The longer-term outcomes associated with families who had worked with Intensive Family Support Projects 2004 to 2006-07

Intensive Family Support Projects (IFSPs) seek to provide families at risk of eviction because of anti-social behaviour with intensive support to address their often multiple and complex needs (Nixon et al 2006a, 2006b). When the study began in January 2004, IFSPs were in their infancy and the six projects included in the evaluation were unique. Recognising the damaging consequences of cycles of eviction and repeat homelessness, they sought to provide a new and more sustainable approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour. The particular form of support employed by IFSPs varies from family to family but commonly comprises of practical assistance in the home, provision of advice, liaison and advocacy support, sign-posting to other relevant services, help in managing finances and claiming benefits, personal skills development, anger management, parenting skills training, and behaviour management.
Following the successful completion of the evaluation of the costs, benefits and effectiveness of six IFSPs, in June 2006 Communities and Local Government and the Respect Task Force commissioned the team of researchers at Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a further piece of work. Employing a qualitative methodology involving interviews with project managers, key stakeholders, family members and agencies working with families, 28 families who had worked with IFSPs during the period 2004 to 2006-07 were successfully tracked to examine the following key research issues:

- The sustainability of IFSP interventions in terms of family functioning and behaviour;
- The impact on existing support and supervision services;
- The community impacts of IFSP interventions;
- Media portrayals of IFSPs.

In all key respects families included in the tracking sample were found to be representative of the wider population of 256 families who had worked with the six IFSP over the period 2004-2006. The majority of the families had exited the project within the previous 12 months and had been living independently in the community for some time. Six families however, had only recently left the project and in these cases it was harder to establish the longer-term impact of the IFSP interventions.

Key Findings

- For seven out of ten (20/28) families, positive change had been sustained and/or had occurred since exiting the IFSP and no significant further complaints about Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) had been received. For these families the risk of homelessness had been significantly reduced and the family home was secure at the point of the final interview.

- The cessation of ASB complaints and reduced risk to the home however, represent only two dimensions of sustainable outcomes and do not reflect the multiple difficulties that continued to impact on families.

- Over half (16/28) the families had moved home and while for the majority moving to a new neighbourhood represented a chance to start again others had exchanged secure tenancies for less secure accommodation either renting from a private landlord or living in temporary accommodation pending a decision about re-housing.

- Just under a third of families (8/28) continued to experience difficulties with complaints about on-going anti-social and/or criminal behaviour placing the family home at risk. For these families the IFSP interventions did not appear to have had any discernable impact on family member’s behaviour.

1 In the Machinery of Government changes of 28 June 2007, the Respect Task Force moved to the newly created Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and became the Youth Task Force. The responsibility for Family Intervention Projects moved to the DCSF Families Group.
The sustainability of interventions in terms of family functioning and behaviour: a continuum of outcomes

In order to reflect the complexity of many families’ situations at the time they were interviewed, a continuum of outcomes has been developed derived from families’ and other agencies’ accounts of the extent to which the IFSPs’ four core objectives had been met. These objectives were:

- **Prevention** of repeat cycles of **homelessness** and **family breakdown** arising as a result of anti-social behaviour;

- **Addressing unmet support needs** and ensuring that families are able to sustain a positive lifestyle without being the cause of anti-social behaviour;

- **Promotion of social inclusion** for families and assisting in **providing better outcomes** in relation to health, education and well-being;

- **Increasing community stability** by enabling and supporting families to live peacefully and to fully participate in their communities.

### Continuum of Outcomes

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#### Continuing difficulties
- Continuing complaints of ASB/criminal behaviour
- IFSP interventions have not had any discernable impact on family members’ behaviour
- The home continues to be at risk
- Continuing lack of social inclusion
- Ongoing support needs not addressed

#### Qualified success
- Reduced complaints of ASB, stable tenancy, but ongoing social exclusion
- Some complaints of ASB persist and the tenancy is not stable
- Case closed too early and/or no re-referral was possible
- Continuing lack of social inclusion and on-going support needs not met
- Inappropriate referral

#### Resounding success
- Cessation or significantly reduced complaints of ASB
- Stable tenancy
- Many beneficial changes, despite possible periodic setbacks
- Increased sense of social inclusion and well being
The majority of families interviewed were located towards the right of the continuum, with the outcomes occurring following the IFSP interventions viewed as being ‘successful’. For four out of ten (12/28) tracked families, the changes that had occurred since exiting the IFSP were significant, with family members stating that they no longer faced insurmountable problems. More mixed outcomes were associated with a further eight families (two of whom were inappropriately referred to an IFSP) who continued to experience ongoing problems which required skilful management. In this context, while some families had achieved housing stability and were living peacefully in their communities, they were not enjoying positive outcomes with regard to other indicators of social inclusion. In the remaining 8/28 families the IFSP interventions had not been successful in stimulating sustained change and the lives of these families continued to be dominated by complaints about anti-social behaviour, homelessness or risk of eviction, and family breakdown.

Pathways to successful outcomes

For the 12 families located at the far right of the continuum of outcomes, positive change had been sustained since exiting the IFSP and the outcomes were viewed by family members and agencies working with families as ‘resoundingly successful’. Members of these families reported stories of relatively straightforward change in which their current circumstances were described in sanguine terms.

- In a small number of cases (3) a single issue usually concerning children’s behaviour had led to the referral to an IFSP. For these families once their tenancy was stabilised positive change was achieved comparatively swiftly.

- Even where families had entrenched and difficult personal histories IFSP interventions were found to be helpful in stimulating change and enabling families to live peacefully within their communities.

- For families with high levels of need the support provided by the IFSP was seen as being pivotal. Pathways to successful outcomes critically informed by the following factors:
  - the careful management of exit routes;
  - the self-motivation and willingness by family members to seek change;
  - project workers’ ability to establish relationships of trust;
  - recognition that change is not a linear process but is defined by episodes of setback and progress, stability and crisis and that for; and
  - some families re-referrals to an IFSP can play a key role in helping families get back on track.
Factors informing ‘partial success’

The term ‘partial success’ reflects the conflicting outcomes associated with just under a third (8/28) of families. While for the majority of these families, there had been a reduction/cessation of ASB complaints at least one (but often a number) of the projects’ core objectives had not been met and families’ circumstances remained complicated and troubled.

• Reflecting the nature of the continuum of outcomes no single factor was found to distinguish families who had achieved ‘partial success’ from those who had achieved greater stability and those who were experiencing serious difficulties which continued to put the home at risk. Rather it was a matter of degree with ongoing problems continuing to detrimentally impact on family stability.

• For these families while project interventions had helped change behaviour so that complaints had ceased or reduced there was evidence of a continuing lack of social inclusion and ongoing unmet support needs resulting in negative impacts on their quality of life and well being. Factors which informed these families’ situation included:
  – Gaps in service provision resulting in a lack of support and/or inappropriate referrals;
  – A reduction in ASB and increased housing stability countered by a lack of social inclusion;
  – Ongoing problems managing children’s behaviour.

Case study 1: Positive change

Family X were re-referred to a support project approximately six months after their case had formally closed following complaints over the school summer holidays about relatively low level ASB, including the family using a trampoline in the garden late at night and causing a disturbance until the early hours, as well as noise nuisance caused by the children and their friends using a caravan outside the property. The family had been issued with a written warning when they were re-referred to a project. The family’s housing officer explained that the mother was finding it hard to cope at that time largely due to difficulties arising from a number of family members having diagnosed mental health conditions, including schizophrenia, autism and learning difficulties.

With the support provided by the project, the situation was satisfactorily rectified within the timeframe the housing officer stipulated after which legal action would have been taken. Since then (over a year ago at the time of interview), no further complaints have been made. The interviewee described how the family are keen to ensure that their tenancy remains stable and have on occasion contacted the housing officer themselves to ensure no complaints have been received. He felt that the family are now coping better and are unlikely to cause any further problems for their neighbours. He did suggest that if any problems around the family’s behaviour were to arise again, then the likelihood is that it will be resolved at a neighbourhood level without the involvement of housing management, as neighbour relations have improved dramatically.
Families for whom there were on going difficulties

Just under a third of the families tracked (8/28) faced on-going difficulties and the IFSP intervention appeared to have been less successful. For these families, their lives continued to be dominated by complaints about anti-social behaviour, managing ongoing support needs, homelessness, risk of eviction and/or family breakdown. When referred to the IFSP, the majority of these families had been provided with outreach support, with only one family provided with a residential form of intervention and one other accommodated in IFSP dispersed accommodation.

- A key characteristic shared by virtually all the families for whom IFSP interventions had not been successful involved ongoing concerns about the criminal behaviour of one child or young person.

- These families were frequently reported by support agencies as exhibiting the most deep-rooted and ‘challenging’ behaviour, with individual family members well known to local welfare and criminal justice agencies.

- In many families, the behaviour of children/young people appeared to be symptomatic of structural disadvantage, combined with long-standing cognitive and psychological problems, which had not been addressed by welfare and educational agencies at an earlier stage.

- The findings from the study highlight the importance of timely intervention, the need for families to have access to specialist support when exiting an IFSP and the important role of re-referrals to help families sustain a positive lifestyle.
Children’s well being

The evaluation report published in 2006 highlighted how children working with IFSPs were amongst the most disadvantaged in the country (Nixon et al 2006b). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, affected children in as many as one in five families, compared with the national average which predicts that ADHD is likely to be prevalent in between 3% – 8% of school-age children (Mytars 2001). Within this context, it is not surprising that at the point of the last interview in 15/28 families the well-being of children remained a cause of concern. In just over half the tracked families, despite stable tenancies and reduced complaints of ASB, parents’ continued to experience difficulty in successfully dealing with their child/ren’s challenging behaviour.

- Project interventions in relation to children and young people most commonly focussed on positive parenting skills supplemented by direct work with children and the provision of diversionary activities. Such interventions met with varied success and for children with pressing educational, social and behavioural needs achieving change was difficult.

- While changes in family structures including the birth of new family members was largely welcomed in many families changes in domestic circumstances were less positive. Family violence remained part of the narrative of some families’ lives and where the violence was inter-generational it was particularly difficult for parents to access help.

Case study 2: On-going difficulties

Family X may be described as multi-problem: the father suffered from a long-term limiting illness, there was a history of domestic violence, the mother suffered from depression and has attempted suicide in the past, and one child has ADHD and learning difficulties for which he attends a special school. Complaints giving rise to the referral concerned groups of people gathering outside the property, playing music and drinking, domestic disturbances and more serious incidents (some criminal) in the local neighbourhood, including harassment of shopkeepers and bus drivers, and vandalism. An older daughter who was no longer part of the immediate household visited the property frequently with her two young children. She was thought to provoke many of the incidents that gave rise to complaints. Following referral to an IFSP the situation stabilised for the family, particularly after they were moved to the other side of the city, where the eldest daughter could no longer visit regularly.

However, despite a period of stability, when the family’s case was about to be closed, complaints began again after the daughter was also relocated to the same area. This gave rise to the same set of problems that had occurred at the previous address. In addition, the daughter regularly left her young children with her mother, who found it difficult to manage them as well as her youngest son, who has severe behavioural problems. Due to continued complaints, a Notice of Intention to Seek Possession (NOSP) was served and because of child protection concerns the grandchildren were eventually taken into local authority care. After this, the complaints intensified as the two sons moved back to the home and the elder daughter began spending even more time there. At the time fieldwork was completed, the family had fled from their property due to a serious dispute with neighbours and fears for their own safety. They were living in temporary interim accommodation awaiting a decision about rehousing. Sadly, the father died of a heart attack soon after. Two of the children were also on remand for stealing a car.
The neighbourhood context and structural disadvantage

The report findings in relation to the neighbourhoods in which families were living is important in terms of contextualising both the behaviour that led to complaints and the process of ‘taking responsibility’ that families are required to adopt when working with projects. Families tracked predominantly lived in deprived urban areas which were described in the ACORN classification of residential neighbourhoods as areas ‘experiencing the most difficult social and economic conditions in the whole country’ with ‘limited opportunity to improve their conditions’ (Caci 2004:19). Within this context defined by multiple and complex deprivations families’ narratives of the process of change were dominated by accounts of resilience and personal agency.

• Ongoing concerns about personal safety dominated families’ accounts with many reporting that since exiting the IFSP they had been victims of crime, subject to ASB from neighbours, and in a few cases were living in fear.

• Contrary to popular belief, the evidence suggests that rather than constituting a distinct minority distinguishable from the ‘law abiding majority’ families tended to conform to the norms and values of the communities in which they lived.

• For many families deep-rooted social exclusion was compounded by the debilitating impact of mental health disabilities and in these circumstances, achieving change required a high degree of personal agency and courage.

The impact of IFSPs on exiting support and supervision services

In addition to providing details on families’ current situations, interviews with referral and other agencies were also used to explore the relationships between IFSPs and partner agencies, the impact projects have had in terms of an increased or decreased demand for services, and the perceived cost-benefits and cost consequences of this form of intervention.

• Generally IFSP interventions were viewed very positively with the intensity and commitment of project workers singled out as a defining feature of IFSP practices.

• While the provision of core residential interventions were identified as a valuable resource for the most chaotic families, it was also recognised that core units carry with them resource implications for local schools which need to be addressed.

• Although local stakeholders could not place a precise financial value on the impact of IFSP interventions or the value to the wider community the projects were perceived to offer excellent value for money.
Lessons learnt from the experiences of IFSP providing a residential form of intervention

Three of the six projects included in the evaluation provided residential interventions for families who were already homeless or at acute threat of homelessness at the point at which they were referred to the project and/or who had particularly complex needs. Families living in core accommodation, typically self-contained flats within the IFSP building, are required to adhere to a set of rules and regulations.

Providing families with a residential intervention was very resource intensive and not all the IFSPs considered that investing in this type of work was either desirable or represented value for money. It was also recognised that there could be a ‘fad’ element to such provision, which runs the risk of becoming the target for local community disquiet (Nixon et al 2006b). The lessons learnt from the experiences of those running residential units included:

- The need for careful selection of an appropriate site;
- The importance of clear communication strategies;
- The need to establish good relationships with local residents;
- Establishment of robust management and admissions procedures.

The wider impact of IFSP in building safe and sustainable communities

One of the aims of the IFSPs is to ensure that families are able to sustain a positive lifestyle without being the cause of ASB to the communities in which they live. Housing officers along with community wardens, specialist ASB officers and local police beat officers were best placed to report on the impact of interventions on the wider community.

- IFSPs interventions were believed to be a more effective and sustainable solution to ASB as compared to other forms of enforcement action;
- Local stakeholders and residents were reported to welcome IFSPs role in breaking the cycle of deprivation and poor behaviour;
- A number of stakeholders highlighted the way in which IFSP interventions were effective in bringing relief to communities which had been troubled by persistent ASB.
Media portrayals of IFSPs

Since the Dundee Families Project was established in 1996, family support projects have attracted high profile media attention. Although core residential interventions were used for a small minority of families, it is this element of project interventions that has consistently been highlighted by the media as the defining feature of IFSPs. Much of the commentary, particularly in the tabloid press, has been polemically informed by a ‘not in my back yard’ discourse. Employing pejorative language, residential interventions have variously been referred to as ‘sins bins’, ‘tearaway towers’, and ‘cages for the neighbours from hell’.

More recently, as family support projects have been actively promoted by the Respect Task Force, the construction of the projects and the families referred to them has become more nuanced, as is reflected in the development of a ‘rights-based critique’ and ‘a sustainable solution’ media discourse. Despite these changes, it remains very hard for individual project managers to exercise control over the way in which IFSPs are portrayed or to effectively challenge the very negative and pejorative ways in which service users are constructed.

Conclusion

The six IFSPs set up in 2003-04 have developed a ‘new’ way of working with families at risk of losing their home as a result of anti-social behaviour that is seen by key stakeholders as being highly cost-effective in the short term and the longer term. The findings from the third phase of the evaluation make an important contribution to the existing evidence base, illustrating the beneficial outcomes associated with IFSP interventions whilst also highlighting the limitations of this approach. It is too early to make claims with any certainty about the longer-term sustainability of the changes that IFSPs had helped engender. This is partly because some families had only recently exited the IFSPs, but it also reflects the fact that families working with IFSPs often had deep-rooted problems suffered from multiple deprivations and were therefore likely to continue to be vulnerable to external influences.

Lessons learnt from the experiences of IFSPs include the importance of early intervention, the need for families to have access to specialist support when exiting an IFSP, and the critical role of re-referrals to help families to sustain a positive lifestyle. Equally important is the need to challenge negative media discourses which directly impact both on the willingness of families to engage with IFSPs and on the extent to which communities are prepared to tolerate IFSP residential core blocks.
About the Research

The evaluation of the longer-term outcomes associated with families who had worked with IFSPs over the period 2004 to 2006-7 has been undertaken by Judy Nixon and Sadie Parr with Caroline Hunter and Sue Whittle, Sheffield Hallam University and Diana Sanderson, Millmount Consultancy. For further information about the study contact the research director: J.Nixon@shu.ac.uk

Further Information

Further information is contained in the full report *The longer-term outcomes associated with families who had worked with Intensive Family Support Projects* which is available on the Communities and Local Government website.

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