



Children and Families Cymru Service Evaluation

1. Context for the report

In 2018, St Giles obtained some additional funding from the Waterloo Foundation to commission an external, independent evaluation of the Children and Families Cymru service and engaged Confluence Partnerships in February 2020 to undertake this work. The aim of this evaluation is to understand the impact of the service, how it meets local need, and how it fits within and adds value to the commissioning landscape in South Wales. It will consider the following areas: The extent to which the service has met its target numbers and outcomes; the wider context within which the service operates; and, the extent to which the service adds value locally. Based on the evidence available, the report will also make recommendations for improving practice.

1. Method

Data was gathered during February 2020 using the following means:

- Dip sample case file review (3 cases)
- Analysis of progress data (from Monthly Progress Reporting database)
- Analysis of monitoring data (collated by St. Giles for inclusion in 2019 report to funder)
- Review of past reports to project funder (2016, 2018, 2019)
- Face to face interviews with the current, and the previous caseworker
- Face to face interviews with three colleagues who work alongside the service
- Telephone interviews with two current users of the service
- Telephone interview with one professional who has referred families to the service

Note on limitations:

Extensive efforts were made by the evaluator to include the voice of current and past service users in the evaluation but within the timeframe available it was only possible to speak with two, one male and one female. This represents a gap and the need for service user consultation is addressed in the recommendations. Further, while the evaluator had sight of St. Giles's Monthly Progress Reporting (MPR) database, it was difficult to interpret the data in relation to this service since the tool has not been designed to capture outcomes specific to this service. As such, there appears to be some level of inconsistency between MPR data and collated monitoring data which, is also addressed in the recommendations. Notwithstanding these limitations, in the view of the evaluator, this report represents a reasonable 'snapshot' of the service and the environment in which it operated during February 2020.

2. The service

St Giles's Children and Families Cymru service has been operating since 2012, originally funded by Barclays and more recently by the Waterloo Foundation, with match funding from the Moondance Foundation. Since its inception, the aim of the project has been to support families struggling to cope as a result of experiencing difficulties and having a range of complex, inter-connected and unmet needs. Through casework support and mentoring the service expects to improve clients' lives in the following ways:

- Improving their living environment
- Improving their relationships
- Improving their wellbeing
- Increasing their readiness to engage in education, training and employment (ETE)

Staffing levels for the service have varied over the years, at most having one full time caseworker and some input from Peer Advisers. The project is currently staffed by one part time caseworker (0.4 FTE), supported by a manager. The service is not subject to any formal steering or multi-agency review.

The Children and Families Cymru service operates predominantly in the Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff, providing intensive intervention for vulnerable families who have complex needs and are trapped in cycles of offending, poverty and disadvantage. These families often require immediate support with a range of problems relating to housing, employment, finances and debt management, mental health, substance misuse, domestic violence, parenting and schooling. The support offered by the caseworker is

intensive, responsive, highly practical and tailored to each family's specific circumstances as the following quote from a service user illustrates:

'They've attended appointments with me, court, solicitors, mental health, they've been there for everything. [Caseworker] gave me the strength to walk away from that relationship. I was so scared and I don't think I'd have had the courage to leave but he was always there, morning or night, giving me the support I needed to do what was best for my family. I suffer with anxiety and back then, before I got my medication, [caseworker] was my medication, keeping me calm.' (Current service user)

Adopting this bespoke, holistic approach to working with clients helps to stabilise chaotic situations relatively quickly and seems to 'hold' them effectively such that longer term, preventative work can be undertaken with them once their immediate crisis/crises are managed.

'I've had lovely texts from [caseworker] over the months. It really matters that he thinks about me and wants to know how things are going for me.' (Current service user)

3. Outcomes

As noted earlier, the data sources available to the evaluator do not readily correspond, meaning a degree of interpretation has been necessary. Monitoring data collated by St. Giles indicates that over the last 12 months the Children and Families Cymru caseworker has provided support to 31 families, in line with target numbers cited in the project proposal. It also outlines the wide range of both practical and emotional support that has been provided to these clients including housing, finance, benefit and debt, domestic abuse, health, wellbeing, relationships, attitudes, thinking and behaviour and substance misuse.

Outcomes for these families can be broadly categorised under the following four headings:

- i. Improved living environment – All thirty one families (100%) supported during the period have an improved living environment. Measures used to indicate this include access to sustained housing; claiming appropriate and relevant benefits; debt management plan in place; tenancy maintenance plan in place; and engaging with health services.

- ii. Improved wellbeing – Twenty seven families (87%) report improved wellbeing. This is measured by taking a baseline recording using a wellbeing scale and undertaking regular reviews to enable changes over time to be measured. This achievement is in the context of very high recorded levels of mental ill health and substance misuse, so supporting and enabling stability under these circumstances is very positive.
- iii. Improved relationships – Nineteen families (60%) experienced improved relationships, including healthier family relationships; actively engaging with relevant services including social services, YOT, Probation and school; and engaging in positive activities/local community groups. This is an encouraging result because in many cases family relationships are very fractured, damaged or toxic at the point of referral and take a sustained period of time, patience, support and effort to change. Often clients have had negative experiences with services, many of which can appear punitive towards them and/or have to enforce unwelcome controls and conditions. Supporting people to engage better with these wider support systems is challenging and progress is unlikely to be linear.
- iv. Increased ETE readiness – Twenty-one families (67%) have been recorded as engaging actively with ETE or another positive activity. Indicators include having an ETE action plan in place; actively searching and/or applying for work; accessing training; engaging with education; and engaging in some other positive, meaningful activity. While this figure is encouraging (because for many, their experience of education hasn't been positive and for a number of reasons, including mental ill-health, substance misuse and contact with the criminal justice system, securing employment can be particularly challenging) it is important to note that, according to MPR data, the vast majority of ETE outcomes relate to engaging in a positive activity rather than education, training or employment.

The case notes reviewed indicate the activity of a service run by credible and principled staff, who have lived experience of the kinds of issues service users encounter, and who exhibit the patience and tenacity required to achieve outcomes. This analysis is supported both by professionals who have referred families to the service and also by service users.

'They're really easy to refer to and it's great to have somewhere to refer families who need a bit of extra support. One guy I referred wanted contact with his child so [caseworker] was able to go to the family court with him and try to move that on. As probation officers we are obviously there to help the person but we also have to enforce the orders so it's good for them to feel there's someone on their side. St Giles can be flexible and have the freedom to help in a different way. One woman that a colleague of mine referred had her children taken away and she could only see them for supervised contact. She struggled to understand why she couldn't see them on her own, thought social services were against her. The caseworker could spend the time with her supporting her and explaining the situation. Other services don't have that time really.' (Probation Officer)

'Probation is just to mark my attendance whilst St. Giles asked me what I have been going through and found a way round to support me.' (Current service user)

'I've never known a service like St. Giles, it feel like they're part of my family. They've been through so much with me. I don't let people into my home usually, don't let them near my kids but my kids know who they are, they love them, they trust them.' (Current service user)

Both the service users interviewed said that the combination of practical and emotional support was what made the service so helpful and feel so genuine.

'They helped me in very practical ways and always emotionally. That first Christmas I got a hamper from them, it makes me emotional talking about it, it was so kind and people aren't kind like that in this world.'

'I have had mental support and encouragement and also immigration support. Thanks guys for everything you have done for me most especially at my 11th hour you really came to my rescue of which I will forever appreciate.'

The following two case studies illustrate how bespoke and responsive support, tenacity and persistence can help families in very different but equally challenging circumstances. Note: real names are not used.

CASE STUDY 1 – “Sarah”: A responsive approach

Sarah was referred at the beginning of 2018. For the first month she required very intensive support to address a range of needs relating broadly to her housing situation. She was helped to: move into a new home after experiencing domestic violence; set up her utilities; secure furniture; apply for benefits; begin managing historic debts; and maintain the new tenancy. After a month, she felt settled and did not feel she wanted or needed further support. The caseworker maintained 'light touch' contact to preserve the relationship. Over the summer, Sarah made contact and confessed that she had got into debt again, was having problems with her benefits and struggling to maintain her tenancy. The caseworker was able to step up support to weekly/fortnightly contact, helped manage the debt by arranging to have pre-pay meters installed and applied for some additional benefits. Issues relating to previous domestic violence resurfaced for Sarah so the caseworker was also providing emotional support. In the autumn, Sarah felt able to enroll at college and began a course. Her caseworker continued visiting fortnightly as ongoing support was needed to maintain the tenancy, the college place, sort out the right benefits and manage debt. Sarah became anxious about a forthcoming court case which would decide on her ex-partner's rights to have contact with their child and she needed a lot of emotional and practical support around this. Generally Sarah was managing well and the caseworker was able to scale back the intensity of support but kept in touch. In the spring of 2019, following appeal, a positive decision about benefits was made and a backdated award meant Sarah was able to better manage her debts. The court case dragged out which raised Sarah's anxiety and had an increasingly negative effect on her mental health. The caseworker supported her at court and at medical appointments and also kept in touch by phone on a weekly basis. By the summer, Sarah was using alcohol to excess to help manage her stress and anxiety surrounding the court case. Once again, the caseworker responded to Sarah's changing needs and stepped up support to twice weekly until the situation settled, her medication was altered and the court case resolved. Currently Sarah is feeling relatively stable and the caseworker sees or speaks to her on a fortnightly basis.

CASE STUDY 2 – “Bill”: Forming a bridge between the client and other services

Bill was referred at the beginning of 2019 but did not engage. The caseworker tried periodically to make contact and succeeded at the start of July. A meeting was arranged but Bill did not make it. The caseworker persisted throughout July and they

finally met in September. Bill and his partner had a history of mental health and substance misuse and were living in unsuitable accommodation with their baby. A number of statutory services were involved, including social services because of the mother's parenting history and current safeguarding and welfare concerns for the baby. Bill and his partner were mistrustful of services and had a volatile and unproductive relationship with their social worker. They felt that because the caseworker was independent of statutory services and had proven herself by persisting in her efforts to engage with them, she could be trusted. While a difficult line to tread, this meant that the caseworker could liaise with statutory services and, without breaching confidentiality, share relevant information and ensure that all parties had the intelligence required to make defensible decisions and safeguard from a contextually accurate position. When Bills' mental health deteriorated and he risked relapsing with substances, he remained engaged with the caseworker. Their relationship was established enough that she held the intelligence required to provide genuinely holistic support to Bill and his family and so was able to informally co-ordinate the input of other services.

In addition to the work and outcomes described above, the Children and Families Cymru caseworker has undertaken some partnership work with colleagues from other St Giles run projects, namely Serious Organised Crime (SOC) pilot, Early Intervention Service (EIS) and County Lines in Cardiff project (CLiC). In certain cases where colleagues have identified a family as having foundational issues such as poverty, domestic abuse and poor living conditions, that are contributing to their children becoming involved in gangs or drug dealing, they have enlisted the help of the Children and Families worker.

The following case study clearly shows how beneficial this kind of partnership working can be and also how much it can add value both to the service (in this case County Lines in Cardiff - CLiC) and crucially to those receiving support.

Note: The most recent UK Government definition of county lines is 'a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas (within the UK), using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move (and store) the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.'

CASE STUDY 3 – “John”: Partnership working

John is a vulnerable young person living at home with his mum and siblings, who was referred to CLiC due to his involvement in county lines gang related activity.

“My young person was recruited (to a County Line). He was living in a trap house and preparing to go out of area. He was sexually and physically assaulted, very vulnerable. His mother was very anti-services; she had a history of lots of contact with services and was sceptical and chaotic. Being independent from social services meant I could be the bridge between them and mum. She was in debt, had serious issues with parenting and poor, insecure housing. She needed lots of practical support to get her to a position where she could support her son and make the family situation more secure. However, my focus really is the young person and because he saw me helping mum too, he started not completely trusting me. In some ways it undermined my work with him but it was also completely necessary. At one point I took a colleague from the children and families service to work with mum because the whole family's needs were so high but that was a one off. This is a common problem and really it needs addressing properly.”

(Project worker)

Of course, the children and families caseworker has her own caseload and cannot always expect to be in a position to support colleagues by supporting their clients' families in this way. However, it is interesting to note that the needs of these families and the kinds of interventions and help required to improve their situations are the same as those for her own caseload.

4. The systemic context: Key issues and challenges

In engaging with vulnerable people with complex needs, the children and families service has encountered worrying trends and changes in offending behaviour, substance misuse and the involvement of families and young people that arguably put them at greater risk.

In the past decade, across Wales there has been an 80% increase in recorded offences involving knives. Further the average age of people found carrying knives has reduced, with teenagers as young as 15 doing so. In South Wales specifically, over the eight years in which the Children and Families Cymru service has been operating, the number of offences involving a knife dealt with by South Wales Police has almost doubled. In 2018,

more than half the recorded knife crime incidents in Wales occurred in South Wales, representing a 23% increase on the previous year. (ONS 2019)

'Knife and gang related crime is definitely on the increase, especially with the young ones. It's a growing problem here.' (Probation Officer)

More recently South Wales, along with many other parts of the UK, has begun to become aware of the county lines phenomenon in its local area. As a result, South Wales Police launched Operation Guardian in September 2017 which sought to raise awareness at all levels of the force of child vulnerability and exploitation in relation to county lines.

In recognition of and in response to these changes, St Giles has established three new services since 2017:

- County Lines in Cymru (CLiC) which aims to support children and young people who have become involved in county lines activity in Cardiff and the surrounding area to help them move away from involvement and into more positive activities and lifestyles
- Early Intervention Service (EIS) which offers support, advice and guidance to young people at risk of becoming involved in serious youth violence and county lines
- Serious Organised Crime (SOC) pilot project working intensively with a small number of young people showing signs of involvement in serious youth violence

While the focus for each of these services is on the young person, there is strong recognition of the role played by families in the lives of these clients, and work to support the young people generally happens within the wider family context.

'We need to be the voice for the family; that's a massive hole. All money is focused on the young people, quite rightly, but the parents get left out and blamed. The young person becomes disconnected from their family unit and without that wider support, our impact can only go so far.' (SOC Caseworker)

Usually the family circumstances are challenging and can contribute to or at least have some part to play in the young person's behaviour and situation, as the following extract from the 2019 CLiC project evaluation indicates:

“Whilst a small minority of children come from stable family backgrounds, the majority have had some form of adverse childhood experience (ACE) before becoming involved in county lines, including one or more of the following: poverty, poor housing, substance misuse, exclusion from mainstream education, chaotic home life, history of offending in the family, divorce, parental involvement in county lines/drug dealing, domestic violence.” (Page 10, CLiC project interim evaluation. May 2019).

More broadly, the need to recognise and work with the wider family context when supporting young people is becoming increasingly acknowledged, as the following extract from the 2018 evaluation of St Giles’s Lambeth Family Gangs service highlights:

“All interviewees recognised the importance of working not only with the young person at risk but also with the wider family in order to affect real and lasting change by understanding and beginning to address the complex practical and relational issues that often underpin or can contribute to the situation.

‘The family element is important. Real impact on challenges cannot be achieved if the focus is only on the young person. The context is important and the fact they [workers] can help with issues like housing, benefits and meet parents who give this context. In situations where the family is not having a positive influence on the young person or struggling to maintain boundaries, it’s very helpful for St Giles to be involved.’ (Referring professional) (Page 6, Interim evaluation of St. Giles Trust’s Lambeth Family Gangs project, April 2018).

In most cases, CLiC, SOS and EIS colleagues have to balance focusing on supporting their clients’ needs with addressing wider family issues as best as they can. While their skills to do so are not in question, they do readily describe the challenges this routinely poses.

‘There’s loads of family work involved in most cases. You need consistency in these families; it takes a long time and a lot of effort to build trust for the young person and also the family. It’s the whole family at risk so the whole family needs supporting.’ (CLiC caseworker)

‘We really need another worker. If I’m working with the child, it’s just as important for mum to have her own support so the whole thing works and we can properly provide our holistic model.’ (EIS caseworker)

It seems clear that these workers and their clients would value and benefit from more support in relation to their families' complex needs, delivered by a specialist families' worker.

'A family approach is critical. If there were two workers a family could relate to, you could really provide that reactive support in real time. We manage our caseloads to allow for that reaction but I'm only one person and I get pulled in different directions.'
(SOC caseworker)

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Over the past year, and in previous years, available evidence shows that the Children and Families Cymru service has provided a range of practical and emotional support to families experiencing multiple and complex needs. In every case last year, this support contributed to families achieving more stable living conditions and the vast majority also reported experiencing improved wellbeing during the same time period. A significant number also saw improvements in their relationships, both personal and with other professionals and also made progress in relation to readiness to engage in education, training or employment. Colleagues working in other, allied projects run by St Giles and probation staff who have referred clients, clearly articulated the benefit of this service with its clear family focus.

The landscape in which the service operates is changing and developing and as a result, so too are the most pressing needs in relation to children and families in South Wales. One of the defining elements of the service is its responsiveness to the needs and situations faced by clients. In line with this ethos, it would make sense for it to adapt and respond to this change in need as defined by national data and local intelligence.

There is clearly a need for a children and families project in South Wales; arguably a growing need. The following recommendations suggest ways in which the service could develop in order to best meet the locally identified needs and further add value to existing provision.

Recommendation one: Re-profile the service

The service would benefit from its parameters being redrawn, such that it becomes more closely aligned to the other St. Giles services with a children and young person's focus operating in South Wales (CLiC, SOS and EIS), in recognition of the importance of adopting a family approach to supporting clients.

Recommendation two: Enhance and test the wrap-around family approach

CLiC, SOC and EIS have recognised a gap in their capacity to provide dedicated support to the wider family of young clients with whom they work. Enhancing the service offer by bringing them together with Children and Families Cymru, creates an opportunity to test a full, wrap-around family approach to supporting vulnerable young people and families. Enabling the children and families service to accept referrals directly from CLiC, SOS and EIS could be a straightforward way of achieving this and would arguably also add value to each in turn.

Recommendation three: Respond to recommendations made in recent CLiC evaluation

The CLiC evaluation recommended increasing capacity in the service and recruiting champions to work with families, particularly those reluctant to engage for cultural reasons. Re-profiling the children and families service as suggested would help to scaffold CLiC (and SOS and EIS) potentially adding value to and creating a more robust structure for future families work in South Wales.

Recommendation four: Multi-agency project steering

Consider creating a steering group comprising multi-agency 'families champions' with the aim of collectively problem solving in real time, maintaining a strategic perspective to help orientate the service to new trends in offending behaviour, and supporting future sustainability. Service users should be represented in this forum to ensure their voice is integrated into any multi-agency decision making.

Recommendation five: Strengthening outcomes data capture

Assuming the hypothesis that 'long lasting positive change for vulnerable children and young people can only be achieved by acknowledging the wider family context and addressing the needs of the whole family', it will be important to robustly capture data in a way that enables this to be tested. This should include: creating a project monitoring mechanism in which project outcomes are clearly stated and reported against; developing case studies which illustrate value added outcomes for whole families; keeping a process log to record challenges, themes and issues in real time; and engaging and seeking the involvement of service users, for example via regular focus groups and interviews.

6. References

The County Lines in Cymru (CLiC) Project Interim Evaluation, May 2019. JH Consulting.

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Knife crime: Record levels in Wales in 2018, April 2019. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales

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