social enterprises (Marmot, 2010). The second, in a period of restricted and restrictive public expenditure, looks to confine the roles and responsibilities of local councils in children's services to that of overall preventive public health strategy and urgent casework. A series of studies indicate that the latter has become increasingly based on statutory criteria and safeguarding risk assessments (Allen, 2011; National Children's Bureau & Children's Society, 2016; Bates, 2017). Together these two policies have been designed to underpin post-Millennium "modernizing" concepts of a more participative democracy and a broader based stakeholder society (Denham, 2001; Henderson et al., 2004; Public Health England, 2015).

As a result of the first of these policy drivers there has been a rapid expansion in what is termed "missional social action" by churches (Diocese of Winchester, 2016). Launchpad, for example, as the agency established and hosted by the Winchester Anglican diocese, aims to provide up to 60 per cent of the county of Hampshire's under 5's day care from premises in its parishes by 2020. This follows in the footsteps of a similar initiative for older people's befriending service which has seen over 120 local Good Neighbour schemes come under the auspices of the diocese (Ralph, 2015). The planned growth in faith based social enterprise corresponds to the reduction in State run children's services arising from the second policy driver (Faith Action, 2014). This trend was well illustrated during the 2015-2016 period when 43 of the Hampshire County Council's 54 Children's Sure Start Centres—covering a

population of 1.8 million—were closed (BBC News, 2017; Smith et al., 2018).

The group-work undertaken by the trained staff counsellors and sessional volunteers of Friends of the Family are specifically targeted at support for fathers; the befriending of children aged between five and thirteen years with their carers; and the maintenance and rehabilitation of families with children under five. Paternal support includes individual counselling sessions for fathers, some of whom are in custody. The befriending service includes named attachments by selected and trained volunteer visitors who are matched to particular homesteads. The under 5's services includes playgroup and pre-school nursery based training sessions. While self-referrals are assessed and accepted most referrals do come from local NHS and Social Services agencies. "Risk of breakdown" is defined to include traumatic events, poverty, social exclusion and isolation, as well as severe domestic relationship difficulties: all of which can be linked to child protection issues. The last items in this are the main reason for referral.

Purpose

In seeking to gain a better understanding of the difference its support services make the trustees of Friends of the Family wanted to ensure that there was an effective alignment between the charity's stated priorities, its intentions and the overall purpose of improving children's experiences of family life. These were encapsulated in our pyramid model set out below in Figure 1.

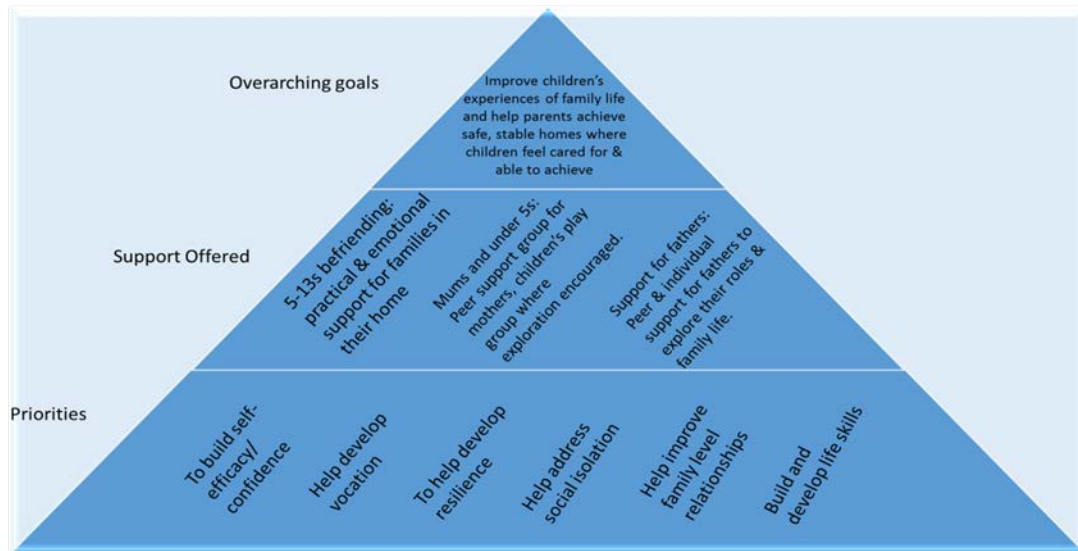


Figure 1. Organisational Priorities and Delivery

The initial discussion with the charity's Chair highlighted her concern that there should be a productive relationship between the actual experiences the charity's clients and the aspirations of its trustees. This desire to understand both these perspectives helped us define and agree the following set of objectives

for the study, as follows:

- 1) To gain an enhanced understanding of the overall performance of the organisation.
- 2) To assess how funding translates into the support services of children and their families.
- 3) Identify areas of service delivery that could be strengthened or improved.

The objectives reflect the twin emphasis on getting right both service delivery and governance arrangements.

2. Method

This dual emphasis was also reflected in the methods of data capture and analysis. Accordingly, in the first stage a three part Delphi style process was designed to enable trustees to review and refine the corporate priorities. In stage two the results of this were then used to shape a client satisfaction survey employing a modified Likert format (Bryman, 2014). The questions corresponded to the individual service delivery items identified by trustees as significant in their Delphi deliberations. Questions were paired on a “before and after” basis to ensure that any changes in client experience over the pre- and post-entry time periods could be identified. The Likert questionnaire is set out in Table 1 below. After training from one of the researchers the survey was administered by trustees themselves, following an introductory letter from the Chair. This guaranteed anonymity and all responses were subject to the charity’s data security procedures. Participation in the project was voluntary for both clients and trustees. The questionnaire contains an open section for any form of comment.

Please score each of the following statements on a scale of 1-5. A score of 1 denotes “Strongly Disagree” and a score of 5 “Strongly Agree”:

Table 1. Client Satisfaction Questionnaire

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Or N/A	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- 1) Before working with Friends of the Family I felt confident in sharing my views with professionals (teachers, social workers, health care professionals, etc.).
- 2) Working with Friends of the Family has helped me feel confident in sharing my views with professionals (teachers, social workers, health care professionals, etc.).
- 3) Working with Friends of the Family has helped me feel confident in sharing my views with my wider family.
- 4) Before working with Friends of the Family I felt confident in the decisions I made in regards to parenting.

- 5) Working with Friends of the Family has helped build my confidence in the decisions I make in regards to parenting.
- 6) Friends of the Family have helped me build a support network with people who share similar experiences.
- 7) I feel that my views and experiences are valued by Friends of the Family.
- 8) Friends of the Family have helped/are helping me develop some goals in relation to employment/education/training.
- 9) I feel that I have something to offer other people who may have similar experiences to mine/with on-going support through Friends of the Family I feel that I will have something to offer people who may have similar experiences.
- 10) I feel that I have learned/am learning new skills through being involved with Friends of the Family.
- 11) My involvement with Friends of the Family has helped me feel able to manage my own day-to-day challenges (work, meetings, sustaining household routines, attending appointments).
- 12) Before my involvement with Friends of the Family I felt able to manage my own day-to-day challenges (work, meetings, maintaining household routines, attending appointments).
- 13) I belong to other social networks outside of Friends of the Family.
- 14) Before my involvement with Friends of the Family I felt involved in the other social networks.
- 15) Before my involvement with Friends of the Family I felt overwhelmed in creating and maintaining routines for my family (school, homework, appointments).
- 16) Friends of the Family has helped me feel able to create and maintain routines for my family (school, homework, appointments).
- 17) Friends of the Family have helped me recognize the skills and abilities that I have.
- 18) I would recommend Friends of the Family to others.

3. Results

Ten trustees took part in the Delphi process. For this purpose they were regarded as the expert data sources, by dint of their positions in the governance structure, with each having nominated specialist roles based on their past experience and interests in the children's services sector. Three meetings took place with the researchers as joint facilitators to ensure consistency of approach. The first was a sub-group exercise to map, through consensus, the key goals of the charity. To respond to the Chair's constitutional mandate for Friends of the Family, as a charity distinctive in its capacity to tailor inputs to particular individual circumstances, this exercise employed the thematic of personalization as its overall framework. The result was the clustering of aims by trustees around the three headings of Resilience, Confidence and Vocation, with four items in each identified and agreed across the trustee sub groups.

The second meeting was a plenary session in which participants were asked in groups a question requiring them to prioritize in order the specific individual goals identified at the first stage. The results were confirmation of the groupings in the threefold classification with some revised wording; and a weighting scale given to each of the three clusters by majority voting, using a graduated 0-1 scale. An updated personalization agenda of priority items from this exercise was defined as now follows. The principal components were, in order of priority: family relationships, inclusion/isolation, life skills, occupational equipping and calling, survival skills/resilience, and self-esteem/social confidence.

This list of items in the trustees' weighted agenda was then applied in the researchers' design of the Likert scale in Table 1. This was internally tested, revised at the trial stage in discussion with trustee representatives, and finally signed off by the charity chair. As the final phase of validation in the Delphi process, prior to dissemination of findings, the trustees were asked to consider the relationship—the degree of alignment—between the publicly stated aims of the charity and the agenda identified in the first two parts of the process.

The survey response rate was 55%. The 22 respondents were spread quite evenly across the three group-work interventions, with a range from 6 to 10 between the under 5's and befriending programmes. Responses were overwhelmingly positive with seven items achieving positive satisfaction scores of over 75%. Summaries of these are set out in below.

- 82% of the participants in the survey felt that their involvement with Friends of the Family has helped them to feel confident in sharing their views with professionals (item 5).
- 77% of participants think that their involvement with Friends of the Family has helped them build confidence in making parenting decisions (item 8).
- 77% think that Friends of the Family has helped them to build a support base with people who share the same or similar experiences (item 9).
- 91% of the participants in the survey feel that their views are valued by Friends of the Family (item 10).
- 82% feel that they have something to offer, or with ongoing support through Friends of the Family will have something to offer other people who have similar experiences to them (item 12).
- 77% feel that involvement with Friends of the Family has helped them to be able to manage day to day challenges (item 14).
- 77% said that Friend of the Families has helped them to recognize the skills and abilities that they have (item 20).

These positive findings were reinforced by the written comments received of which the following are illustrative.

“Friends of the Family have given me emotional support throughout, providing counselling and helping me to access things when I had no money. I have made good and lasting friendships and my daughter

loves the company of other children. Honestly I would have been lost without this group.”

“After having counselling I am now a recovering alcoholic. I have tackled the abuse I suffered as a child and it no longer consumes me. I am able to function as a member of society and be comfortable with who I am”.

“Helping us to become the fathers we needed as children is the main point that I have learned through the wonderful support offered”.

100% of the respondents agreed they would recommend Friends of the Family to others. 77% stated they “strongly agreed” with this. Such a high satisfaction rate should clearly assist in future funding applications.

4. Discussion

The use of weighted priorities by the trustees, however, allowed them to consider more nuanced findings than just this easy conclusion of high client satisfaction. Their own Delphi exercise had afforded “Vocation” the lowest score at 0.5 as a priority, with “Resilience” highest at 1.0 (and “Confidence” midway between). Survey respondents had also scored the vocational items lowest, but as an area of unmet need. Overall the mean score of below 4.0—demonstrating positive agreement—on the items relating to work, schedules, appointments, schooling and homework (Items 11, 15 and 18) appeared to indicate that clients did not view Friends of the Family as a charity which concentrated on practical support in respect of employment and training. The mean score for female correspondents on the cluster of relevant questions was 3.38 and 3.88 for men. The scores suggested to trustees that they should carefully consider if their limited focus on vocational issues may have contributed to some service delivery shortfalls.

The scores in the areas of Resilience and Confidence were more positive. On all items covering encounters with professionals, daily challenges and children’s routines, parenting decisions and building social networks (Items 4, 5, 14, 15, 18, 19, respectively), there were important “before and after” advances recorded. For example, with a mean of 3.0 for “Agreement” overall average scores increased from 3.6 to 4.2 for the ability to deal with professionals; from 3.4 to 4.0 for competence in parental decision making; and from 3.0 to 3.4 for social group membership. Interestingly, on all the relevant items the male respondents (N: 11) scored the services received higher. Similar studies have also found that marginalized fathers appreciate supportive interventions more, seemingly because there are fewer available to them (Quinton, 2004; Clapton, 2009).

The enhanced scores by service users would seem to align with trustees’ own priorities and with their perspective on what constitutes the sources of Confidence and Resilience. The feedback, for example, provided encouragement to them in terms of maintaining the charity’s innovative approach to pre-release counselling support for fathers in custody. Indeed it suggested more such services would be

welcome, with an emphasis on the recruitment of more male volunteers being a possible way forward. A final meeting was then held with the trustees with the results of the survey, leading to the recommendations for practice described below, and affirmation of the organizational model set out in Figure 1 above. This meeting was convened by the Chair of the charity.

The research undertaken confirmed the positive impact in socio-emotional terms of the services provided by Friends of the Family in Winchester. It identified some shortfalls in terms of unmet needs for practical assistance in relation to employment and training which require enhanced external linkages for the charity. This was especially apparent for male clients, who would appreciate more interventions tailored to their needs. The particular Christian charity venues for Friends of the Family were found to offer secure and sympathetic surroundings for social skills and personal identity development; but the relatively closed environments, with some features akin to a sanctuary, could have also contributed to a lack of connectivity with outside community agencies.

Accordingly, it was recommended, that over time the charity carefully consider its future organizational status options, such as those of a community oriented or interested company, with its client families, to help ensure that its values continue to be reflected in its collaborative governance arrangements. Specifically the Chair recognized the requirement to ensure that selected trustees—including past service users—are equipped to fully recognize the full range of needs presented by those referred to Friends of the Family, and that agency partnerships are extended to provide accessible gateways to appropriate and restorative vocational opportunities. These linkages could valuably include charities which both operate alongside or combine with faith based social enterprises that possess wider remits, including employment and training opportunities. The general need to enhance integration between the rapidly growing volume and scale of wellbeing practices was acknowledged.

For future research this project points to the need to address the question of which modes of organizational development most enhance services for children and teenagers in States where social policies are increasingly founded on relationships with and between a diversity of values based agencies. This research question is most pertinent where boundaries between central governments and civil society are shifting significantly.

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