



Family First Project

Women's Aid ABCLN in partnership with Northern Health and Social Care Trust, Family Support Intervention Teams



Mid-Point Evaluation Report

Prepared by:



February 2019

Project Background

Women's Aid ABCLN provides refuge, support, information and training in the Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne & Newtownabbey areas to women and children who are suffering domestic abuse within the home.

In April 2016, the Big Lottery Fund agreed to fund the 'Family First' Project for a 5-year period to March 2021 with the opportunity to apply for a further two years of funding. Women's Aid ABCLN is most grateful for the Big Lottery funding and the benefits it has already brought to women and children.

The original stated purpose of the Family First Project was to:

'Establish an innovative, proactive, partnership model with Social Services that will deliver an early intervention approach to addressing the devastating impact of domestic violence. The project will identify and support families who have experienced domestic violence, thereby reducing risk, minimizing further harm, preventing separation (resulting from children being taken into care) and ultimately strengthening family relationships.'

The project employs a team of 8 workers who work in partnership with Social Workers in the Family Intervention Teams in Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey.

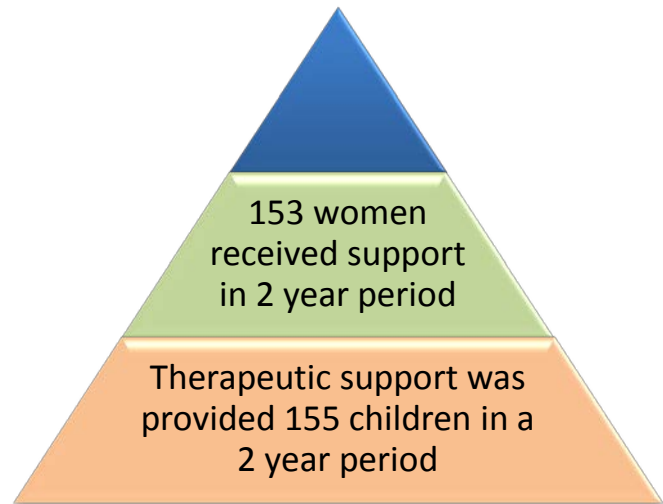
The team:

- Take referrals, assesses risk and develop individual tailored safety and support plans reflecting the needs and circumstances of the families referred.
- Work with mothers in the community to build capacity to support their children and help them overcome adversity caused by domestic violence.
- Provide tailored support as well as provision of group work opportunities for mothers and children.
- Enable women to develop skills and to come together as a family to learn.
- Help reduce isolation by developing contact with local support networks during engagement which will continue on exit from the project.

OUTCOMES

From the outset a framework for evaluation was established to enable Women's Aid to monitor key outcomes over the course of each year. The table below sets out the outcome measures that relate to the original application for funding to National Lottery and to the letter of offer to Women's Aid. Women's Aid in partnership with Social Services decided on four outcomes which were presented to The National Lottery and agreed by them.

The total number of beneficiaries was capped at 5 per area at any one time¹ ensuring that the services provided are tailored, focused and of the highest possible quality with support provided on a one to one basis in the home and at Women's Aid offices locally. The statistical outcomes reflect the two-year period from November 2016, when referrals began and November 2018.



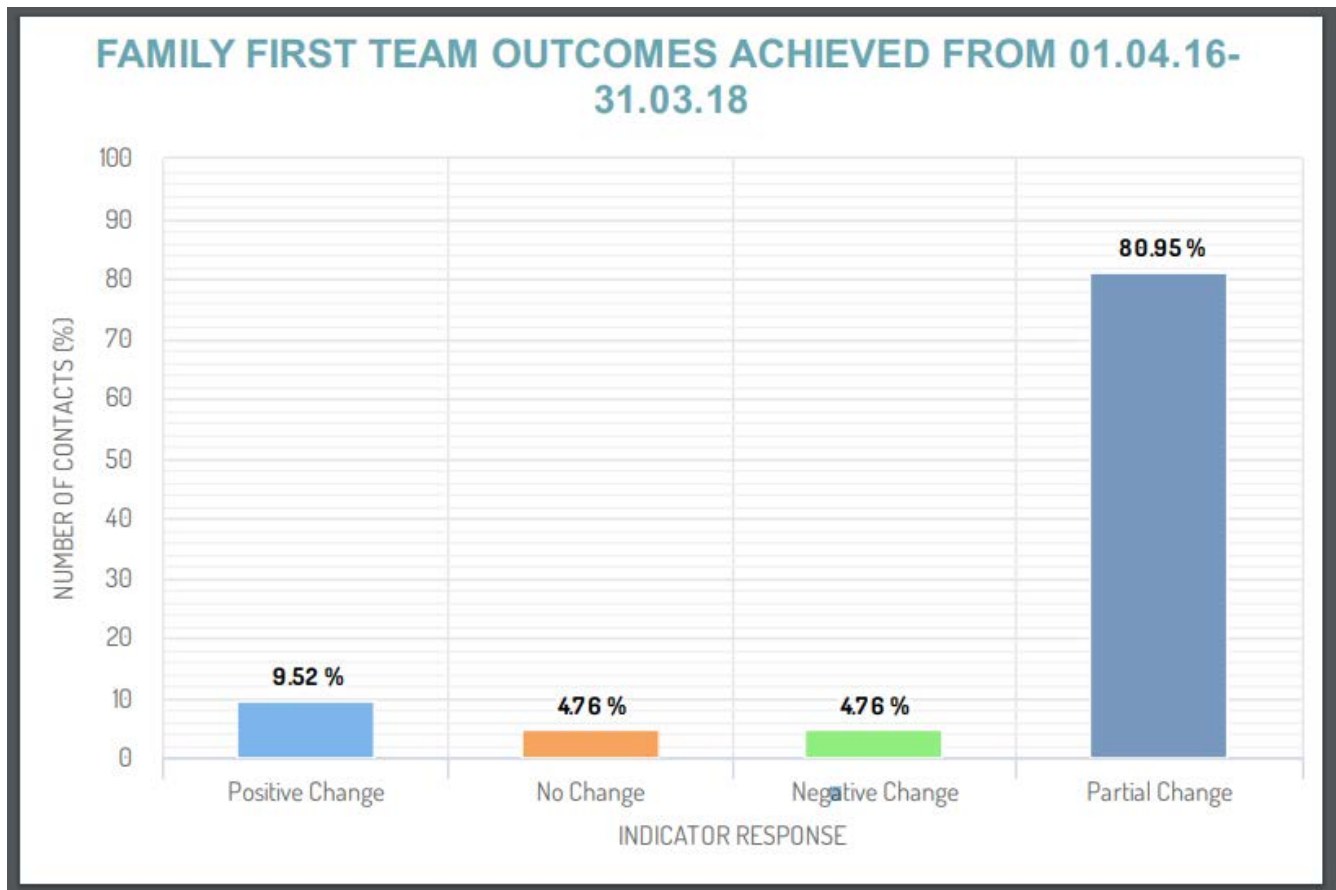
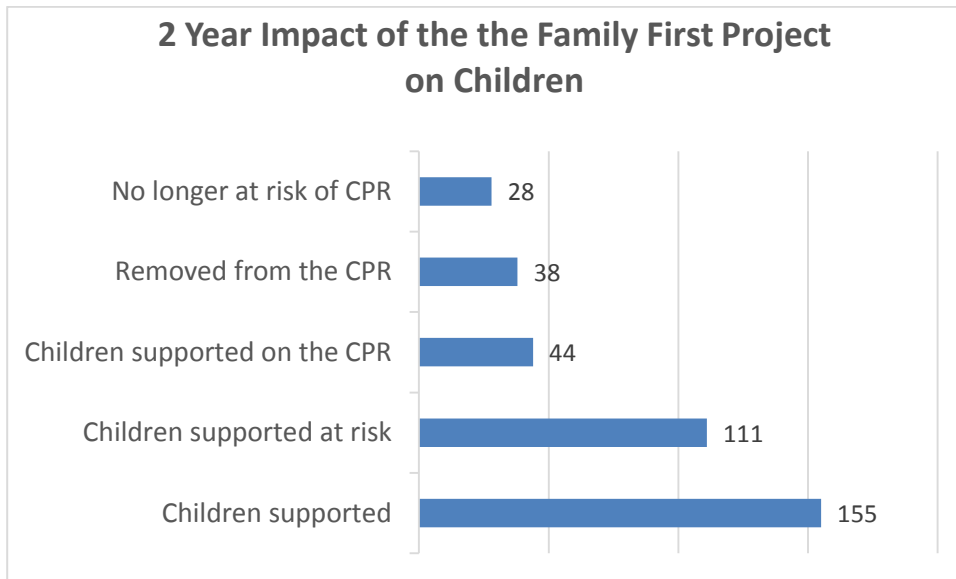
Through the earlier intervention, protection and support approach inherent in this project, mother's capacities to protect and safeguard their children's needs and welfare will be enhanced therefore reducing the need for further statutory intervention (i.e. children being removed from their mothers and taken into care) and ultimately creating safer futures for families involved.

The project uses a Family Empowerment Star, a tool to promote change and track development in situations where there have been multiple vulnerabilities. Family Empowerment Star is also very much about how you work with someone, the values and principles that underpin it and is very person-centred. It is a validated outcome measurement tool which confirms the success of supports/interventions with mum and her children.

The completion of a comprehensive support plan is agreed with the Family Support Worker, Social Worker and central to this is mum being empowered to very much lead on the plan. This approach means that the concerns in relation to the children are addressed. The Family Empowerment Star assists everyone especially mums to have a shared language and framework to reduce the risk and therefore lessens the need for statutory involvement.

¹ With a total of 5 areas – Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Carrickfergus

CPR in the infographic refers to The Child Protection Register



The percentage of change reflects the families' journey in relation to domestic violence

Outcome 1

Improved collaborative partnerships between Women's Aid ABCLN, Social Services and community groups leading to increased understanding in relation to Domestic Violence.

Achieved by:

- Delivery of training by Women's Aid to Social Services staff.
- Ongoing, effective communication between Family First staff from Women's Aid and Social Services staff.
- Steering group meetings are planned quarterly with Senior Practitioners who manage referrals in their areas.
- Joint visits to women and their children made by Family First staff and Social Worker.

Evidence of Outcome

The Family First project was well designed with social workers being invited to be part of the project design team. Partnership working from the design stage leads to stronger outcomes.

Onus is a Social Business economy set up by Women's Aid ABCLN to raise awareness of Domestic Violence. Social Workers can attend this training as part of their induction.

The Family First workers attend team meetings with Social Workers (Family Intervention Team).

Social workers have gained a better relationship with the women as a result of a clear sense of partnership working. One Social Worker said:

"This service has helped my relationship with family as the support worker can often explain why Social Services are involved/concerned and the Mum seems to take this on board."

Another Social Worker said:

"Some Mums who just never 'got it' finally 'get it' with the support of our partners in the Family First team. Family First intervention is now seen as key part of some child protection plans."

The self-esteem of women is being raised as social workers commend women for engaging with Women's Aid.

The vast majority of Social Workers committed to joint visits with Family First Support workers and families and agreed goals through the Empowerment Star. Total of 57 joint visits.

The relationship with children and their Social Worker has improved as a result of joint visits by Social Workers and Family First staff and as a result of an increased understanding of the impact of domestic violence.

The project has strengthened working relationships with Social Services therefore allowing Women's Aid staff to advocate more effectively for the needs of children and their mothers within the service.

A senior Social Worker wrote:

"This project is award winning as it has demonstrated the joint ability of partners to manage risk and achieve best outcomes for women and their children. These include stability and security within the family and community environment. Mothers are enabled to become protective parents and the project is the basis for opportunities to break the cycle of domestic violence."

Outcome 2

Tailored individual/group work support will enhance physical/emotional health and wellbeing of families affected by Domestic Violence.

Achieved by:

- Individual tailored support plans based upon identification of need and circumstances developed for women and their children.
- Families engaging with support interventions, including intense individual support, practical family support and group work opportunities.
- Mothers reporting improved physical and emotional health and well-being of self and children.

Evidence of Outcome

All 153 participants reported improvement and this was evidenced by the Empowerment star which measures the distance travelled.

All of the women who have participated report direct benefits relating to:

- Mental health
- Socialising with others
- Awareness of domestic violence
- Communicating feelings
- Personal safety
- Physical health
- Relationship with other agencies
- Confidence in parenting
- Self Esteem
- Confidence

Participants have said:

- "I would not be here if it was not for this service"
- "It is the smallest and simplest of things that have helped me get back on my feet."
- "The personalised plan and support received are the best support I ever experienced."
- "My anxiety levels have dropped as a result of Family First. I can now cope better with everyday life with my child."
- "This has been a lifeline that has saved my family."
- "My temperament is so much better."

The physical/emotional health and wellbeing of families has improved through:

- Tailored support plans for each woman and child.
- Creating an environment where the support staff understands the experiences women have been through and can support the children to deal with the challenges, they face.
- Creating an environment in which women and children know they are being believed.
- Creating a safe space for children to play, learn and grow.
- Children having an opportunity to talk about the trauma and things that have happened to them.
- Children having increased confidence, having found positive ways to deal with the trauma.

The project has enabled women to rebuild their lives, with confidence, and has helped children to be more engaged at school, be part of a stable family unit and stay out of / come out of care and stay off / come off the Child Protection Register.

Outcome 3

Early family support and intervention will increase safety, reduce risk and strengthen family relationships.

Achieved by:

- Risk assessments completed with mothers (Risk Assessment will identify risks to both mothers and children and put in place interventions to address these).
- Mothers and children reporting increased safety as a result of participation in project.
- Mothers reporting stronger relationships with their children and more understanding of children's support needs and how to address these, as a result of engagement with the project.

Evidence of Outcome

All participants have confirmed that they:

- Now feel safer and their children feel safer.
- Have stronger relationships with their children.
- Have a better understanding of their children's needs and how to address them.
- Have increased skills to enable them to keep their children safe.
- Believe there is a reduced chance of their children being removed from them.
- Have a clearer understanding of the impact of domestic violence on themselves and their children.

As a result of participating in the project women have:

- Increased their positive parenting skills and have enjoyed family together activities.
- Increased their knowledge and understanding of how to develop routines therefore helping to rebuild a sense of family.
- Evidence gathered through empowerment star assessment, pre/post evaluations and parenting/ child feedback to evidence a stronger bond between mother and child. Learning new parenting strategies (including setting rules, boundaries, giving rewards, communicating, giving praise) which has improved life of the families and set a structure within families.

Participants have said:

- "I feel like I now have a good relationship with Social Services. We now have a good relationship and the children react well to her. I think it was a good idea to have the joint visit."
- "I now feel safer and more secure as a result of the support and group work provided."
- "Family First looks at domestic violence and offers specific help to the whole family. It helps mum's well-being and gives her confidence in her own parenting ability."

Outcome 4

Mothers will be supported to risk assess and safeguard their children, reducing the need for statutory intervention.

Achieved by:

- Mothers reporting increased understanding of impact of domestic violence upon their children and improved skills in keeping children safe.
- Increased confidence and self-esteem in parenting their children.
- Reduction in the number of women who have had their children removed from them.
- Intensive in home support and increased understanding of how to safeguard.

Evidence of Outcome

The vast majority of participants reported that they now have increased knowledge and ability to safeguard their children. This was evidenced through the Empowerment Star.

Participants have said:

- Increased support networks.
- Increased confidence by intervening at a critical transitional stage in a young person's development and address the negative impact of domestic violence on development and learning.
- Increased knowledge of what is a healthy relationship.
- Improved home environment.
- Improved mother and child relationships.
- Increased feelings of safety.
- Increased ability in keeping safe.
- Better relationship with social worker.
- Increased positive parenting strategies – results is improved family atmosphere, increased communication between child and mother.
- Child can express feelings, play areas created in the family home, improved bedrooms for children, improved safety standards for children e.g. new beds, locks on doors and safety gates.
- A new sense of hope, optimism and stability for mothers and their children.
- Re-engage and trust social workers, and other agencies, in a way that they otherwise would not have been able to do.
- Social work cases have been closed as a result of the positive benefits of the Family First work.

“Social Services visits are now only monthly as my progress is good and they are happy that I am engaging well with this project. They are hopeful my children will be no longer be classed as at risk of the Child Protection Register at my next case review meeting” (Mum)

“Family First services can prevent children going into care and help the child leave care and return sooner to their mum.” (Social worker)

“Engagement with Family First reduces referrals to other statutory agencies and services. As a result, reduces cost and demand on already overstretched services. Children are being removed from Child Protection Register or having their risk of being registered reduced.” (Social Worker)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- 1. Unique** - In no other part of the UK or Ireland does there appear to be such a unique and successful partnership between Women's Aid and Social Services, supporting women and their children who have been impacted by domestic violence. This has enabled unique and outstanding results to be achieved for the mothers and their children, including removal from the Child Protection register, alongside significant reduction in social services staff time and resources. Family First is unique as it works with mum and child together, helping them to communicate and build their relationship.
- 2. Invaluable** – the Family First Project provides an invaluable service for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. No other project or approach has been able to demonstrate the positive and sustained impacts that Family First have been able to demonstrate.
- 3. Societal Impact** – Research for children in care evidences that these children are more likely to have health problems and more likely to be involved in crime. The Family First Project has brought about a significant reduction in demand for health and care services, and hence costs, to all agencies that would otherwise have been required to support the mum and the children through early intervention/crisis intervention and ongoing support.
- 4. Direct benefit to women and children** - In the first two years² the Family First Project supported 155 children, of which 44 were on the child protection register. As a result, mothers and their children have been kept together or, in some cases re-united. **28 children have been prevented from going on to the Child Protection Register and 38 children have been removed from the register.**
- 5. Cost Savings** - This project has proven that it can significantly reduce costs through reduction in required social services support, reduction in the number of children being taken into care (or return from care to their mother sooner) and a reduction in the number of children being placed on the Child Protection Register (or removal of children from the register sooner). In July 2017 the Health and Social Care Board calculated for, inclusion in the DFG delivery plan, the average cost of children in care³ as being between £163,846 and £298,700 per child, per year. Conservatively, therefore, we could estimate **the cost per annum of a child in care to be £225, 000 per annum with the average cost of a foster care placement per annum being £27,832.**⁴ **The cost of a Family First Support Worker is £13222 per annum. This is 6% of the cost for a child in care per annum.**

² From November 2016 (when referrals began) to November 2018

³ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/newnigov/dp-care-leavers-who-aged-19.pdf>

⁴ Source: Heidi Rodgers, DHSS&PS

- 6. Alignment Research and Good Practice** – the nature and impact of the work being done by the Family Project is in alignment with research and good practice being evidenced internationally. 'In Plain Sight: effective help for children exposed to domestic abuse' published in 2014 by CAADA⁵ states that “children’s outcomes significantly improve across all key measures after support from specialist children’s services ... these kinds of specialist children’s services have a particularly effective role in early intervention and early help to combat the impact of domestic abuse.”
- 7. Shared learning and Legacy** – Learning from the Family First Project is, and will be shared through:
- Women’s Aid Federation Regional Forum Meetings – updates on the project are shared, allowing ongoing learning to be disseminated to all Women’s Aid groups in Northern Ireland.
 - Agency Meetings – learning from the project is shared across agencies at meetings. Women’s Aid engages with a wide range of public and voluntary agencies.
 - Northern Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnership – led by Social Services Head of Children's Services and attended by Womens Aid Senior Management team and at which learning from the project is shared.
 - Women’s Aid engages with a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies – e.g. Family Support Hubs, Case Conferences, Core Group meetings with Social Services, ART Aggression Related Trauma project.
 - Additional meetings with Social Services, these meetings are both formal and informal. Family First workers attend regular meetings with Social Services to raise awareness about Domestic Violence and provide regular updates on caseload.
 - Steering group meetings are planned quarterly with Senior Practitioners who manage referrals in their areas.
 - Regular formal meetings also take place with the Senior Management Team and Heads of Service within the Trust to ensure the benefits of partnership working in relation the partnership agreement.
 - Online – learning from the project is disseminated through online articles about the project on Women’s Aid’s website and social media platforms.
 - Published Material – learning will be shared through published material including making the evaluation report and its findings available in full and summary format to other agencies.
 - All Party Group – learning from the project to be shared at Stormont through All Party Group meetings on Domestic and Sexual Violence.
 - Replication Model – learning will be shared through the creation of a manual that will enable other Women’s Aid groups in Northern Ireland and beyond to apply the learning and develop similar projects.

⁵ Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse

Recommendations

The external evaluation of the Family First Project recommends:

- 1. Continuation** – the valuable work of this project should continue beyond the lifespan of the current funding cycle. The project has done much to improve the lives of women and children and there is much more to be achieved.
- 2. Partnerships** – a key strength of the project has been the partnerships that Women's Aid has with Social Services and with other agencies. These partnerships should be sustained to enhance the outcomes for women and their children and the wider community.
- 3. Follow Up** – The ongoing support provided to Mums and their children by Women's Aid, after the end of their period as Family First participant, enables women and children to maintain and further strengthen the improvements that have happened as a result of the project. Consideration could be given to a Women's Aid volunteer being introduced to the family before the Family First support worker ends their one to one home-based support the volunteer could continue regular visits to the home. Additionally, a Family First support group could be developed as a follow-on support network for past participants of the project.
- 4. Legacy** - Given the extensive learning from the project, and the ongoing work to create project legacy, it is recommended that the Family First Project host a NI wide conference at which project learning can be disseminated and at which best practice can be shared with all relevant public and voluntary sector agencies. To accompany this - learning journal should be developed and published.
- 5. Sustainability** – It would be hoped that additional forms of income generation could be identified. However, in the current climate, income generation through fund raising or social enterprise may well prove challenging. Therefore, every opportunity should be taken to pursue opportunities for enhancing the partnership with Social Services over the coming years, so that the service becomes one pivotal to statutory agencies.
- 6. Replication** – given the benefits identified in the first two years of this Family First project it would be hugely beneficial for women and children in other geographical areas of Northern Ireland to have access to a Family First project.
- 7. Parenting Programme** – A bespoke programme currently being developed and piloted with external partners (initially Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid). An 'Amazing Mums' training programme will be made available for mothers whose parenting skills have been impacted by domestic violence. The programme should then be rolled out across all 9 Women's Aid groups for use in refuge and community settings regionally.
- 8. Integrated Services** – Women's Aid Family First Support Workers could be based alongside Social Services staff teams to continue learning and develop effective responses for women and their children. This will allow for preventative work to continue and highlight the crucial work that the project does to prevent children from risk and harm.