

# Development Department Research Programme Research Findings No. 121

## An Evaluation of the Dundee Families Project

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The findings presented here are of a process, outcome and cost evaluation of a Project run by NCH Action for Children Scotland in Dundee for families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless as a result of 'anti-social behaviour'. The Project follows a systemic approach to family difficulties and offers a range of services through individual and couple counselling, family support and group work. The evaluation was commissioned jointly by the Scottish Executive, Dundee City Council, and NCH Action for Children Scotland.

### Main Findings

- The Project worked with 126 cases between its inception in November 1996 and October 2000. This represented about half the cases referred.
- Just over half the referrals came from housing services with nearly all the remainder coming from the social work department.
- The nature of "anti-social behaviour" exhibited by referred families varied, but most prominent were conflict with neighbours and damage to property.
- The service is highly intensive (3 cases per worker) and includes a wide range of methods.
- Work with families usually lasted 9-12 months, longer if there was a residential component.
- The majority of families made good progress, especially with regard to tenancy-related matters.
- Parents and young people were very positive about the service. All identified substantial changes in their housing situation, behaviour and/or relationships.
- Agencies working with children and families reported that the Project delivered a unique and high quality service.
- Evidence suggests that the Project generates real cost savings, particularly in the longer-term.
- Crucial ingredients were good management, stable staff, shared 'ownership' by other agencies, a repertoire of challenging methods and a holistic approach.

## Introduction

The aims of the research were to:

- examine the work of the Dundee Families Project
- obtain the views of service users and key stakeholders
- assess the progress and outcomes of families served by the Project
- ascertain local residents' perceptions of the Project
- estimate the costs and value of the Project

## The Work of the Project

The Project was set up in 1996 to provide a service for families with 'anti-social behaviour', i.e. difficulties with neighbours or upkeep of their accommodation that were threatening their tenancy. Supported by Dundee City Council, the Project is run by NCH Action for Children Scotland. The Project works with a small number of families and uses a variety of individual, couple, family and group work methods. Support is available 24-hours a day.

The service takes three main forms: core, dispersed and outreach. The most needy families can be accommodated in a residential 'core' block, catering for up to 4 families. Others may be assisted in 'dispersed tenancies'. Finally a preventive service is offered on an 'outreach' basis to families in their existing homes.

## External perceptions of the Project

In its first year, the Project attracted considerable adverse attention from the media and local residents. However, the residents survey showed that by 1999 the great majority of local people accepted the Project and few had experience of any negative incidents. In addition, the wider public perception of the project was transformed from a very negative to a very positive image.

## Staffing and management

Outsiders universally saw the Project as being very well managed. There was a comparatively stable staff group and staff praised the training provided by NCH. The Project maintains very thorough case records, though the addition of certain standard progress indicators would facilitate monitoring.

## Inter-agency co-operation

A strong partnership approach was built in to the Project from the start, with the local authority's housing and social work departments providing funding and advisory input at regular meetings. Strong management commitment to the Project was expressed by all the key council departments. Relationships with front-line staff in other agencies were generally good, but there was scope for improvement or development with respect to social work, education and health.

## Referral, assessment and duration of contact

With very few exceptions, referrals came predominantly from the housing and social work departments. The total number of referrals dipped in 1999, then revived.

The Project received 126 referrals in its first 4 years of operation. Over half the referred cases (55%) were accepted and actively worked with. One third (34%) of the referrals were deemed 'inappropriate' in that they did not fit the Project's criteria, and the remainder (11%) 'did not engage'.

The referred families were all poor and almost always unemployed. Many households were headed by a lone parent, though in some instances the other parent was still actively involved.

The nature of the "anti-social behaviour" was varied, but most prominent were conflict with neighbours and damage to property. In addition to housing difficulties, families usually had serious problems with child-care and control. There was also a high incidence of physical and mental health difficulties and a number of adults had drug or alcohol problems.

The Project adopted a very thorough assessment process, which was strongly supported by the staff and well regarded by outsiders. This usually took about 8 weeks. Concerns were expressed about the time taken for the service to start in some cases and a new direct admission service was under discussion, to allow faster access where families were already known to the Homeless Persons service.

The duration of work with families ranged from a few months to over 2 years. The mean period for those who spent time in the core block was 19 months, but work with dispersed and outreach cases typically lasted 9-12 months.

## Family progress and outcomes

Evidence from several sources indicated that the great majority of families who engaged with the Project made progress. Council information on closed cases indicated that the majority of families had improved following involvement with the Project, particularly with regard to housing issues. However, many still had serious child-care problems.

The evidence about the comparative success of the three main service types offered by the Project was inconclusive, partly because numbers were small. The Project's recorded evaluations of completed cases indicated that a lower percentage of outreach cases were successful (56%), compared with dispersed and core (82% and 83%). The case follow-up survey found similar rates of difficulties among the three case types.

A few interviewees questioned the need for a core block, but the great majority of respondents believed that a small residential facility was helpful in providing intensive support to families with the greatest difficulties.

## Views of parents and children

Family members interviewed in the study were almost all pleased with the Project. The adults believed they benefited from improved access to housing and facilities for children. They reported positive changes in family relationships and behaviour. Parents found

staff supportive and understanding. Some parents indicated difficulties in adjusting after the project's very structured support had ended.

The children and young people interviewed were virtually all very enthusiastic about the Project. Most saw the staff as helpful and thought their housing situations were much better. Several welcomed the attention and play opportunities. Many acknowledged changes in their own behaviour at home or school and recognised significant improvements in their parents.

## Costs and savings

The study evidence indicated that the Project offers good value for money. Stakeholders were confident that the Project helped to stabilise families' housing situation, avoiding costs associated with eviction, homelessness administration and rehousing. In some of the successful cases, major long-term savings were achieved by preventing the need for children to be placed in foster or residential care. In addition, savings to other agencies are likely.

The cost estimates suggested that the project was, at worst, no more expensive than the conventional way of dealing with these families. However, it is more likely that it actually generated real cost savings, particularly when long-term costs are taken into account.

## Considerations for possible replication

Drawing on all the sources of evidence, several crucial factors emerged in accounting for the Project's success. These included:

- shared 'ownership' of the Project by all key agencies
- high quality management and staff
- careful public relations (after a poor start)
- a holistic, personalised and challenging approach to families
- a repertoire of change-focused direct work methods.

The Project (and other similar schemes) would benefit from:

- greater financial security
- clearer and more widely distributed information about referral arrangements
- closer links with health and education services

Partner agencies need to consider alternative options for families who do not engage and develop plans for sustaining improvement after families leave the Project.

Any new Project would need to weigh carefully the high cost of residential provision and the associated staff input against the evidence that the most complex and vulnerable families might not respond to a less intensive service.

## About the Study

The research was undertaken between 1999 and 2001. The main methods of gathering information were:

- Initial and final interviews with 19 Project staff, NCH managers and external stakeholders.
- A survey of 23 local residents
- Initial interviews with 53 individuals in 20 families and follow up interviews with 24 individuals in 10 of the families.
- Interviews with 3 families referred to the Project but who did not engage with it
- Detailed analysis of 126 case records.
- Questionnaires to housing and social work staff on 70 closed cases.
- Discussion of vignettes (brief case scenarios) with housing and social work staff.

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