
One year on:
Lessons from the implementation
of Family Valued in Newcastle

April 2022

Introduction

This report captures reflections from managers and practitioners in Newcastle one year into the implementation of Leeds' Family Valued approach. Newcastle City Council (NCC) began working with Leeds City Council in December 2020, funded as part of the Department for Education's Strengthening Families Protecting Children Programme (SFPC).

The purpose of this report is to present views and lessons mid-way through the implementation of Family Valued. This is based on what senior leaders, managers and practitioners in Children's Social Care say about the difference they are seeing within the service, how the change programme is being managed, and what the priorities should be for the second year of implementation. Although the approach is being developed across the entire system that works with children and families in Newcastle, the initial phase of implementation has focused on Children's Social Care.

NCC has agreed to share these reflections in the interests of helping other local authorities learn from their experience. The report is intended to provide a resource for other local authorities involved in or interested in Family Valued, including other participants in the SFPC programme that are at an earlier stage of implementation.

About the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme

Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (SFPC) is a five-year programme set up by the Department for Education (DfE) to support local authorities improve their work with children and families. The aim of the programme is to enable more children to stay at home in stable family environments so that fewer need to be taken in to care.

Eighteen local authorities are being supported to embed one of three whole-system change projects, developed by either Leeds, Hertfordshire or North Yorkshire. DfE is investing £84m in the programme between 2019 and 2024.

About Family Valued

Family Valued is an approach created by Leeds City Council and seeks to create a shift in culture towards relational working 'with' families rather than doing things 'to' them. Services that draw on existing strengths and relationships in the wider family network are used to support continuity of familial relationships. This includes widening the availability of family group conferences, a service that engages families in the processes of devising effective plans for children while also providing them with support.

Local authorities participating in the Leeds Family Valued strand of the SFPC programme are Darlington, Warwickshire, Newcastle, Coventry, Sefton and Solihull.



Capturing lessons learnt

All the information in this report is the product of interviews and conversations with colleagues in NCC. Three focus groups were held with senior managers, team managers and social work practitioners to explore their views on the first year of implementation and what should be the priorities for the second year. The feedback from these sessions was combined with a series of conversations with NCC's Family Valued Programme Manager.

The findings are presented as a series of questions and answers, divided into themed sections.

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Note: Newcastle City Council refers to the programme as 'implementing restorative and relational practice'. For ease of reading, the narrative uses 'Family Valued'.

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Overall progress in Year 1



1. How have the Family Valued principles and approach been received in Newcastle?

There is clear indication that the underpinning philosophy of Family Valued around restorative and relational practice is being absorbed across Newcastle social work. Senior leaders and team managers say that messages about the importance of the family, the centrality of relationships, and need for a relational approach have been received and are being acted on. Team managers say that Family Valued feels like 'the right thing' and fits with NCC's ethos. A survey undertaken after five months of implementation indicated that children's services staff felt very optimistic about the potential impact of Family Valued on outcomes for children.

Children's Social Care staff at different levels are all able to articulate the foundations of the programme, centred on what was described by one as the 'very simple but powerful idea that families should be at the centre of social work and finding solutions for children'. Practitioners note how they are 'much more aware of families throughout our services'.

An Ofsted inspection of NCC in December 2021 resulted in a judgment of 'good' in all areas. The inspection report noted that 'there is strong corporate and political investment and prioritisation of services to children that extends beyond the council itself', and praised the service's focus on ensuring children return to their parents' care when it is safe for them to do so.

2. How widely has NCC implemented the programme?

The first year of implementation has focused on Children's Social Care and this is now broadening to consider the wider system that supports families. NCC consider that this system-wide approach is key to long-term change in working with families in Newcastle.

Senior leaders and managers acknowledge that the implementation of Family Valued is work in progress and, whilst the programme plan is on track, changes to practice are still to work their way through and are not yet consistently applied.

Team managers note how their staff are all at different points on the journey of understanding and applying Family Valued. For example, although social workers are much more aware of the importance of families, there are some children where the known network of people around the child is very limited. Adoption of some of the tools and approaches is not yet consistent, for example Family Group Conferencing is only available to a small number of children at the edge of care.

Senior leaders acknowledge that inconsistency is natural in the early part of any change programme but needs to be recognised and planned for in 2022. Culture change takes longer than twelve months and NCC has to be 'in it for the long-haul'.

3. What new tools and approaches have proved most useful?

The new tools and approaches from Family Valued are playing a key part of transforming practice. The two tools most frequently mentioned by NCC practitioners are the 'Four Ways of Being' and the 'Six Ps' formulation, which are seen as core to the approach in Newcastle.

Family Group Conferencing is seen as a positive, and there are already emerging case studies of how FGC has enabled children to remain safely at home, who otherwise would not have been able to. As the service has only been up-and-running for six months, experience amongst practitioners of using it is still limited. Practitioners see its potential to bring something new and there is a sense of excitement at using it to both improve outcomes and as an opportunity for learning and professional development.

4. How is the Family Valued programme in Newcastle branded?

NCC officially refers to Family Valued as 'implementing restorative and relational practice', rather than using the term 'Family Valued'.

Whilst the principles of the programme are understood and supported, there is still some ambiguity around how the programme should be referred to. Staff use a variety of different descriptors including 'Family Valued', 'restorative practice', 'relational practice' and 'relationship-focused practice'. NCC recognises the importance of a clear identity for the programme and the benefit of a more consistent approach to branding, in order to encourage buy-in from staff, reduce the risk of confusion, and clearly differentiate it from other approaches in children's services.

“

I would recommend a family group conference to any family as it was very good to sit in a room together and talk about everything without any animosity”

FAMILY MEMBER





Leadership



5. What has been the role for leaders so far in making the programme a success?

A programme of culture change such as Family Valued requires leadership at all levels – from line managers to team managers, heads of service and senior management. Leadership is seen as critical for getting NCC to where they are after one year, including direct involvement of the Director of Children’s Services and Assistant Directors, and support from the wider corporate management team and Chief Executive. Senior leaders’ oversight of the programme via the Family Valued Board ensures that they are up-to-date on progress and are fully involved in how the programme is implemented on the ground.

Participation in training has been key to ensure senior leaders reflect on their own practice and lead by example. Being able to role-model restorative and relational practice shows to practitioners that there is strong belief in this approach at a senior level, and that there is a genuine commitment to this culture of practice throughout Newcastle children’s services

6. What issues would NCC highlight for leaders elsewhere to consider?

As the change process requires long-term commitment, implementation must be conscious of changes in leadership and ensuring a plan for succession. Whilst there has been some change, including the imminent stepping down of the Director of Children’s Services, succession arrangements are in place along with clear plans for the future. Senior managers know that it is vital that new senior officers are well-briefed, understand the programme and give it their full support. Planning is in place to ensure that the transition in leadership happens effectively.





Programme management



7. How does NCC's programme governance work?

Strategic oversight of the programme is provided by a 'Family Valued Board' that meets monthly, co-chaired by Newcastle's Director of Children's Services DCS and the Director of Leeds Relational Practice Centre. Board members include the full NCC Children, Education and Skills Directorate Leadership Team (early help, education and skills, strategy unit and children's social care). This means that Senior Leaders have direct oversight of the programme and can address any issues at a service area and directorate level.

The operational governance is provided by the 'Family Valued Project Group', made up of NCC work stream leads.

This formal structure is supplemented with weekly informal catch-ups with Leeds' programme managers. These meetings are valuable to keep momentum up across the programme, troubleshoot any problems that arise, and learn from insight from other local authorities.

8. What would NCC change in the project plan?

Generally, NCC is confident that the Year 1 delivery plan puts it in a great position to continue to transform the wider children's system. One example of this is enthusiastic reactions of school leaders, in response to communications and engagement around Family Valued.

Reflecting on progress, NCC recognise that they underestimated the capacity required to engage with and provide training to partner organisations. Partly is because training packages need to be bespoke for each partner, and partly as initial awareness-raising within those partners was more of a challenge than expected. Some of this could have been resolved by building in more dedicated training capacity to the programme costs.

NCC say that it would have been beneficial if more time was allowed to embed new services, for example Family Group Conferencing, allowing an evaluation of their impact within the two year programme. However, NCC is confident in all its services and are pleased with the progress made against the project plan.

“ It feels like I am talking to a support friend. There is nothing that isn't good.”

PARENT SPEAKING ABOUT
A SOCIAL WORKER

9. In what ways are children and young people helping to shape NCC's ambitions?

NCC's new 'Voice and Influence team' started in summer 2021. Since then, they have designed, led and supported a range of projects to listen to the views of children and young people. This has included hearing their views on city renewal plans, the council budget, and in re-imagining pathways to employment.

At the end of the year, NCC supported a 'Toon Teen Takeover'. A team of young people took control of four NCC senior management meetings: putting forward their agenda, telling officers and councillors how they can help realise their aspirations, and holding everyone to account for their decisions. The same team also took over BBC Radio Newcastle's Breakfast Show, which gave them the chance to tell their stories, challenge stereotypes of trouble-making teenagers, and discuss their career ambitions and the challenges of realising them. This also included an interview with the Minister for Children and Families about mental wellbeing in school.

10. What impact has the programme had so far on number of children in care?

Performance data indicates that Family Valued is supporting Newcastle's improvement journey across children's services and contributing to fewer children requiring statutory intervention. In the period December 2020 to December 2021, the number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan decreased by 25%, from 438 to 329. In the same time period, the number of children in local authority care decreased by 3.5%, from 686 to 662. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is particularly positive and NCC hopes and expects to see a continuation of the trend in Year 2.

NCC's recent Ofsted inspection also points to the same positive direction of travel, noting the service's focus on 'ensuring children return to their parents' care when it is safe for them to do so', and that 'where children cannot remain with their parents, other family members are considered and assessed to enable children to continue to live within their extended family'.



I couldn't imagine what it would be without her."

PARENT SPEAKING ABOUT A SOCIAL WORKER



Training in restorative and relational practice



11. What did staff think of the Family Valued training?

Colleagues in Newcastle speak highly about the individual training sessions that they attended. They come across as enthusiastic about the new tools and perspectives they have learned. After a year, they say that they feel that it is beginning to bear fruit across the service in terms of how social workers think about families, the support and challenge offered by colleagues, and the potential for better outcomes for children.

12. What could NCC have done differently with training?

Practitioners in NCC identify a number of issues that might improve the impact of training.

First, they observe that training has 'come in bursts', with workshops concentrated over a relatively short period. They suggested that if they were spread over a longer period it would help the message to 'sink in' and better maintain momentum.

Second, they note that workshops were optional, which meant that colleagues could decide not to go. This was seen as a potential barrier to achieving a whole-service change.

Third, newly qualified social workers requested that, for those that are interested, there should be more guidance on follow-up self-learning and where they can read more.

Fourth, although the quality of the training was seen as high, team managers commented that it sometimes felt too social work-specific, and suggested that colleagues elsewhere in the service may have felt it was less relevant to them. The group noted that the introductory 'roadshows' felt very inclusive but that subsequent Restorative Practice training focused heavily on child protection issues.

Fifth, senior managers note that training had missed out finance and business support staff. It was felt that they need to be included to achieve a whole-service culture change.



Impact on social work practice



13. How has Family Valued changed practice across the service over the last year?

Managers and practitioners all report observable changes to practice, including increased use of relational language, positive changes to written communication, better meeting structures and use of 'check-ins', improved supervision conversations, and a greater openness to challenge and feedback. Senior managers noted 'signs of significant change' as restorative and relational practice is becoming embedded in the service.



14. How willing have social workers been to change their practice?

Staff have generally approached the programme with an open mind and positive attitude. There is widespread support for the principles of Family Valued.

Unsurprisingly, there are differences between the pace and extent of adoption by individual social workers. This is seen as relating to the quantity of training received, the individual's attitudes, and the support from their managers. The group of social work practitioners said that their experience suggested that it had been easier for newly qualified social workers to take on the changes to practice because they were in a 'mind-set to learn'. Conversely, the social workers had seen that some of the experienced social workers were less open to change.

Senior managers report that a reaction among some experienced social work colleagues to the Family Valued training is that 'we are doing this already'. NCC does not see this as negative but rather that it is perceived as the right approach and bodes well for sustainable change.

15. In what ways has the use of language by practitioners changed?

The change in language has been one of the most visible impacts of Family Valued. Managers say that language has become more 'personal' and 'open', in terms of both spoken and written communication. Practitioners describe how they no longer referred to 'cases' or 'LAC', but talk about 'children' or use their names. One social worker said how Family Valued had helped her to be more conscious of language, and ensuring it is positive, inclusive and helps build relationships with families. For example, she no longer use words such as 'perpetrator' and avoids technical language that can exclude families.

“

[Our social worker] took our family from a really dark place... she has helped mum be strong... We are happy now.”

SIBLINGS

16. How has Family Valued influenced the attitude to risk across social work?

Family Valued is seen as beginning to change the way risk is viewed and managed in Newcastle. Team managers observe that, in general, social work teams are now more challenging about evidence for risk, instead of making assumptions about families. This is seen as evidence of social workers recognising the importance of families and beginning to practice with a culture of 'high support and high challenge'.

Team managers want the service to continue to challenge how risk is perceived. One manager commented that they wanted to see a culture that respects the family more, for example when a concern is raised by a family member it is treated as accurate, rather than assumed to be malicious.

17. Has NCC seen an impact on the recruitment or retention of social workers?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the programme has positively impacted the perception of NCC children's services in the employment market. One social worker, who joined in 2021, described how he had been attracted to Newcastle above other local authorities because of its commitment and thoughtful approach to working with families. During the period that Family Valued has been implemented, there has been a reduction in NCC's use of agency staff, and some agency staff have joined the authority on a permanent basis.

NCC's Ofsted inspection in December 2021 stated that 'social workers are positive about working for Newcastle. They feel well supported through their induction and speak of supportive and available managers...There are low rates of agency staff and there is stability in the workforce'.



“I feel like there should be more people like her, she was amazing in the way she understood our family”

PARENT SPEAKING ABOUT
A SOCIAL WORKER

18. What challenges are associated with a greater emphasis on relational practice?

Some staff say they feel an unease about how much emphasis to give to 'process' in social work nationally. On the one hand, one manager commented that 'processes can get in the way and we fall into a less relational way of working'. Another said that it was now sometimes difficult to talk about process because it is seen as 'not very relational'. This tension is seen as currently unresolved and there is a hope that, after the initial challenge posed by Family Valued to existing ways of practice, an appropriate balance can be struck.





Family Group Conferencing



19. What progress have you made with implementing FGCs?

NCC's Family Group Conference (FGC) service launched in August 2021. Twenty-eight FGCs have been held successfully, and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive about both the process and outcomes. What has worked well is the passion, commitment and enthusiasm that Newcastle family-facing practitioners bring to the programme, and the way families have responded to that. This has been evident from feedback from children and families and the response to in-house Restorative Practice training we are delivering for practitioners across the city.

20. How has the service reacted to the introduction of FGCs in Newcastle?

FGCs are new to NCC and are seen as an exciting development. All groups were generally positive about FGCs, although noting how they were a learning curve for everyone.

Consistent with NCC's programme plan, FGCs were only introduced in the last six months, so there was limited direct experience of practice. One manager that had participated in an FGC described the 'eye-opening effect' of the way the process helped one family produce a plan for their child that reflected real family engagement and couldn't have been achieved without it.

However, there is also a degree of scepticism around the approach. One practitioner said that he had heard lots of claims about FGCs and wondered if the process could ever live up to the hype. He said that he was sceptical until he saw the impact for himself.

21. What have you learnt from implementing FGCs and what would you do differently?

At the launch of the service, NCC limited the availability of FGCs to children at the edge of care. In Year 2 NCC will continue to expand the FGC service's reach and ensure it is embedded in practice across children's services. Reflecting on where they are now, NCC say it might have been beneficial to have planned to get Family Group Conferencing up-and-running earlier to support the changes happening elsewhere in the service.



Priorities for Year 2



22. What are the key priorities for the programme in Year 2?

A focus on embedding and sustaining the programme was seen as the main priority for Year 2. This will build on the successes of Year 1 but learn lessons from what didn't go to plan and draw on insight from other areas that have adopted Family Valued.

Team managers and practitioners say that the programme could do more to present a 'Newcastle focus'. They would like to see a clearer vision what restorative and relational practice means in Newcastle, which showcases local examples. They would also like to see a clear 'roadmap' for the programme for Year 2 and beyond.

Practitioners identified that there needs to be clarity on 'what good looks like'. They want to see more work to translate the principles of Family Valued into 'simple' and 'tangible' applications. In Year 2, they would like to see more real-life examples of good practice to help social work practitioners answer the question 'am I doing this right?'

NCC will continue to take partners on the journey with them. NCC's Year 2 project plan will include more investment in communications with partners, as it recognises that this is key to overall success and their ambition for whole-system change.



[We] have time to talk to each other first and then make plans. It turned out to be really good for my family."

PARENT