

# The ‘Think Family’ conference in Bath and North East Somerset: Information sharing workshop findings

## Introduction

Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Council’s Connecting Families programme works with families to understand and tackle problems through intensive, flexible and personalised packages of support. As part of the Government’s Troubled Families initiative, the programme was established in 2013 and has so far worked with over 300 local families.

The service works with a variety of partners, including statutory children’s services and voluntary sector providers. The service delivers interventions and shares a range of relevant family information with partner agencies to support families to develop, thrive and achieve.

## Key points highlighted at the conference

- Strong local leadership from managers across local services is key to enabling staff and teams to share information with confidence

“Permission for information sharing and raising awareness of supporting information sharing – change the culture.”

*Delegate*

- It is important that all services working within a multi-agency partnership are treated equally enabling more open and transparent information sharing exchanges

“Leaders should endorse information sharing and give commitment to support staff to do this.”

*Delegate*

- Multi-Agency organisational training and development is crucial to ensure that professionals working across children’s services understand why, how and what relevant information they can share to support service delivery

“Information sharing is too protected sometimes. Teams don’t feel they can even say whether they have worked with a family even though a referral was made. We need more education and training on how to share information.”

*Delegate*

## **Understanding the information sharing challenges**

As part of the Centre's on-going information sharing (IS) support, the Connecting Families team invited our team to attend a conference for multi-agency practitioners and to host a workshop. The purpose of the conference was to encourage council staff, schools and partner agencies to continue to work together in order to look at families' problems holistically and share information that will help turn their lives around. Professionals attending included school and early years' staff, parent support advisors, children's services commissioners, social care workers, youth support workers and health practitioners.

The conference which was entitled "*Think Family*" showcased the different ways in which multi-agency working supported by strong information sharing is helping to transform the lives of families locally. The overall aim was to celebrate and further strengthen the relationships which are growing between agencies and bring other partners on-board.

The Centre's information sharing workshop provided an environment for delegates to focus on the various cultural aspects and barriers of information sharing they were experiencing. This was an opportunity to learn more about developing their current partnership approaches in order to draw out information sharing barriers and enablers. Using good practice examples and stories of success from our work and from delegates' own experiences, they were encouraged to recognise barriers and begin to develop shared solutions.

The objectives of the workshop were to enable delegates to:

- Recognise and explore the cultural challenges of using and sharing multi-agency information effectively to support families;
- Consider best practice examples of how information sharing has improved multi-agency outcomes when working with families;
- Develop local solutions to identified barriers;
- To assess whether any barriers were driven by national policy, for the Centre to reflect to key government departments working across children's policy to help support the information sharing agenda across all children's services.

## **Information sharing workshop findings**

During the workshop, three round-table discussions were facilitated by Jovian Smalley, one of the Centre's Engagement Managers working in B&NES and Joanna Huxton, the Centre's National Liaison Manager. Findings included:

### *Successful multi-agency working*

Practitioners were keen to start exploring barriers they experience to their continued efforts to share useful and relevant family information. They were quickly able to identify examples of projects and initiatives that have helped them to share appropriately and successfully. Information that is currently being shared includes;

- Understanding which services are working with families;
- What interventions have already been applied and;
- How data and information from sources like health providers can support interventions.

During this session delegates praised the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process being used across B&NES. Before the introduction of the CAF, practitioners had difficulties sharing information without families being present during meetings. Whilst getting families' consent to share information at the time of completing the CAF was still cited as an issue in some cases, most practitioners felt that a strong drive to use the CAF for all multi-agency referrals had increased their confidence that they could share information appropriately.

#### *Information sharing barriers*

Delegates also raised concerns about a wide range of information sharing issues – not simply legal and technical barriers, but deep-rooted organisational and cultural ones too. Fears of sharing included the anxiety associated with “getting it wrong”, a lack of understanding of what can and can't be shared, confusion about which system to record information on, or the correct format needed to send information. Also the sense of needing 'permission' from Government and local leaders so sharing could take place. Alongside suggestions that complicated legislation and inadequate technology got in the way of sharing information easily, the groups acknowledged that more time needs to be given to building inter-agency relationships to overcome these barriers.

#### *Potential solutions*

The Centre also shared stories of successful multi-agency working from other areas and best practice examples. During these discussions delegates found that they had plenty of ideas and suggestions for breaking down cultural information sharing barriers by drawing upon their own experiences.

One potential solution emerged while discussing consent related to information sharing using the Common Assessment Framework process (CAF). Practitioners reported having issues sharing information without families present, which prevented them having conversations with colleagues about their needs. This really drove home the need for a consistent approach to gaining families' informed consent. Several practitioners recommended moving from an 'opt-in' to an 'opt-out' model of consent on the CAF referral form, as it was felt that people will be more likely to be open to consent to share if the question is asked this way around.

Delegates acknowledged that this move would need to be supported by transparency on how families' information is shared and used between agencies. This model is currently being considered by the Integrated Service team responsible for the CAF process. This is a positive step for services in B&NES working towards successfully integrating information sharing across services.

Robust and strong local leadership from all management levels was also cited as a key step to giving staff the confidence they need to share information with other partner agencies. Alongside this, it was seen as important that services working within a multi-agency partnership be treated as equal partners, leading to more open and transparent conversations and relationships.

Finally, many attendees thought organisational training and development was crucial to ensure that professionals understood how and when they could share information. Delegates proposed a mixture of courses, reminder communications and refresher session at relevant intervals throughout their career. Participants also suggested resurrecting the local 'multi-agency working' training that had previously been delivered and incorporating this into relevant college and university courses locally and nationally.

## **National work and local pledges to support information sharing**

Information sharing is consistently identified as a key enabler (or barrier) to transformational change and delivering better services. The Centre's work, on the organisational and 'people' issues, complements and amplifies the Government's approach to encouraging change on the ground to improve outcomes for people.

We work closely with our national partners and share the learning from local areas to support policy development across Government. Delegates at this workshop reflected upon the support they felt would be helpful from central Government and national organisations. This included:

- Strong leadership on encouraging local services to share with confidence;
- Identifying a common purpose between all public services for sharing information
- Adopting a single system for all Children and Young People's services to record and share relevant information and;
- Increased multi-agency training to support staff to share information safely.

Many of the workshop attendees made personal pledges at the end of the workshop session. These were commitments to changes they would apply when they got back to their own organisations to support information sharing.

These pledges included:

- *Working towards one common goal for families*
- *Avoiding working in silos and developing multi-agency partnerships*
- *Needing better health information sharing*
- *Making sure we get the right people 'around the table'.*

Attendees also reflected on changes they could make to how their teams work, which would benefit the families they support. For example, how to support teams to record and share information more quickly. Another common theme was learning from others and finding out how commissioners locally and in other areas enable their providers to share information.

## **Workshop evaluation and next steps**

B&NES' Connecting Families team shared conference delegates' evaluation of the information sharing workshop with the Centre. Some participants provided very positive feedback, mentioning that they found the session's content "interesting" and the issues being explored "thought-provoking". One delegate was pleased that B&NES wanted to discuss information sharing as it was "a real issue of concern"; as a result of participating in this session they hoped that the expanded phase of the Troubled Families programme would provide the focus to "improve information sharing for all agencies working with families, including Children's Centres".

This workshop was facilitated as a discreet piece of work within the context of on-going support for the information sharing aspects of B&NES' Connecting Families programme. However, the Centre will take forward the issues raised by delegates participating in this session – both at the local and national level.

The Centre will:

- Support B&NES Integrated Services team to explore ways in which information sharing discussions can be given more prominence within its CAF / Lead Professional training courses.
- Work with relevant senior officers to explore the possibility of running corporate information sharing sessions that meet practitioners' current needs.
- Share learning with other places so they can understand what limits good information sharing in local partnerships, and overcome these barriers in their transformation programmes.
- Continue to involve national organisations in conversations about how better information sharing supports vulnerable families. This will include discussions with our funding partners, including the Troubled Families team, to support the delivery of the expanded programme.
- Through our local and national work, highlight the important role information sharing plays in joining up services for families.