

Practice guide

Family Help & Children's Social Care

Family Help - The Fiona Programme, Liverpool

Background, purpose and rationale

Liverpool has the second highest rate of Looked After Children in the North West with 155 per 10,000 0-17-year-olds. Parental mental health issues were identified as one of the most significant factors contributing to higher levels of children entering care. We wanted to work with parents to improve their mental health and parenting skills to support more children to remain within the care of their families. We had previously trained social workers in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) driving some improvement, yet without securing sustainable change. For families who were receiving the high levels of intervention, including those involved in Public Law Outline, and not evidencing change were offered the Fiona Programme.

What we did to improve children's outcomes

Initially we piloted the Fiona Programme for 12 months funded through the Supporting Families grant extending the contract using an 'invest to save' methodology. The aim of the programme was to improve the parent's mental health, parenting, and relationships by developing skills to manage emotions, stress and conflict. Project Fiona aimed to improve lives of individuals, support families and communities through psychological intervention. The programme is linked to Family Hubs and whilst maintaining links to social work, maintains a degree of separation from social care interventions. We initially set up a triage process based on set criteria to identify parents who could engage with the programme, with outreach family support officers encouraging parents to join the programme. The outreach family support workers were attached to psychologists and could refer families to the service. Outreach support workers also supported parents with other needs including housing, school attendance and access to benefits. A barrier for many parents in joining the programme was due to childcare so we worked with the Sure Start and Family Hubs to find childcare, while the parent attended the sessions.

As a commissioned service, the local authority managed referrals, and monitored outcomes and experiences through regular reporting, contract management meetings and frequent feedback from families. Existing management and family support resources were re-deployed to manage the interface with the programme, using a multi-disciplinary Team Around the Family approach to ensure reach to families who could benefit from The Fiona Programme. Perseverance was key with multiple and flexible offers of appointments to secure and maintain parental engagement. Trained psychologists work with parents using different methods; trauma-responsive; Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT); Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT); Metabolisation Based Therapy (MBT) and Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR). We worked with 16 families across the year, with two 1:1 sessions per week. After parents had completed their sessions, there was a ceremony, which was optional, where they were given a certificate by the Co-operative Director, which was very well-attended.

What was the impact?

The Fiona Programme has delivered a cost avoidance in 2023 and 2024 of £2.07 million, with £18.17 million of savings projected to age 18. Of the families taking part in the project in 2023:

- 59% stepped down to universal services
- 15% prevented escalation (stepped down from their current process but not yet universal services)
- 26% continued escalation (remained at a high level of need)

Of the families taking part in the project in 2024:

- 75% stepped down to universal service (stepped down from their current process, to one below)
- 18% prevented escalation (stepped down from their current process but not yet universal services)
- 7% continued escalation (remained at a high level of need)

Across the trauma intervention, all the measured T scores (standardised scores used in psychological testing) were monitored within four categories; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); Self-disturbance (attachment, depression); externalisation (anger, suicidality) and somatisation (preoccupation with bodily concerns). They all reduced over time; self-disturbance by 29%, PTSD by 23%, externalisation by 29% and somatisation by 20%. There were marked improvements in the wellbeing of children and young people demonstrated by improved school attendance and improved family relationships. Children were able to remain in the care of their families. If there were any issues, psychologists would attend meetings to support and identify barriers and solutions which meant that managers and social workers had additional learning as well. Another impact was on the family courts. In many court proceedings, the Fiona Programme was stated for parents to attend as part of the ruling. As part of committing to delivering the Fiona Programme and to Liverpool's social values, psychologists also offered a service to staff members which improved their mental health and reduced their sickness absence rate.

"I had a lot of a lot of anger issues and a lot of hate in myself that I didn't know how to balance between myself and my children. And it's helped me, the programme has helped me understand, not only ADHD, my children's needs, also my needs, my feelings, my children, and it's helped me a long way. I just wish more people would do this; I wish more people would stick to this. Stick to the programme... You need to move more, put more out there for people to understand that it's for them, and not for the social services. So, it's for yourself." –Parent

"This project was like a calming sea in the waves of chaos! We thought we would be issuing care proceedings on a case where we would have no option but to seek removal. This project helped Mum, things improved significantly for the children. Life changed because she was assisted to make those changes. She described the project as the best thing that ever happened to her."- Safeguarding Team Member.

Find out more

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