Family work at SCARPA
Parents’ views and experiences
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Introduction

This small qualitative study explores a small group of parent’s experiences and views about the ‘Family work’ undertaken with them at the SCARPA (Safeguarding Children At Risk – Prevention and Action) Programme during the period from October 2009 to April 2011. The study also includes a section on staff’s perspectives on what they feel has worked well and not so well in order to add a further dimension to the report and to place the perspectives of parents in the context of the service provided to them. This introductory section begins by giving a very brief overview of SCARPA and the Family work to provide a further backdrop to this small study. This is followed by a section detailing the objectives of this review and the methodology employed.

Project origins

SCARPA has been supporting young people who go missing from home in the Newcastle area since casework started in January 2008. SCARPA aims to help the young people they work with to:

- be ‘safe from harm’;
- stop going missing;
- reduce risky behaviours and;
- to exit situations of exploitation.

In October 2009 a family worker was employed to work with the families of young people involved in going missing and exploitation, in the hope that by working with all of the family, young people would have a much better chance of improved situations. It was felt that working with young people in isolation can sometimes mean that vital information needed to achieve positive outcomes is missed. The Family work was felt to provide a different dimension to the work and a historical perspective which can throw light on the young people’s and parents behavior. Furthermore, many of the issues for young people who go missing appear to be to do with adolescent/parent conflict scenarios and just working with the young person in isolation is not likely to always move such situations forward. Parents sometimes require
support to change their own behaviours and to empathise with other family members, for example the young person who is going missing.

The Family worker provides direct support, advice and guidance to parents in order to:

- better equip parents to deal with family crisis and to enable them to access support from other agencies where appropriate,
- to help to stabilise the parent/child relationship,
- as a result of the above, to reduce missing incidents of young people and to keep them ‘safe from harm’.

**Overview of the Family work initiative**

**Direct support for the families of young people who go missing**

The family worker works with the families of some of the young people referred to the programme when this is deemed to be appropriate and useful. Support is provided for young people peoples’ families to help to reduce the risk of the young people going missing in the future.

**Referral criteria**

Initially the service was only available for parents whose child was receiving support from a young person’s SCARPA worker. However at a later point, this was changed to include parents whose child may not be fully engaging in the work but who nonetheless perceived themselves desperate for support. Staff suggested that this work with the parents may have indirectly had a positive impact on the young people despite their own non-engagement, possibly by enabling their child’s engagement in the work at a later date, or by changing the behaviour and responses of the parent and thus improving the situation at home for the young person.

**Staffing levels and extent of usage**

One full time family worker supports parents. The programme manager of SCARPA oversees the work. The family worker works with a caseload of about 9 families at any one time. She works with them for as long as needed to build relationships and affect change. Other families in need of support go on a waiting list. The family worker has provided support for 27 families during the time frame of this review (October 2009- April 2011).
**Model of work and types of intervention carried out during family work**

The family worker draws on a number of different models in her work with families. In terms of how she carries out the family work she uses an individualised and holistic approach with each parent, working with each family in a flexible and tailored way. The family work can continue on a relatively long-term basis if this is required. The family worker provides:

- Listening support, advice, reassurance and resilience building to parents
- Guidance and coaching on Parenting techniques to address problem areas
- Family mediation or family therapy with the whole family to build empathy and improve communication and relationships

As shown above, the family worker often follows a three staged approach: she starts by focussing on the parents own issues first, for example raising their self esteem and confidence, or helping them deal with personal issues, then she moves on to work with them on an individual basis on their parenting styles and finally may carry joint family work with the whole family to improve relationships if this is required. This is only a guide however; each family receives an individualised and flexible intervention to suit their needs. For a detailed example of the type and nature of the work carried out with a family see the case study in appendix 1.

**The Review**

This small qualitative evaluation study explores SCARPA’s parenting work funded by the Parenting Fund. This report was carried out by researchers at The Children’s Society’s Research Unit. It focuses on the work carried out with parents of young people who go missing funded by The Parenting Fund between the period from October 2009 to April 2011.

The aim of this study was to identify the outcomes of the work carried out with parents and to highlight learning from practice. In particular it aimed to;

- ascertain the key features which contribute to positive outcomes for parents highlighting the services strengths and weaknesses, as perceived by both the parents and staff,
- review the outcomes of the Family work, as experienced by parents,
- capture any learning from the work,
- produce a brief qualitative evaluation report, which includes the above.
Within these overarching aims the views of parents themselves were sought, as well as the family worker and programme manager at SCARPA. It was felt that this would not only allow for an understanding of how the family service operates, but also what contributes to, or detracts from, the achievement of desirable outcomes from the perspective of a sample of the parents involved and also staff. In light of the limited budget, the evaluation study took the form of a small qualitative study that would sit alongside and complement a SCARPA own-produced review of the ‘outcome’ data the team collected themselves.

**Study design and method of data collection**

This review is based on qualitative data collected from six parents who have received support from the worker. The family worker and programme manager were also interviewed over the phone at the end of the funding period.

**In-depth telephone interviews with 6 parents**

In March 2011 a researcher from the Research Unit held telephone interviews with six parents who had received substantial support from the family worker based at the SCARPA programme. The parents were initially approached by the family worker and asked if they would like to participate in the evaluation. Eight parents were approached, and six went on to participate in the study. Five mothers and one father were interviewed. The parents were asked to identify what had been happening in their lives when they had first been referred to the Family worker, what work had been carried out with them, and what they had liked and not liked about the support provided. They were also asked to describe the outcomes and impact of this work on their lives. (See appendix 2 for a list of the questions).

**Feedback from SCARPA staff**

In March 2011, two staff members involved in the delivery of the service were interviewed over the phone regarding the general learning, covering what had gone well, not so well, and any learning to be gleaned from the work carried out with family members. This report also includes a ‘case study’ provided by the family worker (in appendix 1).

**Analysis of the review data**

Qualitative analysis of the interview data gathered from internal programme staff, and parents who had received substantial support from the family worker was undertaken. A thematic analysis of the interview data collected from participants was undertaken.
A brief summary of each chapter

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 present the review findings:

- Chapter 2 explores parents’ experiences of participating in the Family work, and their views on the positive and negative aspects of it
- Chapter 3 explores parents’ experiences of how the work has impacted on them and their families.
- Chapter 4 presents some key learning points derived from programme staff covering perceived strengths of Family work service, and the challenges faced during the work.

Finally, chapter 5 concludes the report with a summary discussion of the key findings explored in the previous chapters.
The following chapter explores parents’ experiences of participating in the Family work at SCARPA. It begins with a section exploring how some parents had to overcome certain barriers to engage in the work, and goes on to describe their experiences of the different types of support provided. It ends with parents’ views on what they had particularly liked and didn’t like about the work carried out with them. As previously stated, a total of six parents were interviewed for this study and so their views can not be seen as representative of all the families worked with over this time.

Parents’ feelings and experiences prior to the work

Having to overcome initial scepticism, bad experiences and fears to engage in the Family work

One parent interviewed commented that prior to receiving the intervention she did not think it would work out for her own family. She described how her children ‘like to get their own way’ and so was sceptical that anything could help. However, this parent went on to say that as the children got to know the family worker, they opened up to her and ‘made a connection with her’. She also felt that her children would not have accepted the support from someone else who came into the family. She commented:

“It’s (the support) worked! I never thought it would work. We (the whole family) sit around the table (now) talking about rules, homework...”

Another parent described how prior to her working with SCARPA she had received support from a family support worker from another agency. This she explained had not worked out well and had affected her trust in professionals:
“They used things I said to them against me, so I didn’t trust them” “Social services come in with their reports, taking what other people say (at face value) they just point the finger.”

This parent commented that as a result of this negative experience, initially she did not want to work with the family worker at SCARPA, but was very glad she had got past this initial fear:

“I didn’t want one at first, didn’t feel I could trust someone, but thought I would give her a go... and she’s been excellent!”

Another parent who had participated in the ‘Strengthening Families’ parenting course described how initially he had felt a bit dubious being the only male parent attending although despite this, the family worker had put him at ease very quickly:

“I was a little bit dubious to start with as the only male parent there. I felt uneasy being the only dad. But after the first time everything was fine. I didn’t feel like an outsider or awkward. She was helpful and made me feel all right that I could speak to her. She asked how things were going. I felt comfortable”.

Linked to the above points, another parent described finding it very difficult to ask for help, as this entailed having to say the family was not coping and was in need of help:

“I find it difficult to ask for help- I don’t like to ask for help...it’s difficult to say we need help. But knowing they’re there, this made it easier to ask”.

Another parent described how because she is a very independent person it took a lot for her to admit to needing support:

“I’m not one for asking for help, I’m an independent person and it took a lot to say I’m not coping and we need help...”

One parent explained that her family had heard ‘good things from the police about SCARPA’ about the project being able to help some children. This knowledge would likely have allayed any possible scepticism or fears they may or may not have had.

Parents’ experiences of the support provided

Provision of listening support, advice and practical tips on parenting techniques
Parents described how they were provided with valuable listening support

“She is just there when we need to go blah….”

“You can talk to her on the phone any time. She been there for me, I’ve talked through stuff with her.”

Another parent commented how the family worker’s objective approach had helped her to see things more clearly:

“She was every bit my guardian angel. She listened, she was objective, she helped me to see things more clearly, she was there for me.”

Another parent commented how useful the family worker’s ideas on how to deal with situations had been:

“She has listened, she has brought ideas, good ideas for how to manage and negotiate with daughter.”

Another parent commented:

“She said things like ‘you have nothing to lose’...she gave practical tips like rewarding my daughter even though I didn’t want to and trying to be more positive, giving her more incentive to do good, even though she (daughter) was being horrible!”

Parents described how they had been given strategies to use, which had been very useful to them in improving their own confidence levels and their relationships within the family.

**Mediation sessions, family therapy and the Strengthening Families course**

One parent described participating in mediation sessions with the family and how it had helped:

“We had mediation...had a meeting round the table, looked at where we were going on wrong, punishments, grounding…”

Another parent described her experiences participating in ‘family therapy’ provided by the family worker. She recounted how the family worker had got the family together to look at three things they would like to change. She also described how her daughters could express their views and they could discuss it all openly.
“She (daughter) thinks I’m the worst parent in the world and my relationship with her was strained, but it (family therapy) helped. We kept a diary, and had to say a positive thing to each other each day.”

This parent went on to say that the relationship with her daughter did improve, as well as the relationships between siblings, which had also become strained at that time. She felt that the intervention helped to keep things consistent and to keep boundaries in place.

“She (family worker) said ‘Don’t argue, say what you need to say and walk away’.”

She described how her husband was less confrontational, while she was more so - and they were helped through the family work to meet in the middle. She commented that the family worker had advised her to:

“Say how you feel – you are making me feel, rather than you’re bad’…This helped the situation at home. Relationships improved for a bit...”

Another parent described his experiences on a Strengthening Families course run by Newcastle City Council and facilitated by the family worker at SCARPA with other workers. He commented:

“The work was fun and enjoyable. We were playing games which meant something although we didn’t realise it at the time, that it was helping parents to bond with their children without us realising it. This was good.”

He described how the parents had then been involved in a ‘refresher course’ two months later to check out how things were going for the parents, for example to see whether new techniques were working out. He felt this was a good reminder for parents.

“It reminds you, if you had forgotten some things. You need to be consistent...”

He also described how the parents on the course had shared ideas with each other. He also commented that he had come to realise that they (he and his ex wife) weren’t the only parents going through difficulties in this way - that they were not alone, and that this knowledge had helped them. The only slightly negative aspect was that he had found it difficult getting to the course on time due to his work commitments- and he had to rush home from work to attend the course. He also commented that at the end of the course it felt a bit like ‘it was coming to a dead end’ and it would have helped just to know that they were still there, that it had not just finished. He said that parents were given leaflets advertising the support of other
services. However, it seems that he had got to know and trust these particular workers.

**Parents’ views on the Family work and approach taken**

The parents were asked what they had liked and not liked about the Family work, and the approach taken. All the parents found it very easy to describe positive features of the family work and the family worker. However, all the parents found it very hard to identify any less positive features or ways SCARPA could improve the support to families and as already illustrated throughout this study appeared very grateful:

"*Scarpa is brilliant 100%. I couldn’t knock them.*"

"*Couldn’t praise them enough! They (SCARPA team) have been a godsend really.*"

In fact no negative features were identified except for the comment about the timing of the Strengthening Families course and its abrupt ending (see above) and one parent noting that they had not realised this kind of support was available for parents.

"*I didn’t realise what support we could get.*"

Similarly another parent commented in general terms on people’s lack of knowledge about such help available to them.

"*I just think they are really, really good, they’re invaluable really- and people don’t know about them.*"

The following section summarises the positive features identified by the parents interviewed

**The non-judgemental approach**

The non-judgmental approach taken by the family worker was clearly valued by all the parents interviewed.

"*(the family worker) was good because she showed there was no one to blame, they don’t judge you.*"

When asked what had been positive about the family work another parent commented:
"For one, she understands. She’s not judgemental doesn’t see you as ‘bad’. It’s like a fresh start and a light at the end of the tunnel. She doesn’t say that shouldn’t have happened. (She says) that is the past. Now look to the future."

Another parent commented how much she valued not being judged and that the family worker did not come into their home pointing the finger at her:

"They are professionals and don’t judge you or point a finger, they’re very good. They make their own mind up."

And another parent said she did not feel labelled by the family worker as a ‘bad’ mum, an experience she (and some other parents) had with other professionals:

"She wouldn’t put a label on me...she didn’t say I was a ‘bad’ mum...”

**The empathetic and understanding approach**

As highlighted in one of the quotes above, the parents also valued the family worker’s understanding of them and ‘where they are coming from’:

"I’ve had a bad past and get depressed; she comes and has a cuppa and a chat. This helps. She understands what I’m saying."

"It’s been brilliant. She understands me, you can be yourself. She knew I wasn’t lying."

"She understands our point of view...where we are coming from...”

Another parent also valued that the family worker had a good understanding of the situations parents can be in, and tried hard to help them to understand the other side of the situation:

"I know if someone came to me I would refer them to SCARPA- and the (family worker). She’s good. She understands situations and tries her hardest to get the point over. She’s good at what she’s doing."

**Helps family members to understand each other, building empathy**

Similarly another parent also described how the family worker had helped her to understand why her son was behaving how he was:

"My son was going through a vile patch. I talked through things with (family worker). She helped me to see he was confused...SCARPA realised that he (son) was confused. She understood.”
Another parent described how the family worker was able to help her children to understand situations:

“She gets them (the children) to understand things.”

Furthermore a parent described how during the ‘Strengthening families course’ he attended with 10-12 other parents and their children, he felt that the family worker had helped each of the families to understand each other more:

“Makes them understand each other, gets everyone to understand.”

**Empowering approach: not telling parents what to do**

The parents clearly appreciated not being told what to do, or feeling patronised (as other professionals had sometimes done) but valued being encouraged to find their own solutions to their problems:

“She’s great: professional, caring, no nonsense, straight forward. I never felt patronised. She never told you what to do, you solved your own problem. This was important to me, I would have been resentful if she had, I didn’t need that.”

“She doesn’t tell us what to do or say, or you’ve got to do it like this, she talks you through it, helps us find ways round things if I have a problem.”

“She shows us how to do things, but you come up with your own answers, she explains how things are and how things are happening, and I come up with my own answers – this is good- she doesn’t judge, if you do something wrong she still helps you. She explains things. I think it over for a few days and come up with my own answer instead of her telling me what to do.”

The parents also identified features of the family worker’s approach and personality that they had found very valuable and which had helped to foster a sense of trust in her.

**Trust ing relationship built with parents and whole family**

It was apparent from the parents’ comments that they trusted the family worker and felt that she had built good relationships with them:

“I can trust (family worker) and the team.”

“I don’t see her as a SCARPA worker, I see her as a close friend.”
One parent described how when she had felt ‘on the edge’ she would sometimes send texts late at night to the family worker and receive ‘nice ones back’. She commented that SCARPA were ‘the only ones who have helped’.

She explained that although her daughter had not engaged very well in the work “they have helped her indirectly” through the work carried out with the parents. This parent mused:

“I wish she could have worked with my daughter...she got on well with (family worker).”

Similarly a few of the parents described how the family worker had built close relationships with the whole family:

“She doesn’t forget, ignore the rest of the family, she asks them about things, she doesn’t put them aside. This feels good, brilliant.”

“She can talk to and has built a relationship with the whole family even the little ones.”

“My husband thinks she’s like Mrs Doubtfire- she’s that type of person!”

One parent explained how the family now text the family worker and feel they can get in touch when they need to, despite the work having finished. She commented that her husband feels able to get in touch with the family worker too if he needs to.

**Sense of humour, calm approach, always on hand...**

Some of the parents also valued the family worker’s sense of humour, calm, balanced approach and flexible attitude to contacts (e.g. that they could text her anytime).

“She stands back, is a great listener, great sense of humour – made me laugh.”

“She is so calm, it’s the voice, she never over reacts in the beginning I would sit and cry and she would make me laugh and break the tension.”

“She was just the right person for me...she was calm. I used to love her coming on a Thursday, nothing was a bother for her you could text anytime. It was like having a lovely aunty a sensible and wise lovely aunty.”
One parent commented that although the family intervention had finished the year before, she still pops into SCARPA occasionally for coffee mornings, commenting:

"They don’t shut the door."

A few of the parents clearly valued this level of support and the feeling that someone is on the end of a phone when needed.

"She’s always there even on a weekend I can send her a text and that’s a good thing. I know she’s there 24/7."
Parents’ views on the outcomes of the Family work

The following chapter provides an account of the outcomes of the Family work as perceived by the six parents interviewed. The parents talked about becoming more confident in their dealing with their children and other aspects of their lives, having improved relationships and feeling more able to cope with challenging situations. It is apparent from the parents’ comments that the family worker has had quite an impact on how the families feel about their parenting capabilities and how they respond in situations. All the parents interviewed were clearly very grateful to the family worker and SCARPA as a whole, describing how desperate they had felt at the start of the work, and how the family worker and the SCARPA team as a whole had been a lifeline to them:

“I would have been in a hell of a mess (without her). Nobody else was there. It was brilliant to know there was someone there.”

“If it wasn’t for (family worker) I wouldn’t be where I am today. She’s been a big support to me and my family.”

“I don’t know where I would be now to be honest without her. Social Services have been a disgrace – neither use nor ornament. SCARPA have been a lifeline for me and daughter.”

“We are just really grateful to (family worker), SCARPA were the only people we have had help from at a point when...I can’t tell you how desperate we were...”

“We didn’t know where to turn. She needs a medal!”

The parents interviewed identified a number of positive outcomes for themselves and for their families of the input they had received, including:

**Increased confidence in coping with and responding to situations**
A parent described how the family worker had helped her at a point when she had felt very distressed by talking to her about how to cope with the situation she was in. She felt that knowing she had that support available had helped:

“I was ready to snap but with her support I can cope now.”

The family worker had helped another parent to cope and carry on when things had felt desperate to her:

“I would be in a mental institution if it wasn’t for (family worker), I was off work with stress- which is not like me- it really did destroy me. She really helped. You should clone her!”

Another parent described how her confidence in dealing with situations had increased through the work:

“I feel more confident in situations. I had panic attacks and had no confidence before I met (family worker). I can talk to (family worker) she’s really friendly she makes you feel comfortable and confident. I feel more confident in myself…it feels a lot better, I can handle things a lot better now instead of getting in a rut with things…”

Another parent felt that she had been supported to deal with her difficult relationship with her ex partner

“She’s helped a hell of a lot with my ex partner. She’ll help us to know what to do. She’s made us feel stronger. I changed totally towards him.”

**Improved parenting skills**

The parents explained how through the work they now have improved their parenting techniques, which they feel have improved the situation within the family. One parent described that now when talking to his children he feels clearer about what to say to them and that the family worker has helped him to understand where they are coming from in terms of rules and punishments. Another parent commented how she responds differently to her children now, and that they communicate and work together more as a family:

“It’s (the intervention) made a big difference. We do still shout but don’t smack them. And they don’t get shouted at so much…we sit down and talk things through. We’re more involved with them. Play games, do homework together, decorating the house. It’s communication with one another, everyone’s doing the same thing.”
Another parent described how useful the ‘Strengthening Families’ course he attended had been (the family worker had been involved in facilitating this course with other workers). He described how he and his ex wife had been struggling to get their children into routines. He described how they had received advice regarding implementing ‘rules and regulations’ and that as a result things had improved at home:

“Because in the beginning I did used to give in to the kids and felt sorry when I was punishing them…I didn’t know the best way to punish them.”

Another parent commented:

“She’s helped find ways round managing the kids. When they are demanding I used to give in to them. She has offered suggestions on how to handle situations…I was handling it all wrong, I wanted to regain control and she was lashing out. My parenting technique wasn’t working…”

She went on to say:

“We found a different way of doing things in a non confrontational way, started to back off more. I used to confront things head on.”

She was advised by the family worker to relinquish some control:

“This wrong footed my daughter and it worked. I had to do a lot of tongue biting, but it did work and things did calm down a bit.”

**Improvements in relationships and communications within family**

As described above when parenting skills increased this had a knock on effect in improving relationships between the parents and their children. One parent described how consistency and keeping on with the strategies suggested is key:

“When you stick to things, things start to improve.”

A parent described how the ‘family therapy’ had strengthened the whole family unit, although this had been disrupted when her ex partner had ‘come back on the scene’.

Some of the parents also described how their relationships with partners or ex partners had improved through the work. One parent described how prior to the intervention difficulties in the relationship (as well as with the
children) had occurred because he and his partner were using different parenting styles:

“I was easy on the kids, she was hard on them. We now meet in the middle. I’m not too easy on them now.”

He commented:

“She (family worker) put a level on how far you should go and shouldn’t go.”

Some of the parents described how improvements in communication within the family had occurred through the family work. A parent described how they now:

“Get out and about more as a family, and this has been good!”

**However, sometimes relationships and situations deteriorate...**

A few of the parents explained how although the family worker had helped and improved the situation at an earlier point, sometimes the situation had deteriorated again within the family. The parents recognised that sometimes the family worker’s influence was limited when external factors intervened which were beyond her control.

“Her work is really good to be quite honest, but her hands are tied. We were starting to turn a corner with the family therapy...but things have deteriorated now” (due to situation with dad).

This parent described how the family worker is now trying to build relationships with the stepfather to try to improve the situation again.

Another parent described how the family work had helped relationships between her and her daughter initially but unfortunately, later on (after the family work had come to an end) her daughter had ‘packed in school, and got in with a ‘bad boy’. This had led to deterioration in the family situation again. She commented:

“We rang her (family worker) again to have a chat, she just listened and we off loaded. She said we had got through the first round, and we will get through this...”

**Facilitating access to other services, support in meetings**

A parent described how the family worker had helped her to contact the health visitor. Another described how she had been supported in her meetings with Social Care.
Keeping the family together

A couple of parents described how they felt the intervention had kept the family unit together:

"Without her, we wouldn’t be in this situation now, the kids would be spread out across the family. She’s kept us together as a family. We were at the end of our tether."

One parent commented that she knows people who have ‘had their kids taken off them’. She felt that in her opinion SCARPA workers were more trained at working with people (than Social Care).

"Scarpa kept us together.”
Staff perspectives on learning from the work

This chapter outlines staff’s views on what they have learned from carrying out the Family work. A number of valuable lessons have been captured through speaking to staff and parents through this review. These lessons point to areas where the work has been working well, and highlight conditions which appear to impact favourably on this type of work with parents, and which appear to contribute to the positive outcomes. From talking to the staff and the parents the approach appears to have enabled parents’ engagement when possibly other approaches may have been off putting to them. The perceived strengths of the Family work approach as identified by staff members are summarised briefly below. This is followed by a brief description of the challenges facing the service.

The perceived strengths of the approach taken

Staff members interviewed identified the following ‘strengths’ of the Family work.

The independent and flexible nature of the service

The independent nature of SCARPA was felt to help the family members to engage in the work. It is apparent that some of the families have had negative experiences of Social Care in the past and find it hard to trust statutory agencies. Furthermore the flexibility to respond to parents on an individual basis when they required support was also highlighted as a key component of the approach as was its holistic focus.

The relationship building and person centred approach taken

The non-judgemental, non-patronising and empowering approach taken by the family worker (and SCARPA as a whole) was felt to engender trust in the parents. Staff identified that being warm, caring and accepting of parents and being able to demonstrate this to parents while keeping a professional
distance was vital, as was being direct, open and honest, and not letting
them down. Staff also identified that being available 24/7 was also important
in building relationships with families1. Moreover, being persistent was also
viewed as an important component as breakthroughs could sometimes take
time to take place. As highlighted as part of this review, parents also
identified these features as strengths of the family work and which appeared
to contribute to the parents’ engagement in the work and their subsequent
attitude and behaviour change. So having a respectful attitude was not just
a positive way of working with parents, but also seemingly an essential
ingredient of initiating positive change within families and for the parents
and young people involved.

The integrated working between the family worker and the young
people’s workers

Staff felt that the integrated working between the family worker and the
young people’s workers at SCARPA had been positive. Staff could chat
across the table, carry out reviews every week, and keep an eye on whole
situation with the family. Joined up working could take place. It was felt that
a good approach was embedded in the team.

Partnership working

According to staff, the family worker had built good relationships with
external professionals in the area of Newcastle, and the service fitted well
within ‘the parenting landscape’. The family worker had been involved in the
Strengthening Families course run by Newcastle City Council and this had
led to positive partnership working.

Challenges faced by the service

Resource and capacity issues

Another challenge faced by SCARPA has been securing funding to keep the
Family work going. Clearly parents felt that more parents and families could
benefit from this type of support. Staff suggested a number of possible
welcome additions to the service (if they had further resources) which could
increase capacity: a drop in service for parents; a parent support group; a
confidential telephone line for advice and guidance; more staff, virtual family
work, coordinating other professionals to support parents; having parent

1 Staff commented that this level of availability is down to the worker’s own approach, and is not typical of the role.
It was felt that to build this feature into terms and conditions and remunerate appropriately would not be
straightforward.
support workers attached to GPs; co facilitating training with other professionals; helping parents to create their own resources.

One of the parents in the study described how useful a parenting group had been in which parents could share experiences and support each other. As noted above, this may help to increase capacity and provide a point of access for parents who need ‘top up’ support, reassurance and advice. A parent support group could perhaps provide much needed support and enable valuable relationships to develop amongst the parents themselves.

The impact of other issues upon the Family work

Staff identified that some families are much harder to work with and help than others, for example families where there is domestic violence (but there are issues around denial of this) or those where parents engage in substance misuse and who are not ‘in control’ of the situation. In these cases the child within these families would be supported by the young person worker and provided with an exit plan to remove her/himself from any unsafe situations within the home. As the worker commented, SCARPA is ultimately there to protect the children and to help them to keep them safe.

Issues around who is responsible for the parents and when to close cases

A dilemma faced by staff is when to close certain cases. Sometimes the child who had been going missing may no longer be in the family home, or circumstances may have changed for the family, and yet the parent still feels in need of support from the family worker. As highlighted above, the team have very stretched resources. Parents clearly valued the support provided by the Family worker and felt it to be a lifeline. They felt that no one else was providing this valuable support which they were in desperate need of at the time. Understandably they can be very reluctant for the intervention to come to an end, and still feel a genuine need for support. Staff question whose responsibility it is, once the young person is safe, but the parent still needs support? Problems to do with parenting and relationships can often resurface, and a trusted and capable professional is likely to be forever welcome. Of course, this then may take up the time of the family worker when her expertise and support may be needed by another desperate family. The danger being that some parents desperate for support have to wait and go without (while all the time their situation at home may be deteriorating) while other parents may become overly dependent on the family worker despite her trying to maintain a professional distance and using an approach to try to empower them to help themselves. Parents clearly valued the relationship they had established with the family worker and this seemed to be a key ingredient in helping them to change. Staff concede that this is a very hard balance to strike, and that it has to be
carried out on a case by case basis. They continue if they can identify and demonstrate a very clear need within the family. Potentially if the parent has trouble coping their stress may again impact on the situation at home and relationships may again deteriorate, possibly impacting on the safety of the young person involved. These issues require much careful thought and consideration.
Summary and conclusions

This study is based primarily on the qualitative and anecdotal data collected from six parents who were asked to feed in their experiences of, and views on the Family work they had received from SCARPA. The small group of parents interviewed described how they had to overcome negative experiences and fears in order to engage in the work. They discussed their experiences of the different types of support they had received, and gave their views on the approach taken by the family worker. They appeared to value the non-judgemental, empathetic and empowering approach taken with them, which had enabled their trust in the family worker and built their own confidence. They also valued the family workers sense of humour, warmth, calmness and her responsiveness.

Staff also identified the above strengths of the approach. The family work appears to hinge on the family worker being able to build trusting and respectful relationships with the parents, in order to build their confidence, empathetic responses and their parenting skills. Staff felt that being persistent yet flexible and working in a realistic and holistic way with families were also important features of the approach. Once trust and confidence had been built, the family worker had then been able to challenge (in a way that was acceptable to the parents and didn’t lead to their resistance) them to look at and change their own unhelpful behaviours. It is perhaps the case that if they had felt patronised or judged this may have shut down the relationship and thereby prevented important change from being instigated that would ultimately lead to improvements for whole families.

As well as the above strengths, staff also highlighted the integrated working method at SCARPA, and partnership working. The challenges staff identified included the impact of other issues on the work; the question of who is more widely responsible for the families they come into contact with through running away, when to close cases and related resource issues.

In terms of the outcomes of the family work, parents described how they had felt desperate and ‘at the end of their tether’ at the start of the work when no one else was helping and went on to detail how they had benefited from the work, including for some how their confidence in coping and responding to situations had improved, their parenting skills had developed,
and relationships and communications within the family had improved (although some also mentioned things had since deteriorated in some instances) and for some how they felt that the Family work had kept their family together. Some are now enjoying improved relationships with their children and families and have increased confidence in their parenting techniques. Some described how the Family work had increased their own empathy and understanding and that this had helped to improve relationships with their children (and families as a whole). Furthermore, some also described how they have changed personally through the work.

The parents interviewed for this study clearly articulated a need for this type of support.

“SCARPA- it’s not just for kids. They are for both- for the parents too. We need more of them to help more kids.”

“I hope (family worker’s) work continues. It’s really good- both her and (young person’s worker)! They’re there when you need them.”

However, SCARPA also clearly have very stretched resources: there is only one family worker to work with parents. Ultimately the service exists to help to keep young people who go missing safe from harm. Both through the work carried out with the young people themselves and through the family work provided to the parents of some of these young people, SCARPA appears to be in a stronger position to meet this overall aim. This family service appears to add a needed addition to SCARPA to ensure the young people are kept safe. Being very clear about the aims of the service and the target group they wish to work with is very important and appears to be an ongoing challenge for SCARPA, especially as there are perhaps very limited resources for parents in the area.

Future more comprehensive evaluations could perhaps explore whether different approaches would suit particular groups of parents and within specific circumstances. It may be helpful to tease out and untangle in which circumstances this service adds particular value to the lives of the young people who go missing from home, and also to ascertain whether working with the families first can indeed encourage some hard to engage young people who are going missing to engage in the work at a later date and to demonstrate whether (and if so, how) it improves their lives indirectly.
Appendices

Appendix 1 - case study

Case study provided by the Family worker

Background context
Family self referred following a missing incident with the young person in January 2009. The young person had also previously made an allegation of abuse in October 2008, resulting in the young person and their sibling being removed from the family home throughout the investigation. The allegation was subsequently retracted, no further action taken and the children returned to the family home in December 2008.

Work carried out
Work commenced with the young person and the parents to identify areas of concern within the family from both the young person and the parent’s point of view. This provided the basis of sessional work, which focused on the following areas:

- internal family relationships and relationships the young person had that were of cause for concern external to the family,
- identification of risk and safeguarding processes,
- behaviour management through the process of negotiation and development of a contract appropriate to the needs of the young person and the parents,
- understanding the impact of parental alcohol misuse on the family and developing strategies to manage the effect of this,
- developing a safety plan to enable the young person to exit the family situation safely when needed.

Work with the family consisted of individual sessions with the young person facilitated by the young persons worker at SCARPA. Individual sessions for parents and joint family sessions facilitated by the family support worker in which the young person was supported by their own designated worker. Work was carried out on a weekly basis.

Through the work, certain factors were identified as impacting negatively on the family’s ability to function:

- financial issues causing severe hardship,
- estranged extended family relationships,
- the tenuous relationship between the parents,
- loss of the family business,
• loss of the family home resulting in a change of locality and lifestyle.

The above factors were impacting upon the whole family but in particular the young person in terms of lifestyle and the parents ability to feel they were providing adequately for the children. It was identified and reflected back to the parents, the number of changes the family had suffered and how this was impacting on them as individuals and as a family, in order that they could understand the age appropriate developmental issues around the young person and how to manage the subsequent behaviours arising from the changes.

The parents themselves were struggling to understand and cope with the recent changes, which had left them feeling inadequate in the area of family provision, lacking in self-esteem, confidence and ability. The work continued with the family through to June 2009. Throughout this time, work continued in raising the parents awareness, self esteem, confidence parenting skills and supporting the parents in their attendance and contribution at the monthly core group meetings to monitor the plan around the children. This continued to de registration

Outcomes
Through the work the parents self esteem was raised and also their confidence in their parenting abilities. As a result of the intervention and support, the family situation stabilised resulting in the young person and parents being able to maintain the situation and achieve a positive outcome for all family members.

Appendix 2 – questions for parents

1. What was going on in your life when you first got involved with the SCARPA programme?
2. How long have you been involved?
3. Tell me a little about what your programme worker has worked with you on, what did they do?
4. What has changed through your being involved in this work/what do you think you have you gained from being involved in the programme?
5. What have you particularly liked about the programme, what’s been good?
6. Which bits have you not enjoyed as much? Is there anything that you’d change about the programme?
7. Is there anything else you’d like to say about SCARPA?

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