

Connecting Families: How improved information sharing is helping to turn around troubled families in Bath and North East Somerset

"In the space of less than a year we have seen changes in how we work. We are all working more closely together, thinking differently and as an organisation - becoming more flexible in responding to new opportunities. We are proud of what we have all achieved together as One Council - doing it our way." B&NES Council Leader and Chief Executive

The Connecting Families service at Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Council shares information with its colleagues and partners to help turn around the lives of families in need.

Part of the Government's Troubled Families initiative, the programme was established in 2013 and has worked with over 300 local families, helping them to tackle these problems together, through intensive, flexible and personalised packages of support.

Through sharing information appropriately, the Connecting Families service and its partners can understand the bigger picture of the problems they face and help to bring about lasting change.

"I have found [the Connecting Families programme] very useful - in the past I have told people stuff but they didn't write it down then it gets forgotten or not done, with my keyworker they got everything in the profile/action plan so it won't get missed."
Parent

Key points

- The service's guiding principle of building close relationships with family members and partners has been crucial to successful information sharing.
- A changing organisational culture, where everyone is encouraged to 'Think Family', has allowed staff and agencies to share information about families appropriately and proactively.
- Strong leadership from the B&NES Chief Executive, leader and the Connecting Families service manager is supporting services to share information and 'think big' to solve complex problems.

Introduction

Information sharing plays a vital role in connecting services together that provide packages of support to families in need. Families may be involved in criminal activity, with children missing education, at risk from financial exclusion, or health problems. Quite often, they are experiencing all these problems at once. By sharing different pieces of information held by separate agencies, and breaking down the cultural barriers that prevent services working together, services can build a more complete picture of the multiple problems families face every day.

“It’s great to have Connecting Families integrated with Social Care. These are new ways of working and help build the relationships.”
Connecting Families partner

The Connecting Families team

The Connecting Families ‘core team’ consists of eight key workers, led by two team leaders and a business analyst manager. The service manager is responsible for ensuring that staff are well trained and supported, and has created an environment that enables information to be shared easily between the core team and the wider partnership supporting the programme. Sharing of information is vital if services are to change how they work with families experiencing multiple problems – both to identify duplication of services but also to understand more fully what is happening with the families.

At the outset of the support process the Connecting Families team obtains consent from the whole family to share their information with partner agencies. For the key-worker to be able to gain a family’s trust at the beginning of the support, understand the bigger picture of the problems they face, and provide practical and caring interventions that helps them turn their lives around. This ensures support is provided when and where it is needed, without the need to repeat issues over and over to a variety of agencies.

The service works with a wide range of partners, in a multi-agency arrangement known as the ‘matrix team’. Services that are represented include: children’s health and psychology services, children missing in education service, 11 – 19 preventative service and to age 25 for those with Special Education Needs or Disability (SEND) , safeguarding teams, Police, Domestic violence services and voluntary sector partners including the Southside Family Project, Bath Area Play Project (BAPP) and Wansdyke Play Association (WPA).

Key partners have come together to form a multi-agency operational board. The board meets regularly to oversee the work of the teams. The board oversees progress on information sharing support and identify families eligible for the expanded phase of the programme.

The operational board meetings are very well attended, and provide a regular forum to discuss the issues preventing them from sharing information, such as health outcomes – an integral element of the expanded phase of the programme. Partners are now looking at improving information sharing further by integrating these discussions into similar governance arrangements for B&NES’ early help strategy group.

How successful information sharing happened

Information sharing didn't automatically happen as soon as the Troubled Families programme was launched. When the service manager Paula Bromley came into post in January 2013, she identified several information sharing challenges that the service faced. Initially the team encountered a lack of trust amongst key partners, as well as a lack of understanding of the purpose of information sharing to support families with complex problems.

The resistance to sharing information stemmed from a lack of strong local leadership on this agenda, meaning that the vision for helping these families to turn their lives around was not fully explained or understood by all partners involved.

As a result, the service manager remembers having to...

"win hearts and minds in order to focus partners' on the shared outcomes we wanted to achieve".

Paula Bromley, Connecting Families service manager

After a period of hesitance from some services in the partnership, and an early unwillingness to share information, she found that doors were being opened to her service both within the council and to their partner agencies.

Eventually the Connecting Families team was able to break down long-standing barriers, build robust relationships with their partners and develop a common aim of working together to transform families' lives. Paula reflects that the personal support of the new Chief Executive, who publically championed the service at high-profile partnership events,

made all the difference at this stage in their journey. Partner agencies report that a key step in overcoming these information sharing challenges has been the integration of other services with the Connecting Families team.

The role of business analysis and information sharing

The business analyst manager, Kate Townsend, plays a vital role in the Connecting Families service, along with the two team leaders, Tracey Bidgood and Debbie Greenough. They work together to co-ordinate the key-workers' caseloads and are the link between the delivery of support to the families with the evaluation and monitoring function required to measure progress. They work together to report this to the Troubled Families Unit in the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

The team receives information about families that may be eligible for support from matrix partners. The team are keen for the service to be less reliant on this stream of referrals as the programme enters its expanded phase. More recently, Kate has compiled a list of families known to services across B&NES which is relevant to the expanded criteria for support under the second phase of the national programme. (This includes children and families with a range of health problems.) Not only does this list constantly need to be analysed and families prioritised according to need; a greater challenge is that the methods used to share the data are often inconsistent and the way in which the data are formatted can make this information unreliable.

Troubled families phase two and the impact of information sharing

Phase two of the national programme brings a new set of complex and challenging service delivery barriers for the Connecting Families team. The service is paid by results: Paula and the team have built strong relationships with education and welfare teams to evidence that their interventions have supported families to turn their lives around (e.g. through reductions in school exclusion rates or reductions in benefit claims). Now they must encourage agencies with which they may not have worked previously to share information about a much wider range of 'soft' outcomes, such as families avoiding financial exclusion or overcoming mental health issues.

The extended phase of the programme represents a significant step up in the scale and scope of the service, but Paula and the team are confident that the team can rise to new challenges. For example, the team are working closely with colleagues in Avon & Somerset Police to share information about parents and children involved in crime or antisocial behaviour. Having identified an issue of capacity (the Police has asked the partnership to fund a data officer to collate and clean this data before sharing it with the team). The team have offered to support this work to ensure that this information was shared and used effectively.

Information sharing and the extended welfare support service

B&NES is also developing an enhanced version of its existing welfare support service, in order to help more people back to work. From spring 2015, workers from the welfare support team have been seconded to the Connecting Families service for a trial period of six months. The team interviews and assess people applying for debt advice or food vouchers and works closely with partners to help them find employment and stay in work.

The Centre has been supporting staff to explore the benefits of the new approach and help them to information share appropriately. At a recent workshop, the welfare support team used tools designed by the Centre to develop a 'Think Family – Think Work' ethos for the service that enables claimants' information to be shared appropriately.

Changes and next steps for information sharing

Changing organisational culture

A supported and positive information sharing environment, coupled with well-developed policies and processes, allows staff and agencies to share information appropriately and proactively. B&NES' Connecting Families team is empowering its workforce to share information proactively and appropriately to meet the challenges it faces in phase two of the Troubled Families programme.

"In this economic climate with reducing resources it is imperative that all agencies work together to ensure resources are focused where there is the greatest need, which will eliminate duplication and waste. The Connecting Families initiative is exactly what we need to join together for the benefit of all our communities."

Norman Pascal, Chief Inspector, Avon & Somerset Police

Strong local leadership

Places can go further and faster on their information sharing journey by developing strong leadership and taking time to building important relationships with partners. B&NES has found that through senior officers publically championing Connecting Families, and committing to greater partnership working, important information can be shared quickly between family support agencies.

“We are still having the same discussions [about information sharing] but at the same time the conversation has moved on. It’s all about developing relationships – you can’t slot IS neatly into your project management process.”
(Paula Bromley, Service Manager)

Empowered workforce

Local places need to develop a connected workforce that is empowered to ‘think big’ to meet current and future challenges presented by families with complex needs. Adopting a ‘Think Family’ approach, the Connecting Families team has developed a compelling narrative for change that encourages staff in other services, such as the Welfare Support team, to see how improved sharing information helps families turn their lives around.

Next steps for continued information sharing

The team are continuing to build relationships and develop the capacity to gather and report consistently on families’ information. This will be critical to the Connecting Families programme as they enter phase two of the Troubled Families programme. They will need to continue to foster trust through persistent and practical support to families, so that they can get consent where needed to share information.

The Connecting Families team already have a strong track record of sharing information in order to support families to turn their lives around. The Centre will continue to work with B&NES to help the Connecting Families service overcome further identified barriers to information sharing in the expanded phase of its operation.

The service has identified various partners that it will need to engage more pro-actively to share information about families with these needs, including the police, health services and mental health agencies. The Centre will continue to support the service manager and staff to develop relationships with new partners, as well as encouraging a joined-up ‘Think Family’ approach to working with other teams.

The Centre has facilitated an information sharing workshop for partners and providers at a ‘Think Family’ conference hosted by the Connecting Families team. This was an opportunity to explore the challenges local places face in continuing to use and share information effectively to support families. The workshop was designed to help practitioners develop a holistic approach to sharing information across services.

Over the summer, the Centre will support Connecting Families and customer services staff to review progress in piloting the enhanced welfare support service. The centre will also help managers to establish the benefits of this approach in order to start sharing information about claimants with a wider partnership of advice and guidance services.