

# Intensive family support: the evidence



*as long as it takes*

## 1.0 Introduction

Action for Children's evidence base shows that intensive family support can:

- ▶ keep children out of care
- ▶ prevent anti-social behaviour
- ▶ provide a cost-effective solution to service provision, reducing need now and in the future

Our evaluated intensive family support services have been shown to raise the self-esteem of vulnerable parents and help overcome neglect by tackling issues in the early stages of a problem. There is positive evidence of change through the provision of intensive support via family intervention programmes to turn around anti-social behaviour by young people and families, often where there is a risk of eviction and homelessness.

This paper brings together the Action for Children evidence base on intensive family support services. It is made up of research commissioned by Action for Children, research Action for Children is featured in and internal evaluations. In order to put the evidence into context, it has been collated under a number of themes:

- ▶ keeping children safe
- ▶ keeping young people safely at home/ out of care
- ▶ keeping children out of custody
- ▶ keeping children healthy
- ▶ improving children's relationships
- ▶ savings to the state and communities
- ▶ improving educational attainment
- ▶ reducing anti-social behaviour
- ▶ housing stability

## Background

Action for Children developed and ran the first UK family intervention programme aimed at reducing anti-social behaviour in Dundee. This was developed in response to the council facing pressures to take action on people who caused problems to neighbours. Following a successful attempt at rehabilitation with one family, they decided to establish a specialist intensive project. The Action for Children Dundee Families Project was formally established in 1995.

An evaluation of the project found the multi-disciplinary nature of the project teams to be a key strength. Referral agencies included housing, social services, youth offending, health, police, education and schools. Families had a high degree of existing agency involvement; most had three or more different agencies involved (8% had more than six agencies involved). Co-ordinating this involvement for the best interests of the families is a key function of projects of this nature.<sup>1</sup>

The model of intensive family support has since spread across the country and has come to demonstrate effectiveness in dealing with anti-social behaviour and youth crime, and to reduce entry to care for teenagers. This has been achieved in Action for Children through the development of family intervention services and through delivery of intensive help through family and children's centres.



## 2.0 Keeping children safe

- ▶ A 2010 study based on the 1013 families that formally completed an anti-social behaviour family intervention project by mid October 2009 found that the proportion of families (between support plan and formal exit)<sup>2</sup> in which:
  - ▶ there were concerns about child protection declined from 24% to 14% (42% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 43% reduction
  - ▶ domestic violence was a concern declined from 23% to 9% (61% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 59% reduction
- ▶ Recent analysis of outcomes data collated in Action for Children showed that of 819 cases where Action for Children was working towards the outcome ‘risks are known and protective factors are now in place’, improvement had been seen in 81 per cent of cases.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Working with families at an early stage can help tackle problems, such as neglect, before they become too deeply rooted and potentially irreversible.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Intensive family support based on sustained professional relationships is particularly effective in cases of neglect.<sup>5</sup>

## 3.0 Keeping young people safely at home/out of care

- ▶ The intensive support provided to families who were at risk of eviction because of anti-social behaviour had the potential to reduce the need for children to enter the care system.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ A recent study looking at the Northamptonshire family intervention project<sup>7</sup> commissioned by Action for Children found that the project achieves its aim: ‘As a result of intense whole family intervention, the child can live a safer, happier and more stable life at home and avoid being taken into care. This analysis found plenty of evidence of these outcomes.’
- ▶ A social return on investment analysis undertaken on Action for Children East Dunbartonshire Family Support found that 93 per cent of the benefits the service has made for the state come through a reduction in foster care costs.<sup>8</sup> The research highlighted that some parents expressed concerns that, without the work of a family support project called East Dunbartonshire Family Support, there was serious risk that their children would end up being taken into care or that their children would have ended up out of work or involved in drugs or crime.<sup>9</sup>



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- ▶ One study shows the following family intervention project outcomes for parents:<sup>10</sup>
  - ▶ Parent(s) felt calmer/less anxious/hopeful/ more confident/safer/less angry, developed better parenting skills, communicated more, fought less and family life and relationships improved.
  - ▶ Parent(s) felt calmer/less anxious/hopeful/ more confident/safer/less angry, faced up to past and started to communicate and deal with issues for first time.
  - ▶ Parent(s) felt calmer/less anxious/hopeful/ more confident/safer/less angry and so were less depressed and/or reliant on drink/drugs.
  - ▶ Parent(s) calmer/less anxious/hopeful/more confident/safer/less angry, developed better parenting skills, engaged with other public services more and child protection/children going into care was avoided.
  - ▶ Family (parent) is separated from partner, feels more safe and secure and is less at risk of domestic violence.
- ▶ In a 2010 study, positive outcomes for families showed that the number of those:<sup>11</sup>
  - ▶ affected by a mental health problem declined from 39% to 29% (26% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 29% reduction
  - ▶ with drug or substance misuse declined from 33% to 18% (45% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 47% reduction
  - ▶ with drinking problems/ alcoholism declined from 30% to 14% (53% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 57% reduction
- ▶ Data from Action for Children's 2009/10 business plans shows that in Burnley family intervention project 90 per cent of children and young people participated in their needs assessment and service plan and in Leicester family intervention project 90 per cent of parents reported improved parenting skills
- ▶ A 2010 study showed the following family intervention project outcomes for children and young people (in families):<sup>12</sup>
  - ▶ Family (child) is separated from father, feels more safe and secure and is less at risk of domestic violence.
  - ▶ Child felt calmer/less anxious (about self and mum)/less angry/happier/safer and family life and relationships improved.
  - ▶ Child felt calmer/less anxious/less angry/ happier/safer and family life, relationships and behaviour as well as life prospects improved.
  - ▶ Child felt calmer/less anxious (about self and mum)/less angry/happier/safer and avoided contact with the criminal justice system.
- ▶ The evaluation of Action for Children Wakefield Families First noted that after being involved with the project for at least four months, all service users interviewed gave many examples about how the family intervention project had helped them with resolving problems and meeting any needs they had. Service users particularly appreciated the emotional support that project workers gave them, help with developing parenting skills and work with children and managing debts. All felt the family intervention project had helped them improve their quality of life and all were thankful that they had been referred.<sup>13</sup>
- ▶ Lessons learnt from the experience of intensive family support projects include the importance of early intervention, the need for families to have access to specialist support when exiting family intervention services and the critical role of re-referrals to help families to sustain a positive lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>



## 4.0 Reducing anti-social behaviours

- ▶ The evaluation of Action for Children Wakefield Families First reported that all the managers and staff interviewed from referral agencies and other organisations said there had been many positive outcomes for several families that the Wakefield family intervention project had supported, including reduced incidents of anti-social behaviour.<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ Research into all family intervention projects inclusive of those delivered by Action for Children has shown reduced anti-social behaviour and improved retention of tenancies in respect of families receiving a service.<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ One study, in which 28 families who had worked with intensive family support projects during the period 2004 to 2006/07 were successfully tracked, showed that the early outcomes reported by family intervention project staff for 90 families who completed the intervention displayed considerable improvements in all key areas of the project's work. Anti-social behaviour and criminal activities had declined considerably at the point families exited the projects, as had the risk of families engaging in anti-social behaviour. The risk of families being evicted had also considerably reduced. The outcomes for children and young people were also reported to have improved:<sup>17</sup>
  - ▶ Environmental damage (eg vandalism, litter/rubbish) declined the most; it dropped from 42% when families first started working with the family intervention project to 4% when families exited.
  - ▶ There was a similar level of decline in relation to acts directed against people, which decreased from 32% to 7%, and disregard for community and/or personal wellbeing (eg nuisance, noise, rowdy behaviour), which decreased from 80% to 20%.
  - ▶ The smallest, but still considerable, reduction was reported for misuse of public space (eg drug dealing, street drinking, prostitution, begging), which dropped from 70% to 29%.
- ▶ Pre-court juvenile specific orders (ie verbal reprimand and final warning) fell from 9% to 2% of families at the end of working with a family intervention project.
- ▶ Warnings (eg early intervention warning, police, conditional and prostitute caution): these reduced from 10% to 6% of families with warnings at the end of the intervention.
- ▶ Sheffield Hallam's initial evaluation report indicates that the six pioneering intensive family support projects, undertaking interventions with some of the most disadvantaged families in the country, had helped them achieve remarkable changes; 85 per cent of complaints about anti-social behaviour either ceased or reduced to a level where the tenancy was no longer deemed to be at risk at the point where the family exited the project.<sup>18</sup>
- ▶ Families who were involved in anti-social behaviour had decreased from 89 per cent to 32 per cent (64% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 52 per cent reduction.<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ Families with four or more anti-social behaviour problems declined from 45 per cent to five per cent (89% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was an 87 per cent reduction.<sup>20</sup>

**Families who were involved in anti-social behaviour had decreased from 89% to 32% (64% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 52% reduction<sup>19</sup>**

## 5.0 Keeping children out of custody

- Recent research has identified positive outcomes for children and young people in terms of their involvement with the youth justice system:<sup>21</sup>
  - Pre-court juvenile specific orders (ie verbal reprimand and final warning): these fell from nine per cent to 2% of families at the end of working with a family intervention project.
- A social return on investment analysis undertaken on Action for Children East Dunbartonshire Family Support highlighted that some parents expressed concerns that, without the work of a family support project called East Dunbartonshire Family Support, there was serious risk that their children would end up being taken into care or that their children would have ended up out of work or involved in drugs or crime.<sup>22</sup>

## 6.0 Savings to the state and communities

- A social return on investment analysis undertaken on Action for Children East Dunbartonshire Family Support found that for every £1 invested annually in family support projects, which is designed to catch problems early and prevent problems from reoccurring, society benefits by between £7.60 and £9.20, and approximately 93 per cent of the benefits to the state come through a reduction in foster care costs.<sup>23</sup>
- An social return on investment analysis undertaken on Action for Children's family intervention project in Northamptonshire found that for every £1 invested in Northamptonshire family intervention project activities, the likely social value created is about £4, but in the range of £3 to £6 based on the information currently available.<sup>24</sup>
- Other cost analysis of family intervention projects have shown that they offer excellent value for money given their potential to considerably reduce short- and long-term costs of many agencies, including those providing services relating to housing, criminal justice, policing, education and health.<sup>25</sup>
- Other cost analyses of family intervention projects have shown that they also offer many intangible benefits to families – such as keeping families together and improving their quality of life and their prospects – and to society, by making neighbourhoods and communities safer and more pleasant places.<sup>26</sup>

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## 7.0 Keeping children healthy

- Sheffield Hallam's initial evaluation report indicates that the six pioneering intensive family support projects, undertaking interventions with some of the most disadvantaged families in the country, had helped them achieve remarkable changes. Over the evaluation period, significant improvements in children's health, wellbeing and educational attainment were recorded.<sup>27</sup>
- Data from Action for Children's 2009/10 business plans shows that in Bolton family intervention project, 80 per cent of parents reported enhanced capacity to support their children's health – and development and in Wakefield family intervention project, 78 per cent of children and young people attended essential health appointments.

## 8.0 Improving children's relationships

- An evaluation of the delivery of targeted family support by Action for Children highlighted that the use of a professional relationship with vulnerable people was critical in leading to change in parenting and that the provision of intensive visiting for a period of time had a significant impact in reducing the level of concern about children's wellbeing. The authors noted that working with families at the early stage of problems had significant impact in terms of avoiding problems becoming entrenched and irreversible.<sup>28</sup>

A close-up photograph of a young boy with dark hair, wearing a grey sweater, smiling broadly as he eats a green apple. The image is partially framed by a large, light green circular graphic element that overlaps the text area below.

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## 9.0 Improving educational attainment

- Data from Action for Children's 2009/10 business plans shows that in Wirral family intervention project 82 per cent school attendance remained constant or improved and in Wakefield family intervention project, 76 per cent of children and young people improved their educational attainment.
- Young people experiencing truancy, exclusion and bad behaviour at school declined from 57 per cent to 24 per cent (58% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 55 per cent reduction.<sup>29</sup>

## 10.0 Housing stability

- Families facing one or more housing enforcement actions declined from 50 per cent to 14 per cent (72% reduction) – the figure at 31 March 2009 was a 68 per cent reduction.<sup>30</sup>
- Sheffield Hallam's initial evaluation report indicates that the six pioneering intensive family support projects, undertaking interventions with some of the most disadvantaged families in the country, had helped them achieve remarkable changes; in 80 per cent of cases, families' tenancies had been successfully stabilised. Furthermore, 85 per cent of complaints about anti-social behaviour had either ceased or reduced to a level where the tenancy was no longer deemed to be at risk at the point where the family exited the project.<sup>31</sup>



In 80% of cases, families' tenancies had been successfully stabilised<sup>31</sup>

## 11.0 Full list of research

### 11.1 Research commissioned by Action for Children

- ▶ The economic and social return of Action for Children's family intervention project, Northamptonshire (2010) The analysis was led by Tim Goodspeed.
- ▶ Backing the future, Action for Children and nef (new economics foundation) 2009, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content/561/Backing-the-future>
- ▶ An Evaluation of the Dundee Families Project (2001) Joint publication by Scottish Executive, Dundee City Council, NCH Action for Children. Dillane J, Hill M, Bannister J and Scott S (2002)

### 11.2 Research featuring Action for Children intensive family support services

- ▶ ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2010, <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-RR215>
- ▶ Tunstill J, Blewett J, Meadows M (2009) An Evaluation of the delivery of targeted family support by Action for Children, Synergy Research and Consulting Ltd, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/5020.pdf>
- ▶ Evaluation of intensive family support Projects in Scotland, The Scottish Government (2009) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/272803/0081442.pdf>

- ▶ ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2009, <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications//eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RBX-09-16.pdf>
- ▶ Parr S, Nixon J and Duffy D (2008) The Wakefield Family First Project: An evaluation, Sheffield: Centre for Regional and Economic Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
- ▶ Sheffield Hallam University 'The Longer Term Outcomes Associated with Families who had Worked with Intensive Family Support Projects' (2008) A number of Action for Children services were part of this research study. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/doc/familysupportprojects.doc>
- ▶ Anti-social Behaviour Intensive Family Support Projects: an evaluation of six pioneering projects, Sheffield Hallam University (2006) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/hrs230.pdf>

### 11.3 Internal evaluation

- ▶ Internal evaluation of the effectiveness of Action for Children youth services was carried out in 2009/10 by Action for Children's performance, improvement, inclusion and development team
- ▶ Internal Action for Children review of services 2009



## Endnotes

- 1 An Evaluation of the Dundee Families Project (2001) Joint publication by Scottish Executive, Dundee City Council, NCH Action for Children. Dillane J, Hill M, Bannister J and Scott S (2002)
- 2 ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2010
- 3 Internal Action for Children review of services 2009
- 4 Tunstill J, Blewett J, Meadows M (2009) An Evaluation of the delivery of targeted family support by Action for Children, Synergy Research and Consulting Ltd, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/5020.pdf>
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Sheffield Hallam University ‘The Longer Term Outcomes Associated with Families who had Worked with Intensive Family Support Projects’ (2008). A number of Action for Children services were part of this research study.
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- 9 Ibid.
- 10 The economic and social return of Action for Children’s family intervention project, Northamptonshire (2010)
- 11 ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2010
- 12 The economic and social return of Action for Children’s family intervention project, Northamptonshire (2010)
- 13 Parr S, Nixon J and Duffy D (2008) The Wakefield Family First Project: An evaluation, Sheffield: Centre for Regional and Economic Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
- 14 Sheffield Hallam University ‘The Longer Term Outcomes Associated with Families who had Worked with Intensive Family Support Projects’ (2008). A number of Action for Children services were part of this research study.
- 15 Parr S, Nixon J and Duffy D (2008) The Wakefield Family First Project: An evaluation, Sheffield: Centre for Regional and Economic Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
- 16 ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2009
- 17 Sheffield Hallam University ‘The Longer Term Outcomes Associated with Families who had Worked with Intensive Family Support Projects’ (2008) A number of Action for Children services were part of this research study.
- 18 Anti-social Behaviour Intensive Family Support Projects: an evaluation of six pioneering projects, Sheffield Hallam University (2006)
- 19 ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2010
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2009

- 22 Backing the future, Action for Children and nef (new economics foundation) 2009, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content/561/Backing-the-future>
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 The economic and social return of Action for Children's family intervention project, Northamptonshire (2010)
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- 27 Anti-social Behaviour Intensive Family Support Projects: an evaluation of six pioneering projects, Sheffield Hallam University (2006)
- 28 Tunstill J, Blewett J, Meadows M (2009) An Evaluation of the delivery of targeted family support by Action for Children, Synergy Research and Consulting Ltd, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/5020.pdf>
- 29 ASB Family Intervention Projects – Monitoring and Evaluation, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) 2010
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Anti-social Behaviour Intensive Family Support Projects: an evaluation of six pioneering projects, Sheffield Hallam University (2006)



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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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Produced by Action for Children 04/2011. 11/12 0008

