

Top Tips for the Voluntary Sector in Establishing Support for Families with Complex Needs



Key Messages from Improving Futures

In 2011 BIG Lottery Fund launched the £26m Improving Futures programme, which aims to test different approaches to improve outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs. The programme is funding 26 local projects across the UK, run by third sector organisations in partnership with statutory services; to develop innovative models of support for families facing difficult circumstances where the eldest child is aged 5 – 10.

A consortium led by Ecorys UK and including Family Lives, Ipsos MORI and the University of Nottingham was commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund to evaluate the programme. The first evaluation report has been published and highlights some 'top tips' for voluntary organisations establishing support for families with complex needs:

Working in Partnership

1. Ensure there is buy-in at both the strategic and operational level.

At a strategic level, it is helpful to have a steering committee or board consisting of senior local leaders that meets regularly. At an operational level, it is helpful to have regular multi-agency meetings with service managers from partner agencies.

2. Define roles and responsibilities.

Being clear about the role and responsibilities of different partners is crucial, particularly in respect of avoiding duplication or overlap with existing provision. Projects have often been more successful where there is a clear case for adding value to statutory provision.

3. Attend and deliver joint training.

Joint training, attended by staff drawn from across different organisations, is a useful mechanism for shared learning. This can also improve partnership working as it breaks down sector barriers, particularly between the voluntary sector and public services.

Generating Referrals

4. Invest in marketing your project to local services.

Generating referrals and building trust amongst partners can take a significant amount of time. It is important for projects to identify and fully brief partners on the remit of the project, the eligibility criteria and the specific process for making referrals.

Attending partners' team meetings can be particularly effective. Being persistent and identifying a key link member of staff in the partner agency can also help.

5. Provide a single point of contact to partners.

This is the point of contact for whom to refer families to. This simplifies the process and enables the partner to informally discuss the referral first before making a formal referral.

6. Take a two-pronged approach of working with schools and community based organisations.

Working closely with schools can be a very effective referral route, as they have an excellent understanding of local families. However, this can exclude those families who are not engaged with the school. Working closely with community-based organisations can be an effective approach for engaging the 'harder to reach' families.

Assessing and Planning Support

7. Stage assessments over a number of visits.

This allows project staff to focus on building relationships with families, but also avoids creating a tool/questionnaire-based introduction to the programme, which can feel like a more formal social care intervention.

8. Be flexible in when support is delivered.

Families don't just need support 9am-5pm Monday-Friday. Working outside normal hours can provide support to families when they need it.

9. Provide practical support to families.

There are often immediate housing and finance-related issues that need resolving before any further work can be done on more deep rooted or acute issues. This can include clearing out dirty or cluttered homes, supporting a family to apply for more appropriate accommodation and ensuring the correct benefits are being claimed.

Have you set up a project supporting families with complex needs? Do you have any top tips of your own? Tweet your top tips using the hashtag #bigfuturestoptips

The full report can be read here:

www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/research/children-and-young-people/learning-from-improving-futures