ACTION FOR CHILDREN
FUNCTIONAL FAMILY THERAPY

Case study

About the project

Funding awarded: £1.4 million  
Duration of funding: 3 years 3 months  
Number of beneficiaries: 319 children aged 8-14  
Areas of delivery: Northern Health and Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland and Renfrewshire, Scotland

Action for Children supports and speaks out for the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK. In Realising Ambition the organisation delivered Functional Family Therapy (FFT), a form of intensive family therapy for young people who are at risk of entering custody or care and their families. This service works to improve communication and parenting skills and reduce problem behaviour such as drug use and violence. FFT was delivered by two different teams in Action for Children, one in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland.

Lessons learnt

Action for Children’s experience illustrates the impact of the wider commissioning environment on further replication and sustainability of a service.

Functional Family Therapy (FFT) is underpinned by a strong evidence base and has been delivered by a strong organisation, Action for Children, with the necessary skills and experience. However, the organisation’s experience of replicating FFT beyond Realising Ambition funding has been different in each country due to the different commissioning environments.

The Scottish replication has been closely delivered with key commissioners from Renfrewshire Council. These commissioners were involved in identifying FFT as a service that fulfilled strategic priorities and addressed the needs of the community. The Council directly supported the implementation of FFT, embedding it into social work practice. It also supported Action for Children in its application for Realising Ambition funding, and committed to exploring funding the delivery of the service in the future. The Council has now commissioned Action for Children to deliver FFT for a further 3 to 5 years.

In Northern Ireland, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust also supported the introduction of FFT. The two organisations have a close working relationship and the Trust both co-located Action for Children staff within a Council building and provided referrals. However, significant cuts to government spending in Northern Ireland impacted on the amount of funding available for Action for Children to apply for. The organisation was unable to source further funding to continue to deliver FFT.

Learning from Realising Ambition indicates that there are several key ingredients required for successful replication, as explored in our Programme Insights series. However the experience of Action for Children indicates that these alone are not enough. The wider commissioning environment needs to also be right in order to facilitate further replication and growth.

Five key ingredients of successful replication

The Realising Ambition consortium has mapped each project’s journey against our five key ingredients of successful replication. The key points from this follow below. Find out more about these ingredients.

A tightly defined and replicable service: FFT is an evidence-based model developed in the US and as such already has a logic model, manual and training package. Action for Children has had support from a UK-based FFT consultant to understand when and how to adapt it to a UK context.
Action for Children delivered FFT to 136 young people in Renfrewshire, Scotland and 183 in Northern Ireland. In Scotland the organisation administered pre- and post-questionnaires to 79 of the young people they supported. Amongst these young people, 71% found their behaviour remained stable or improved following FFT and 83% reported stability or improvement in difficulties in their personal, home or school life. Action for Children in Scotland also administered the FFT-developed Client Outcome Measure for Adolescents (COM-A) at the end of the service in which almost 90% of young people reported that things were at least ‘somewhat’ better in relation to family conflict and parent-child communication skills.

In Northern Ireland the organisation’s COM-A data shows that 95% of families reported improved communication and 90% had reduced family conflict. In addition 88% of young people directly avoided admission to care and remained at home, and upon the completion of FFT all (100%) of the young people were in education and 90% were violation free.

In both replication areas the changes in outcomes for young people are significant and positive. Whilst not surprising given the intensive nature of FFT, changes in outcomes are generally greater than those observed with other more universal and preventative services within the Realising Ambition programme.

What next

There has been a retrenchment in funding for voluntary sector providers in Northern Ireland due to significant cuts in government funding. Action for Children in Northern Ireland has not been able to source further funds to continue to deliver FFT, despite central and local government buy in to the value of the service.

In Scotland, Renfrewshire Council committed to looking at funding Action for Children’s FFT delivery after the end of Realising Ambition. Action for Children has now been commissioned by the Council to deliver FFT for a further 3 years with the intention to extend to 5 years. The organisation states that its existing close working relationship with the Council contributed to this, along with the partnership developed over the course of Realising Ambition.

Find out more

Each organisation has sought to monitor the outcomes of children and young people prior to and after service delivery. Find out more about outcome measurement in Realising Ambition.

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