

Collaborative projects on youth crime

Sept 08 – March 09

Essex County Council – Case Study

1. Where the project started

The Youth Offending Team in Essex embarked on the Innovation Catalyst project as a component of other work they were undertaking to create the culture of a learning organisation – where frontline staff become engaged in continuous service improvement.

Within this broader context, the team saw the Catalyst as an opportunity to focus on exploring how to better support the most complex and challenging families with children in the youth justice system. The hope is that by improving the capacity of staff to engage with the most challenging families from the beginning of a YOS order through to the end, that the outcomes for young people will be improved (a decrease in repeat offending and returns to custody) and the experiences of staff will also improve (an increase in capacity, confidence and satisfaction).

So, the team wanted to explore the following question:

How can we empower staff to work more effectively with the most complex families in the Youth Justice System?

The team estimated that 2-3% of all families dealt with by the Youth Offending Service fall into this ‘complex’ category and they understood the families to be characterised by:

- Lots of children (often at least 4)
- ‘Messy’ family relationships
- Noisy and chaotic households
- Service fatigue – ‘here we go again’

They recognised early on some of the key issues around staff training, resources and time that were exacerbated when working with these families and needed further exploration.

The Essex context

- Third largest local authority in the country, with population of 1.3 million of which 10.2% are aged 10 – 17
- However, the YOS is the ninth lowest funded YOS in the country
- Reported crime levels are 40.1 per 1,000 lower than the national average of 53
- Complex partnership framework to navigate with 5 PCTs, two foundation NHS Trusts delivering CAMHs services and two unitary authorities which have common partners to the YOS including Police and Probation
- Recent inspection showed one of the main strengths to be the commitment of staff and their confidence in their managers

2. Defining success

The aim of the project was to fully explore the issues associated with working with the most complex families and to use this information to design more innovative mechanisms to give YOT staff the confidence and key skills to engage with the families more effectively, and to do so in partnership with other agencies.

If successful, it should contribute to lower re-offending rates and fewer children being sent to custody in the first place.

4. Researching the key issues

Detailed research was carried out to provide the Catalyst project team in Essex with a clearer and greater understanding of the issues they were trying to tackle. The research focused on the following questions:

- What are the experiences of staff in Essex in engaging with the most challenging families?
- What strategies can be employed to improve the co-operation between staff and families?
- Which aspects of the families' interaction with their children can be bolstered by a stronger staff involvement?
- What lessons can be learned from other localities and countries about enabling frontline staff to work effectively with the most challenging families?

It involved desk-based research, plus focus groups and interviews with staff to understand their experiences.

The desk based research focused on examples of practitioners working innovatively with the most challenging families in a number of different sectors. These examples showed that staff themselves are often the key to success, alongside the structures which are in place to support their interactions with young people, their families and partners both in statutory and non-statutory bodies.

A workshop with staff from the YOS and other practitioners, alongside case reviews of five of the most complex families from different geographical areas, highlighted a number of common themes. Staff felt the main challenges they faced included:

- Inconsistent access to often limited resources
- Too much time spent on paperwork
- Travel and meetings, rather than direct engagement with families
- A lack of training on *how* to engage.

Overall, it was felt that a focus on process, and not practice, both through induction, training and supervision, was impeding staff's ability to work effectively with complex families.

5. Moving from research to design

Having started the Innovation Catalyst project late due to a Joint Area Review (JAR), the team in Essex are now moving into the project design phase. In the next month or so, they will be:

- Holding focus groups with staff from partner agencies in the localities
- Taking findings to commissioning groups within Essex leading on workforce development and securing support to influence investment and priorities