



Building
stronger
families

Family Action: Our response to the challenges of **COVID-19**



Introduction



As Chair and Chief Executive of Family Action, we are pleased to present this report on our response to the changes and challenges posed by COVID-19.

This time last year we were in the middle of our 150th Anniversary celebrations. Who could have known how different the world we work in would be this year? Family Action's long history has taught us how to manage and adapt in periods of crisis and change - the charity has survived two World Wars and several long periods of economic depression as well as lots of ups and downs in our own fortunes over the years. What has always been constant though about Family Action has been our ability to evolve, innovate and deliver high quality support for the families that need it most.

One core aim unites everything that Family Action does – we provide practical, emotional and financial support so that people can overcome their challenges and look forward to the future with more confidence. COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges for everyone – we have all had to adapt to lockdown and Family Action has needed to find new ways of supporting the people who rely on us so much. Since lockdown began in March we have been providing a broad range of support; from useful resources and information for those who just need a little encouragement, to working intensively with the most vulnerable families - families who are going without the basics, like somewhere safe and warm to live and food for their children.

Our response has been based on several key principles:

- Recognising that we had to stay open – we could not help anyone if our services were closed.
- Understanding that we could still remain open even if many of our workplaces were closed and then being highly creative in finding ways to deliver our services virtually and to innovate at pace.
- Aligning our response to the pandemic at all times with our values - mutual respect, excellence, can do, people focused.
- Continuing to deliver services to families as far as humanly possible, adapting constantly to ensure safety and to meet changing needs.
- In all cases taking into account the safety and welfare of staff and volunteers, reassuring them and avoiding causing additional worry.
- Only furloughing staff as a last resort – considering other support they could be offering within the service or wider organisation if their usual role was not able to be delivered.
- Seizing opportunities to do more where we could.

We were able to react quickly to COVID-19, changing delivery and how our staff work, as a result of our investment in recent years in modernising how we work. One of our strategic objectives is to be agile and responsive so that we can look ahead and maximise opportunities. As a result, we already had in place the technology and systems to enable our staff to deliver and record their work remotely in an efficient and safe way. We are also a highly flexible organisation and many of our staff and volunteers were already accustomed to working from home (though not as often as we have had to do lately!). Our staff and volunteers have risen superbly to the challenge, creating many new ideas for working with families in this extraordinary time.

We understand that returning to supporting families in the way we used to will take time, and we are also keen to take the learning and benefits from this period forward, rather than rushing back to doing exactly as before. We would like to thank those who have funded or otherwise supported our work during COVID-19. That generosity has enabled us to adapt our existing delivery significantly and to develop new services to meet escalating needs.

We would also like to thank our staff and volunteers for everything they have done.

We hope this report will demonstrate to you the breadth, depth and impact of what we have achieved so far and that it will inspire you to support us to continue this vital work.

Mary Fulton, Chair

David Holmes CBE, Chief Executive



About Family Action and our COVID-19 response

Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families and brighter lives. We provide innovative and effective services and support to over 60,000 of the UK's most vulnerable families through a network of national programmes, financial grants and some 160 community-based services. In addition we support hundreds of thousands of children every day through the National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP). We help individuals and communities address the challenges they face through practical, emotional and financial support.

Our Vision: Our vision is that everyone who comes to us will receive the support they need to tackle their challenges, whether they are experiencing poverty, disadvantage or social isolation.

Our Mission: Our mission is to provide services and financial support to strengthen and improve the life chances of those who are poor, disadvantaged or socially isolated. We believe in the strengths within families and seek to empower everyone we work with and ensure they are listened to. We help people look forward to the future and not be defined by their past.

Our Values and Behaviours: We embrace our values and behaviours in our work, as well as in our professional relationships with colleagues, partners and those who use our services. We do this by always:

- Being people focused.
- Reflecting a 'can do' approach.
- Striving for excellence in everything we do.
- Having mutual respect for everyone we work with.

We have over 160 services nationally, and 98% of these were able to stay open during lockdown, delivering support for families and individuals. We were also able to extend the areas where we deliver support thanks to new funding. Out of over 1,000 staff, only 11 employees were furloughed.

As of 30th July, we had received COVID-19 related donations and pledges totalling £4,123,854, including a significant donation of £3million from Barclays to fund a grants programme for people facing extreme hardship and 18 Food

On Our Doorstep (FOOD) Clubs. We also received over a million pounds worth of donations and gifts in kind from a variety of companies, trusts, foundations and the general public to support our work to continue and develop services to meet needs arising from the pandemic. This has included £661,471 of donations raised through The Times Coronavirus Charity Appeal where we were lucky enough to be chosen as one of their two beneficiary charities. This Appeal has become the most successful in their long history.

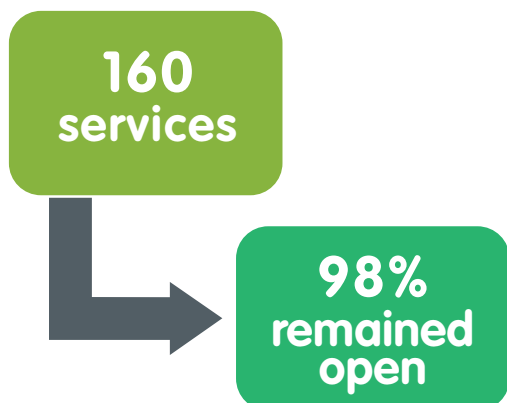
This generous funding enabled us to do so much – make emergency grants, set up new services and enable existing services to adapt and keep going. For example, our Escape Allotment project in Swaffham, Norfolk is usually funded largely by training income. However, as this training was not able to continue during lockdown we were in a position to support the project financially through our COVID-19 Fund, enabling it to keep supporting those with mental health issues in the community.

COVID-19 – supporting our staff and volunteers

To support our staff to adapt services safely, and manage our response consistently across the organisation, we immediately set up a COVID-19 Response Group (CRG) chaired by the Chief Executive and involving senior managers from across the whole organisation. CRG continues to meet three times a week and has ensured consistent leadership throughout the crisis, supervising production of all guidance to staff, considering emerging issues to ensure a coordinated, organisation-wide response, and in more recent weeks managing the phased return to our 199 workplaces. As a result, the whole organisation has felt informed about what is going on at all times and confident that we have robust arrangements for managing the situation. We also set up a dedicated email address for staff to raise any COVID-19 concerns or queries and receive advice. We have dealt with over 750 queries through that inbox by return.

"The team have all commented on how well they feel Family Action has supported them throughout the pandemic and feel that the changing advice has been quickly cascaded and very clear."

The Bridge Young Carers Manager, Durham



In order to maintain staff morale and enable us all to share things that are helping us, a daily newsletter, 'Getting Through Together', was created from the day we went into lockdown, and is also ongoing. This has shared stories from services of how work has changed, resources for working with families, ideas for maintaining personal wellbeing and family life whilst working from home, and fun things like photos of our pets, children and gardening efforts! We also invested in trialling 'Listening Slots' with the People Project, providing an



independent, non-judgemental, compassionate listening space for staff to enhance their self-understanding and channel their emotions positively.

"I would like to say how overwhelmed and grateful I am to be part of Family Action and the NSBP during this pandemic. Many friends and loved ones are struggling with the situation and do not have the support and caring community at work that we do."

School Partner, National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP)

Training and induction

Family Action is committed to being a learning organisation. During lockdown we have inducted some 30 new staff online. We have also continued our programme of training to ensure our staff have the skills they need to deliver work safely, particularly in the context of COVID-19. Many of our training courses were already available on e-learning, but we have provided additional live virtual training on health and safety, first aid, how to use technology and work remotely, and practice sharing around safeguarding and measuring outcomes. Family Action is also a member of Research in Practice, which enables staff to access additional resources online, including webinars and podcasts. We are developing

a network of regional voluntary Learning and Development Champions from among our staff, who will be trained online. They will deliver further internal training and highlight training needs now and in the future.

Volunteers

Despite lockdown meaning that some of our volunteers felt that they could no longer continue to work with us because of childcare and other issues, we still have 573 volunteers. Our services have worked with volunteers to support them to deliver online, or explore changes to their roles. For example, in Staffordshire we have worked with the Local Authority so that volunteers can support key roles whilst they are unable to volunteer within our Children's Centres. In Staffordshire, our volunteer co-coordinator has offered daily telephone support via text, phone and video calling and our volunteers are supporting the work of the virtual Children's Centre with ideas for content. Volunteers are also being directed to online training courses, to develop their skills further.

Family Voices

In addition to keeping services open and supporting staff to keep working, we have also been ensuring that families' voices are heard at this time. We know that many families are facing uncertainty and added pressures, in particular those who are vulnerable or on a low income. The absence of school routine, regular social contact and free play or sports opportunities understandably raises worries about our children's happiness and wellbeing. Many of us have faced the added pressure of juggling work, childcare and looking after relatives. Spending more time together than we usually would has also heightened normal family tensions for some.

Continuing from our Family Monsters Project campaign last year, where we encouraged families to talk more freely about their problems so that we can face them together, we have been publishing a series of blogs, advice and tips, and real stories that we hope have helped many families find positive solutions and ease some anxiety during lockdown. We have also created resources to make conversations easier, such as animations about how to explain COVID-19 to children.

Owing to the success of last year's 'hold your own family picnic', part of our Family Monsters campaign events across the country, we have also run 'virtual picnics' in May and July this year. We created a picnic pack with advice and tips about how to hold a virtual picnic, games such as bingo, picnic recipes from a NSBP Nutritionist, yoga/stretch videos, and





stories from the Discover Centre. We have also been delighted to work with Danone Yogurt, who have run some brilliant cook-a-long sessions on Instagram and YouTube. £1 from each view of these sessions (up to a wonderful £60,000) is now helping to fund Cook4Families Holiday Hubs in July and August.

As well as sharing stories and resources to support families, we have also been making sure policy makers and funders are aware of the issues families are facing as a result of COVID-19, and the support we believe is needed now and in the future for families to recover. We have been working with alliances we are members of to send statements and letters to Government, including:

- A letter to Vicky Ford MP as the Minister responsible for the National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP), asking her to ensure it continues beyond the scheduled end date of March 31 2021. We are certain that the NSBP should be a key plank of any recovery strategy for schools and families. The NSBP ensures children in disadvantaged areas across the country are given a healthy, nutritious breakfast at the start of the school day. Children will be in a better position to catch up on months of missed schooling if they are not starting the day hungry! The NSBP could fix that and this is why it needs to continue.
- A letter to Boris Johnson from the First 1001 Days Movement asking for attention to be given to the needs of babies and parents as we come out of lockdown.
- A letter to Matt Hancock from the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and Sir Norman Lamb asking for future support in the form of a Children and

Young People's Mental Health Task Force given the effects of COVID-19.

- A letter to Gavin Williamson convened by School Food Matters and the Children's Food Campaign about Free School Meals continuing through school holidays.
- A joint statement calling on the Government to put children at the heart of recovery.

We have also sent evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, and the Early Years Commission's call for how we can support parents. We will continue to argue that recovery plans need to consider how society recovers from COVID-19, not just the economy, and how we can support families better as part of that.



Staying open for business as usual even in extraordinary times

Despite the changes and challenges that COVID-19 has brought to the way that Family Action is able to work, we remained open for business throughout lockdown and continued supporting families across the country. We kept as much going as possible including implementing a range of new services. Our existing digital services have continued to deliver their usual support, and have been particularly in demand during this time.

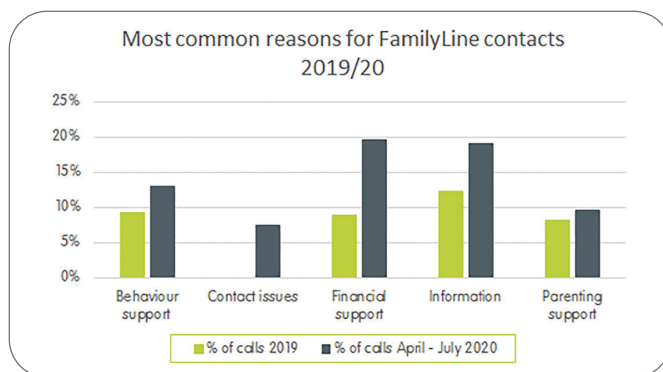
Digital Services

FamilyLine

Family pressures can sometimes be difficult to manage without additional emotional support and guidance. Many people feel confused by what information is available or struggle to access services close to home. Our free FamilyLine service tackles these issues by using a network of volunteers from across the country to support family members over the age of 18 through telephone calls, email, web chat and a text message service. FamilyLine aims to:

- provide both immediate and long-term support
- help with practical information and guidance
- provide emotional and listening support
- help with understanding and accessing relevant services and information
- provide regular one-to-one befriending support to service users feeling isolated
- provide access to short term telephone counselling
- provide a referral into our many projects across the country, where relevant.

From the 1st April to 31st July 2020, we have seen a 74% increase in the number of contacts received to our FamilyLine service. The five most common reasons that people are currently contacting us are:



There has been a sharp rise in contacts to the service for financial reasons in comparison to the previous year, and issues around parental contact with their children where parents are separated are now in the top five reasons.

Special Guardianship Support Service (SGSS)

Special guardianship provides an alternative legal route to permanence for children where adoption is not appropriate. Special guardians may step in selflessly to provide a safe and loving home to a child or children that need support, but many face challenges in doing so – financial difficulties, health issues, managing contact with the child’s birth parents, supporting children with complex needs and/or attachment issues to name but a few.

To meet the needs of increasing numbers of special guardians, Family Action offers a national Special Guardianship Support Service. This is a very cost-effective subscription service available to local authorities across the country. Once a local authority has signed up to the service, all special guardians living in the locality and local authority professionals supporting special guardians have access to:

- A dedicated website containing comprehensive and up-to-date information and guidance, downloadable resources and signposting to other sources of support.
- A helpline, text, email and online web chat with trained operators available 5 days a week.
- Discounted access to up-coming training and consultancy events.
- Discounts on additional support services purchased for individual special guardians, including facilitation of support groups and life story work.



At the beginning of 2020, we only had a small number of Local Authorities signed up to the service. We now have 46 Local Authorities that have recognised the quality of the virtual support that we can offer to the special guardians they work with. Many Local Authorities have subscribed to the service as part of Regional Adoption Agencies and we are now realising our vision of a national support service for special guardians.

FamilyConnect

Our new website FamilyConnect was launched on 1st April. It aims to help adults who have been adopted or in care understand how to find answers to questions about their origins. This is a free national resource that we have created to provide information, guidance, support and signposting. For people who have been adopted or who spent time in care as children, finding out information or accessing documentation about your background, your birth family and the reasons why you came in to care or were adopted can be very important indeed. The information can help people to understand more about why they were separated from their birth family, make important life choices and understand more about any inherited health risks. Lots of people aren't aware of their legal rights when accessing their birth and care records, or what they can expect to receive. People may also be very unsure about how to go about searching for information in the first place. For the first time FamilyConnect contains advice all in one place on how to start searching and what to expect as that journey unfolds and we hope it will help thousands of people in years to come. We did not hesitate for a moment before launching this new virtual service during lockdown and we are delighted that it has already had more than 9000 views.

Adoption Services for Adults (ASFA)

Lockdown also hasn't stopped us from completing a merger! We are delighted to announce services delivered by ASFA transferred to Family Action on 3rd April. All services previously provided, including searching and tracing, intermediary services, birth record counselling, and access to information from adoption files, will now be delivered by our adoption support agency PAC-UK.

Family Monsters Garden relocation

Last year, as part of our 150th birthday celebrations, we were delighted to work with *idverde* to exhibit the Family Monsters Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, winning a Gold Medal and the Best Artisan Garden award. As part of this project, our services competed to have the garden relocated to them, and our Silkmore Children's Centre, which is based on a primary school site in Stafford, was chosen. Despite the difficulties posed by COVID-19, relocation work has progressed as planned thanks to *idverde*. Whilst everyone was disappointed that families from the Children's Centre, the school children, and the local community were unable to visit the garden, they were still able to be part of its relocation. Seeds have been sent to families who use the Centre asking



children, with help from their parents, to grow plants for the garden at home. We have also asked them to paint pebbles to be included in the garden. *idverde* are now making COVID-secure arrangements to send their staff to finish this planting, and we plan to open the garden with families in September. We hope that it will also be a space that children can use to relieve anxieties about going back to school.



Implementation of new services

Leeds Young Carers Service

On the 1st of April we began delivering our new support service for young carers in Leeds. The service will reach as many young carers as possible, including those who are currently unidentified, through the provision of information, advice, networking and support to have their voices heard. The service is providing support tailored to young carers' needs, for those whose caring role has a profound impact on their lives. This may include individual and/or group work and the service will also proactively champion improvements in the identification of, and support available for, young carers in Leeds.

North East Hampshire and Farnham Social Prescribing Service

We started to deliver the Social Prescribing Service in North East Hampshire and Farnham on 1st July. The service links people aged 18+ to activities in the community which they may benefit from, as well as connecting them to non-medical and universal sources of support. We provide support to overcome barriers to people accessing these services, whether this is practical or emotional, as well as focusing on better health awareness and self-management. We are currently providing practical information about which services are still running locally and how these have been adapted to meet the changing guidance around COVID-19. The service aims to improve people's quality of life, helping them identify ways to build their self-confidence and self-reliance, providing practical support to help them achieve their aspirations, and reducing social isolation and dependency on health and social care. We also aim to build resilience within the local community and maximise the use of existing available resources.

Innovating at pace

Family Action is always flexible and innovative – and we have been no different during the pandemic.

Emergency Grants Fund

The financial impact of COVID-19 poses an unprecedented challenge for thousands of vulnerable and low-income families. Although the Government has stepped in to support many people whose jobs were at risk, it is inevitably the families who were already struggling financially before COVID-19 who are in an even worse position now.

Self-isolation, closure of schools, loss of low-paid work and worries about existing debt all increase pressure and tension within the home.

To prevent thousands of Family Action service users struggling even more during these difficult times, we set up an Emergency Grants Fund at the beginning of April to support families with an immediate cash grant. By enabling them to overcome some of the immediate financial pressures, people who receive grants are more able to engage with support and find a way forward. From these small beginnings, we can help people rebuild their lives even in the midst of a national crisis.

Family Action services are able to apply for a grant per individual or family, up to a maximum of £200. Grants are available for food and other essential household items, such as personal hygiene items, assistance with utility bills or toys/play equipment. Services were asked to triage those they work with to focus the resources available on those with highest need. As of 31st July, we have given out £71,720 through 422 emergency grants.



Survival and Recovery Fund

Thanks to the funding from Barclays, in addition to our Emergency Grants Fund, we have set up a Survival and Recovery Fund, open to Family Action services and partner organisations across the UK from 24th July. The programme will distribute a significant financial grant of up to £1,500 to approximately 3,000 households where there is severe and multiple disadvantage to help them survive and recover from the COVID-19 crisis. Staff from Family Action, as well as those in our partner organisations are able to apply for the grant. Our partners include:

- Hafal in Wales,
- Causeway, Omagh and Antrim, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey Women's Aid branches in Northern Ireland,
- South Lanarkshire and East Renfrewshire, Grampian and Wigtownshire Women's Aid branches and Bethany in Scotland,
- Riverside, women@thewell, Street Talk, Local Solutions and Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid branches in England



Megan's Story

(names have been changed to protect identity)

Megan is a vulnerable care leaver and has been living in semi-independent accommodation. She has little contact with her birth family and is severely isolated as she does not have a friendship network. As a victim of modern day slavery, sexual abuse, trafficking and physical abuse, Megan suffers from anxiety and finds it difficult to leave her house, causing her to experience depression. She also has extreme OCD, which dictates much of her life and she was finding it difficult to cope during COVID-19. Megan was not able to work during lockdown, spending more time at home, resulting in higher utility bills and WiFi costs. Owing to her OCD, which is cleaning related, Megan also spent more money on cleaning supplies rather than food because of anxiety caused by COVID-19. We gave a grant of £200 to Megan towards utility bills and food to avoid the situation deteriorating, which would put her health and tenancy at risk.

COVID-19 Ideas Bank

We launched our COVID-19 Ideas Bank in April using funds received from donations. Anyone at Family Action is able to apply for funding to support their service's COVID-19 response, where the idea is beyond usual or adapted service delivery. Ideas have included:

- Food related training so that services adapting to deliver emergency food support would be doing this safely.
- Top ups' for food parcels including essential daily items and fresh produce that are not included in parcels in partnership with FareShare in Peterborough.
- Laptops and tablets for families to support online learning and mental health in Birmingham, and tablets for volunteers to borrow to engage with service users.
- Technology to create pre-recorded videos and Facebook Live sessions for parents in Stockton.
- Written and telephone coaching support to help service users use technology in our BAND service in Bolton.

- online sessions around fitness, cooking, singing and story time by our Manchester Children’s Centres

The COVID-19 Ideas Bank has also helped us to support our partners, funding two external ‘Holiday Hub’ settings to provide supermarket vouchers for families whilst the usual service is not running.

“The vouchers will enable our families to buy fresh food from our local supermarket which will support their health and wellbeing at this very challenging time. As a small charity we are struggling financially so this has relieved the burden on us too. Thank you so much.”

Holiday Hub partner organisation



In addition to the ideas above, our services have produced a range of wellbeing, learning, food and creative packs for children and families across the country during lockdown. They aimed to enable families to have fun together, help reduce boredom, develop sibling and parental relationships, encourage communication and reduce child and parent stress. Packs have included:

- Durham The Bridge Young Carers: family self-care boxes, tailor made according to age and need, containing items like bubble bath, face masks, mindful colouring books, board games and cup cake recipe boxes.
- Barrow-in-Furness 0-19 Child and Family Service: activity packs to help with home schooling.
- Carlisle 0-19 Child and Family Service: grow your own food packs for children.
- Children’s Centres: ‘virtual picnic’ packs, including VE day, Dino day and teddy bear’s picnic themes. Teddy Bear packs included a picnic, word search, nature strip, build your own bear craft and a bear mask.
- Leeds Family Support Service: outdoor games packs for families to use in the garden or at the local park, including items such as balls, bean bags and frisbees.
- Stockton Family Outreach and Volunteer Service: outdoor games packs and craft resources plus wellbeing packs for volunteers, to promote their wellbeing and help volunteers to feel valued, cared for and appreciated.
- Birmingham Think Family Service: craft and activity packs for children of different ages, from toddlers through to teenagers.

Our Mill Race Community Support Service in Wiltshire has produced activity packs for adults with learning disabilities and autism, as well as a newsletter giving the opportunity to share what they have been doing in lockdown. This aims to provide consistency, continuity and stability. Service users are helping to shape this service by requesting specific activities that they particularly enjoy.

Peterborough Family Support Service has used Ideas Bank funding to create activity packs which, in addition to the aims above, have helped families to talk about their worries and concerns about COVID-19 in a relaxed, safe and informal environment.

Our PAC-UK Adoptees service used Ideas Bank funding to create wellbeing packs for teenage adoptees to help them feel remembered and connected. Social relationships can be hard to navigate for those with attachment difficulties, and moving

“Thank you so much for the amazing gift bag. I wish I could have shown you the children’s faces, they were both super excited and loved everything. We have had bubble time, the whiteboards are used every day... we are making peg fairies today and a washmonster. We really appreciated it.”

Parent



interaction online is almost impossible for some. This places extra strain on family relationships where managing emotions and behaviour are already a challenge for many. The packs provided activities such as creating a time capsule, a calendar with suggestions for every day of the month and worry coping cards. They encouraged teenagers to engage with the service by sending stories, pictures and poems of how they were coping during lockdown.

“Thank you so much for the pack it will keep me busy. The little guy that climbs down my window is funny, I have already tried it.”

Teenager

“The activity pack was great. Many thanks for this. I have used lots of it with him. I even used the COVID-19 time capsule with all 4 kids. They loved the calming bedtime story and made the coping with worries into cards to use when he is stressed.”

Parent

New services funded through our COVID-19 Ideas Bank

Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) Hub

We launched a DVA Hub in July, helping staff in existing services ensure that all reports of DVA are better identified and supported. The DVA Hub will ensure all Family Action staff are better equipped to identify and respond to cases of DVA within our services.

It was estimated before the pandemic that 1 in 5 people in the UK experience DVA (ONS, 2019), so a significant proportion of those that Family Action supports are likely to be affected. Families are reporting escalating levels of all forms of DVA and specialist organisations are reporting that they are seeing unprecedented demand. This means for many people experiencing DVA, the wait for support may be longer and even more damaging to their chances of achieving safety. As an organisation with such a significant footprint, we have the opportunity to address DVA cases which would otherwise be missed. By upskilling our entire workforce and raising awareness of the issues around DVA we hope to be able to support families at the earliest opportunity. We aim to provide initial help through services that already have a positive relationship with families and refer them to the most appropriate local services. In addition, using a dedicated phone line and email, DVA Hub staff will be able to offer an 'on call' response in real time to all staff and volunteers working with complex cases. The Hub will also work with national and local DVA specialist providers to improve referral pathways both from our existing DVA services and from FamilyLine and other services where there has been an increase in referrals.

Listening Works

Our young people's mentoring service, Friendship Works, inspired the idea to set up a bespoke support line for young care leavers. They noticed that this group of young people were being particularly negatively impacted by COVID-19. Often needing to be in the company of others to manage their mental health and overwhelming feelings of isolation, many of these young people are struggling with remaining at home or with social distancing at all. Reports show they are feeling lonely, confused and abandoned – all leading to rising levels of poor mental health. Additionally, these young adults are struggling with debt and managing the little income they have to ensure they have food and utilities.

After a fast paced three weeks of development work, and funding from the Ideas Bank, we launched our new support line, Listening Works on 22nd April. The service supports young people aged between 18-27 who have been in local authority care with emotional support, signposting, a listening ear,



managing the lock down and isolation. Befriending, work readiness and, hopefully, counselling is being introduced. The service is open seven days a week from 6pm until midnight, by phone, text or web chat and is run by 25 trained volunteers. We are thankful to The KPMG Foundation who have agreed to fund the work for the next year.

"I didn't feel rushed, pushed away, patronized, or fobbed off with some 'try taking a bath' or 'try mindfulness' unwelcome suggestions. The 'agents' were happy to talk with me as much as I wanted to, and also on the online chat were quick to respond, so I knew I had their full attention. It's so refreshing to not be made to feel like you're taking up too much of someone's time. That's just what care experienced people need - to not feel like a burden. Thank you for running it"

Young person

Birmingham Support Services

Following an approach by Birmingham Children's Trust, we successfully established a new Early Help response to families in need because of COVID-19 in Hodge Hill, a deprived district in Birmingham. This is currently a small scale service, with the aim of bringing local networks of providers together to provide swift responses for families. Since opening on 20th April, the service has received 599 referrals up to 31st July, covering a range of issues such as food and fuel poverty, isolation, coping with children's behaviours, and the need for emotional support. The service has also approved 18 community grant applications across Birmingham, totalling £106,099.

However, through wider network and partnership discussion it was acknowledged that more support is also needed to address youth violence and gang related issues in the area. Youth violence is a significant issue within Birmingham, with reports of increasing incidents of crime during lockdown. Drawing on our knowledge from delivering the Think Family support service in Birmingham (part of the Troubled Families programme), we have developed a youth violence programme that acts as wraparound support for the Think Family and Early Help services. The programme will provide support on an outreach basis, working 1:1, in groups and virtually to tackle a range of complex issues including:

- mental health problems
- substance misuse and County Lines
- crime, anti-social behaviour and re-offending
- poverty and money issues
- unsuitable housing and poor housing conditions
- disengagement from education/becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)
- unhealthy, harmful and abusive relationships
- entrenched intergenerational problems
- gang violence and criminal/sexual exploitation
- other barriers to achieving positive outcomes such as low self-esteem and aspiration

The programme aims to provide continuity and stability to build honest, trusting relationships with young people, enabling us to explore their strengths, set goals around their behaviour and build their confidence and resilience in order to protect them from harmful influences and exploitation.

FOOD Clubs Expansion

In partnership with FareShare and Manchester City Council, Family Action launched FOOD (Food on our Doorstep) Clubs in Manchester, and then expanded to deliver more Clubs in Bristol, where we also work with Feeding Bristol and Bristol City Council Early Years.

The Clubs receive surplus stock from food suppliers, offering a means for eligible families to access good quality ingredients, which may otherwise end up in landfill. The food is a mixture of fresh fruit and vegetables, dried goods, fresh meat and dairy products. For just £3.50 per week, each member receives a weekly bag of food worth up to £15-£20.

Our FOOD Clubs have been providing a vital service for families who are struggling to cope during the COVID-19 crisis. Many families on low incomes were not able to access food when supermarket shelves were bare at the beginning of lockdown, as they did not have the extra money to stock up in advance. Some families we work with cannot afford to give their children three meals a day, relying on free school meals as the main meal. Their children were going hungry. Many families have also approached our FOOD Clubs experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety because they cannot leave the house as they are high risk.

To meet this need, the number of Clubs Family Action hosts has increased from 9 to 36 during the pandemic, with a further 18 opening in the next few months thanks to funding from Barclays. We have expanded our delivery of FOOD clubs to a number of new locations, including Southend, Rochdale and Oldham, with London, Birmingham and Cardiff all due to open soon. There are multiple clubs in each location and each aims to support 50 families a week – in June in Manchester and Bristol alone we were able to support 3185 families. To support us to expand the FOOD clubs and meet additional needs we have had a great response from some amazing companies, including Mars Food, Danone, Brakes, Boots, United Utilities, The Times and Sunday Times, offering over 15,000 food items and additional toiletries to include alongside food packs, worth over £60,000. Partners from John Lewis Partnership also volunteered their time to support our Manchester clubs by making up food parcels.

Before COVID-19, the 'club' element also offered crucial support to its members centred on food and cookery lessons, demos and nutritional information delivered from Children's Centres and other community venues. These elements will be delivered again as soon as it is safe to do so. In the meantime, our Ideas Bank helped the Manchester clubs to provide online cooking sessions with Shane, a professional chef. Shane used the ingredients from the FOOD club bag, cooked a meal and developed a recipe card, which has been posted online. FOOD club members say that having the food bag and being able to cook a healthy meal for their children means less to worry about.

"I struggle with anxiety and panic attacks, this takes away the difficulty of being in a supermarket with two children in a busy environment. It's amazing and there was excitement when they looked in the bag last week and discovered strawberries."

FOOD club member

"This particular family had unique circumstances which left them in a position that money was so tight that food became a massive issue... then along came the signposting to Family Action. Wow! There was no hesitation that this family needed help now! And food now! They stepped in and just made such a difference, to see a mum cry because she has food in her fridge is overwhelming, and it is heart breaking that families are in this situation. Family Action are continuing to support this family and there are no words to explain the difference they have made. Every representative was empathic and listened and helped."



Primary school teacher

"All the community work we are doing is continuing. That includes making packed lunches for the homeless and those in food poverty... we are currently giving out around 80 of these a day. We also help some of our elderly and isolated neighbours and those who would normally access the mental health community groups we host here. Over recent weeks [Family Action] have been helping us with supplies of food that have helped us with the meals we are providing. I wanted to say a huge thank you for the help - both from me and from the people we are supporting on a daily basis. It's particularly important at the moment, because it means we are maintaining our relationships with some of the most vulnerable in our community and because they come daily for the food, we have also become a hub from which the key workers for statutory services can contact and support these people, which has helped us to assist in making sure the majority of our rough sleepers are now safely in and off the streets."

Adopt London Partnership Service

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 23 London councils joined together as Adopt London to commission a bespoke therapeutic support service for adoptive families and those caring for children under Special Guardianship Orders. Family Action's PAC-UK service started delivering this service in partnership with Adoptionplus in May. The service aims to benefit around 700 families across the capital and will be available until September 2020. It is accessed by calling the helpline or the PAC-UK Advice Line, and families or social workers can also refer online. After the first call, families are offered follow-up support packages from PAC-UK. If further therapeutic support is required, Adoptionplus therapists provide a range of services, including Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Parent Consultations, specialist support for teenagers, attachment informed sensory regulation support and couple counselling.

Adapting our service delivery

As virtually all of our services have stayed open, there have been many ways in which they have adapted to support families during the pandemic. This has included:

- Delivering groups and 1:1 sessions online, via WhatsApp or Zoom, or over the telephone.
- Using individual services' social media pages to answer queries and share information.
- Using Facebook Live and pre-recorded online content.
- Using PPE to continue to deliver services that are not safe to do remotely, or to check on high risk families through 'doorstep' visits.
- Delivering resources to families to complete and encouraging them to send us photos or videos of the results of their activities!
- Online coordination of support for groups and clubs.
- Extending our usual delivery to support statutory services and partner organisations.
- Support for partner organisations to continue to deliver their work.

Early Years

Peterborough Pre-Schools

Throughout lockdown, our Peterborough Pre-Schools continued to provide childcare for children of key workers and vulnerable families. Usually the services are provided from seven settings, but we adapted our physical delivery to focus on one centre. To stay in touch with the children and families from all seven of our settings, staff posted videos every day during lockdown of themselves reading stories and singing songs on our Facebook group page and children attending the open setting helped by recording a song for their friends at home.

There was a very positive response, with parents saying their child joined in and asked to play the videos over and over! We also added a daily suggestion for a simple activity based on "Fifty things to do before you are 5". Some settings also challenged parents to send in observations and photos of what the children were doing at home via our Early Years Log electronic Learning Journey. We worked with families on issues such as parent and child mental health, escalation of child behaviours in lockdown, home learning and finances.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being there at this difficult time."

Parent

At the beginning of June, we welcomed more children back to their pre-schools, still prioritising children of key workers, those from vulnerable families and those where children are due to start school in September so that we could help with that



important transition. We have worked hard to make sure the settings are COVID secure, following Government and public health guidance before re-opening. Four of our settings have opened to a restricted number of children, with one being used as a hub to offer spaces to children from other settings that are not yet able to re-open. The pre-school staff have made short videos, available on their Facebook page, so that parents and children can see what to expect when their children return to our pre-schools, including all the different activities that are available. Despite some children returning to a different building as part of temporary hubs and others attending sessions they wouldn't normally have been allocated, they have all settled in well.

"It's really nice what you are doing. My little boy loves to see his preschool teachers on here and I like the fact that you keep putting ideas for us parents to do at home. It's much appreciated!!"

Parent

Perinatal Support Services

During the difficult time of lockdown and the increased fear and anxiety around COVID-19, mums and mums-to-be with depression, anxiety and low mood may have been feeling more isolated. In our Perinatal Support Services, which are volunteer-led, we have been fortunate to have dedicated volunteers continuing to provide emotional support and a listening ear to mums and their partners.

Matilda's Story

(names have been changed to protect identity)

Matilda is a volunteer, currently supporting Kerry and her baby daughter Leah, who is around eight months old. Matilda had an initial meeting with Kerry and was due to deliver one to one play sessions to support her with attachment and bonding. However, after their initial meeting the COVID-19 situation evolved rapidly and the country went into lockdown. Matilda adapted her approach as advised and continued to support Kerry through weekly contact over the telephone. During these calls, Kerry talked about how she was feeling emotionally, how she plays with her daughter and about her physical health and wellbeing. Kerry was eager for things to return to normal, but coped well under the circumstances and appreciated having a volunteer befriender to speak to. Matilda feels that **“face to face work is better because you can build a relationship more easily, but we have to do what we can in these circumstances”**.

Matilda has found providing telephone support weekly easy, as well being a distraction from her own situation. Matilda's youngest daughter recently moved out and she also has a six week old granddaughter who she has not been able to hold for four weeks. This has been an emotionally testing time and Matilda said she too has **“good days and bad days like everyone else, but knowing I am helping someone makes things a little easier.”**

In Birmingham, our Perinatal Support Service has created mental health PowerPoint presentations, accompanied with audio, which have been uploaded onto the local NHS Foundation Trust website. These include a range of activities for adults and children, which we have also supported through distributing wellbeing packs to families. Along with our partners, Barnardo's, we have created online baby massage sessions as well as mindfulness and meditation presentations. We also encouraged parents to write a journal and start mood diaries, so that we can monitor wellbeing. Then, if at any point, we have felt the someone's mental health has been deteriorating, we have been referring them into community services. Staff also created a list of recommended mindfulness apps to share with other staff and families.

Staffordshire Early Years Services

As our Children's Centres had to close during lockdown, we moved our support online through our social media pages. We wanted to ensure we supported families with fun activities that they could do daily with their children, help them navigate the abundance of information, advice and guidance available in a way everyone could understand and provide a 'wind down' session in the evening. In between these posts, we shared online sessions from other providers who would normally be based in the Centres. Our volunteers have also been providing content, with one mum making a YouTube channel with her son, who likes to be known as Professor Scott!



The universal elements of our service needed to continue, so along with our virtual offer we delivered an Early Years Coordination Service that:

- Acted as the main point of contact for families who need information, advice and guidance.
- Supported other providers to promote their services and online sessions.
- Ensured the buildings were maintained.
- Shared the support networks we identified within localities.

We also adapted our work to support the local Early Years Childcare Sufficiency Team, keeping a record of open and closed settings, supporting those which were open to identify how many children were attending and sourcing alternative placements for families whose usual setting was closed. Our commissioners have also set up a Vulnerable Children's Project that focuses on families who would normally be just about managing, to ensure they are supported to maintain their health, wellbeing, resilience and independence during this time. To support this we:

- Mapped all support available within communities and are keeping a central record of this.
- Identified gaps in support within communities and are working in the area to fill these.
- Acted as the main contact within each district for families and professionals to contact if they need any support or help with understanding information, advice and guidance.
- Created a 'survival pack' of age appropriate activities for each family identified and delivered this to their houses.
- Established a food project, issuing supermarket vouchers to families eligible for free school meals, and ensuring members of the community who were not eligible for the voucher scheme could access local food providers such as food banks.

“Can I commend you on the most amazing commitment and professionalism you, your organisation and your staff are providing during this challenging time. It is absolutely fantastic what you are all doing and I don't think we can thank you enough for the “take charge” attitude that you have.”

Service Commissioner

Southend Children's Centres



Six of our nine Southend Children's Centres remained physically open during lockdown to support delivery from Health Visitors, Midwifery and Social Care partners. We have staffed reception during this time, ensuring that things like signing in and completing Children's Centre registration forms have been continued safely. The Family Support element of our service has also continued to provide support via telephone, video

calls, Zoom groups and doorstep meetings. We also enabled families to be seen in a Children's Centre where a face to face meeting was essential. The Centres have also launched a Bibs & Bobs Baby Bank funded by monies we raised as a result of COVID-19, to support new parents and vulnerable families with items for their babies.

Our Southend teams also delivered strawberry or tomato project packs to over 100 children, including a plant, plant keeping diary, recipes, a make-your-own sun catcher and a story book. DJ Strawberry, Planty Fruity and Strawberry Pawberry are just some of the names the children have called their plants!

"Thank you so much for the strawberry plant and the goodies in the bag were so lovely. We have read the books every night before bed."

Parent

We have run competitions for children to enter which have enabled us to engage with a wider group and check that things are ok, or if families need some extra support. Southend's virtual offers to keep families busy and engaged have consisted of pre-recorded videos or Zoom sessions, such as Story & Rhyme Time, Sign and Sing, Craft Activities, Cooking, Starting Solids and Baby Massage. We have even enlisted the support of two of our Crèche Supervisors' children, Harrison and Jimmy, who have been amazing. Many families have said how much they missed coming into the centres and they did not realise how important the groups were to them until now.

Children and Families

Cumbria 0-19 Child and Family Support Services

In January 2020, Family Action began to deliver a range of 0-19 Child and Family Support Services in Allerdale, Barrow-in-Furness, Carlisle and Copeland in Cumbria. The services provide a range of universal and targeted support, working directly with children, young people, parents and carers, and playing a critical role in preventing children and young people needing to be placed on a Child in Need (CIN) or Child Protection (CP) Plan, to become a Looked After Child (LAC) or entering the Youth Justice system.

"I just wanted to say thanks for everything! Checking that me and the kiddies are ok and being there as someone to talk to. I really do appreciate everything you do for me and the kids. You could have just closed the case but you chose to check in on us. I just wanted to tell you that I really respect you for that. So thank you."

Parent

All four areas have used the time available to staff in lockdown whilst they are not able to deliver face to face support, to complete training to provide the Decider Skills Programme and are delivering this virtually on a 1:1 basis. This supports children to understand their feelings and behaviour, providing tools for them to manage their emotions. Volunteers have also received virtual Solihull Approach training, which aims to increase emotional health and wellbeing through the workforce and parents. In Cumbria, the Solihull Approach is being rolled out for the coming year as a result of COVID-19 and we have had great feedback from staff and families so far.

'I have been working with an eight year old girl who has difficulties expressing her emotions and has very low self-esteem, she also displays some OCD tendencies. In the second week of lockdown Mum rang me and was desperate for some help. We talked through some of the strategies that could be useful for the individuals in the family and the family as a whole - Mum was apprehensive at first but said she would give it a go. I also had a video call with the little girl and discussed some of the decider skills. Last week when I caught up with Mum she said she felt like she had her family back as she was using the decider skills that we had discussed and reflected on her own parenting due to the Solihull programme I had signposted her to. Mum thanked me for enabling her to see the situation differently and taking positives instead of the negatives out of each day. This feedback really made me realise why we do our jobs and the difference we actually make.'

Staff member

We have contributed to providing packs of resources for families across Cumbria, which have also been translated for refugees. In Copeland, our breastfeeding and toddler groups have continued digitally, as has our youth club. We have also stayed in touch regularly with families, with one parent saying that without our weekly call, she would not have had contact with anyone else.

"We have never had support like this, it's so nice that you continue to check up on us weekly to see if we are okay. It's nice to know somebody cares."

Parent



Stockton Family Support and Volunteer Outreach Service

In Stockton, our family support team hold cases in Early Help that are challenging and can escalate quickly. Many of the families we work with require help to manage with food, housing, money and utilities and tend not to use many other services. In adapting our service during the pandemic, we had to balance following national guidance with how heavily families rely on this vital service. We made sure that those families we work with who were in higher need had more frequent contact from our Family Support team by telephone. Families were able to email us forms they needed support to complete and we have liaised with other services on their behalf. Working with Stockton Council we also provided 240 lunches every day for children who would usually receive Free School Meals.

We were pleased to see our efforts acknowledged nationally by the Children's Commissioner for England, not just because Family Action and our partners have been working hard to ensure children aren't going hungry, but also because it means that the families of Stockton and their needs are recognised too. Tesco, Morrisons, Warburtons, Meals and More and NewDay, as well as many more have also recognised the level of need and donated food and baby supplies, and other donations from their customers and staff.



Remembering Darren

Our wonderful Stockton Project Manager, Darren Storey very sadly passed away in May as a result of a blood clot in his lung. Darren responded magnificently to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and he is missed greatly by us all. We wanted to share a tribute to him and what he brought to Family Action.

Darren was a rare person in that he could touch you from the inside out. When a young, eager candidate bounded in front of me at interview many years ago, I asked "Where do you see yourself in five years' time?" The broad smile, Geordie accent and reply had me hooked, "Um, I don't know, maybe Prime Minister." Darren joined the Durham team, throwing himself into his work, development and career progression. He proved to have the most incredible memory and nothing was impossible. He relished new experiences and made unique relationships with everyone he met. Darren championed children and young people and would stop at nothing to ensure they were both seen and heard. He carried this passion for making a difference, his determination to keep children safe and his ability to cultivate relationships into the Stockton Service to build strong networks and invested himself fully in the Stockton team. I have so many precious memories of Darren. The joy when we handed out Christmas Eve gifts to children, the way he celebrated the everyday things that sometimes get lost, but most of all, the fun. Thanks for treasured memories Darren.

Allison Hicks, Operational Manager - Durham and Stockton



Darren epitomised the values of Family Action. When I started, he was quick to introduce himself and offer his support wherever he could in setting up our service. Darren's passion to support families was unwavering, his service users were his priority and he regularly told me times he had gone above and beyond to help a family in need. We will miss Darren immensely, and our thoughts are with Darren's friends, family and colleagues.

Anita Jesson, Service Manager - Leeds

Birmingham Think Family Service

Our Birmingham Think Family Service is part of the Troubled Families Programme and supports those who have one or more of these problems:

- An adult is out of work.
- There are concerns about a child's school attendance.
- A young person is not in education, training or work.
- A family member has been in trouble within the neighbourhood or with the Police.
- A family member has physical or emotional health problems.
- There are problems that are stopping the family from bringing up their children as well as they could (such as housing, relationship or money worries).

I wanted to thank you and your colleagues at Family Action for the care and swiftness of support that service users linked to our school have received, including the information about grants that were not known about before. This proved to be invaluable to service users in receipt and to myself, as a Designated Safeguarding Lead and a Senior Leader in Primary Phase. Not only have they wanted to say thank you from the bottom of their hearts, but also a very big thank you for doing the amazing work you all do from myself and my colleagues too!

Director of Learning, Primary School

To continue to offer these families support, we have been visiting them on their doorsteps weekly throughout lockdown, as well as offering telephone or video calls where parents were self-isolating. Community rooms have also been used to continue to deliver face to face sessions with families who live in hostels/units, so that social distancing can still be practiced.

Shabira's Story

(names have been changed to protect identity)

Shabira had been working until she had her baby in May, but was not receiving any maternity pay from her job. Shabira and her partner Adeel had split up and he left the family home. Her landlord was threatening to evict her for not paying rent and Shabira also could not speak much English. She also has a 10 year old child. Our support worker arranged for Birmingham Settlement to discuss the situation with maternity pay with Shabira on the telephone with an interpreter, where it became clear that her employer had not been submitting her tax and National Insurance contributions to HMRC. Birmingham Settlement supported mum to apply for Universal Credit. Our support worker also provided information about the local Children's Centre, which Shabira said that she would like to access. We were able to discuss this with the Children's Centre at our daily meetings. Our support worker also advised Shabira about Government advice about tenancy and the laws that landlords must comply with. Shabira has said she really appreciated our support at this time.

"If ever I need any help or support, they are there for me. Whether it's emotional, having a little cry or rant on the phone, even down to helping me get funding for things that I may need."

Parent

Bradford Survive and Thrive Children and Families Service

In June 2019 we partnered with the WomenCentre, Staying Put and sister organisation Domestic Violence Services to create a one-stop-shop for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Living in a house where one parent may be hurting another parent can be very distressing for children and young people. Sometimes this distress in children can look like anger, agitation, hyperactivity, fear or seeming very down or withdrawn. During COVID-19, we have been offering crisis support via the 'One Front Door' free telephone helpline to children and young people aged 5-18 and/or their non-abusing parents who may be living with domestic abuse during lockdown. We can then offer individual ongoing support over the telephone or via video call for children/young people, as well as whole family work. We also have 'trauma first aid packs' we can send directly to families we work with.



Amy's Story

(names have been changed to protect identity)

I am a Systemic Therapist working with children and families who have experienced domestic violence in the Bradford Survive and Thrive Service. My first thought when the lockdown began and I was told that we would be working remotely was 'how on earth can I maintain the therapeutic relationship with my clients through a screen?' The reason I got into therapy was because I love spending time with people face to face and not with a computer. I now see this is possible. That it is about understanding people's skills and abilities, what they feel comfortable with and what they don't. Also taking into account lengths of sessions, as virtual sessions can often feel difficult for a full hour. Another aspect is one needs to take into account the safety of the session as you are not as aware who is listening and in the therapy world confidentiality is vital.

Many of my sessions are with one or more children and a parent, so being able to keep them engaged in the session is tougher as you do not have the safety of the therapy room. I think imagination and creativity have been really important here. I left most of my resources in the therapy rooms, so have created my own therapy pack at home with things around the house e.g. puppets, pens, paper, stress balls, art and also encourage the family to introduce things from their home.

Young Carers

Young carers are children and young people who help to look after a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, or drug or alcohol problem. They may do extra jobs in and around the home, such as cooking, cleaning or helping someone get dressed and move around, as well as give a lot of physical help and emotional support. We assess the caring role and support families to access other more appropriate help where necessary, as well as provide young carers with some respite and ability to meet with their peers. However, during the pandemic, many young carers and their families self-isolated for long periods, and some have been shielding, meaning that they have not been able to access their support networks in the usual way. At this time, further support is especially needed for these families.

Young carers were identified as a vulnerable group in government guidance, and thus we have been working with schools to coordinate support. In Windsor and Maidenhead in order to maintain weekly contact, our Young Carers Service devised a support worker rota to call young carers and their parents regularly. One mum commented that she was overwhelmed that our The Bridge Young Carers Service in County Durham made weekly telephone calls to see that her and her family are ok and she felt our service went above and beyond her expectations. We were also able to continue to assess new young carers and complete one to one work via video calls or doorstep visits. On a weekly basis, the Windsor

and Maidenhead service has sent an e-bulletin to families containing useful information, guides and resources as well as positive messages of support from the team. The Young Carers Practitioners at the Bridge wanted to do something to help to bring all of the Young Carers together during this difficult time, so they asked the young people and their families to help to create a "garden themed" collage. Young Carers were asked to draw, paint, photograph or make objects that you would see in the garden.

"Our young carers do a great job looking after their loved ones, while also juggling their education and helping to manage the family home. It is crucial we provide the support they need. I would like to thank Marie and the team at The Bridge for the range of practical and emotional support they offer these amazing young people."

Councillor Olwyn Gunn, Durham County Council member for children and young people's services



Lincolnshire Behaviour Outreach Support Service (BOSS)

At Lincolnshire BOSS, we usually work in schools supporting pupils who are at risk of being permanently excluded from school, as well as providing schools with helpful strategies and interventions. Now, during lockdown, we have been working directly with the parents of our referred children and young people to offer support, guidance and a listening ear over the telephone. We also developed transition booklets for Year 6-7 pupils and for Year 11 pupils to support them remotely with transitions to secondary school and college. In addition to our work supporting families who have been referred to BOSS, some of our staff started volunteering for FamilyLine. Staff from the BOSS service also supported five NACRO assisted living houses for young people aged 16-21 in Lincolnshire, providing 1:1 careers support for individuals, creating a toolkit with a wide range of resources to support key workers within the homes and providing a listening ear to keyworkers. A virtual training session on transition was also delivered to key workers.

"Great to hear from you, I feel relieved to know that he will have some support when he gets back to school. This is great news. Thank you for your phone call, it is very reassuring and it comes at a time when I was actually stressed about [him] returning to school."

Parent

"Thank you so much for your support – I am sure it is making a real difference to him."

Headteacher

Health and Wellbeing

Swaffham ESCAPE Allotment and Orchard Community Project

Our Escape Project in Swaffham, Norfolk supports adults with learning difficulties and those recovering from mental illness through gardening. As humans, we have an innate desire to connect with the natural world around us – it's called biophilia. Our connection with nature can reduce stress, enhance mood and stimulate creativity to increase health and wellbeing.

This is usually one of the busiest times of the year at the Escape Project in Swaffham and the Discovery Garden in Kings Lynn. We would usually be preparing the beds, sowing seeds, potting cuttings taken in the autumn and planting out this season's crops. This year we were able to offer a different service to our participants whilst observing the Government advice. We allocated 90 minute slots for visits, which counted as daily exercise, with a supervisor working in another area of the allotment to enable social distancing. Usually 60 - 70 vulnerable adults visit each week, and about 20 have been doing so with the new measures in place. For those who wanted to grow at home instead, we have delivered seed parcels.

With only two people allowed on site at one time, the usual activities have taken a lot longer than usual, but our amazing participants and volunteers have told us that we need to keep things ticking along so that once normality returns they still have a peaceful, restorative place to visit to help them recover again.



We have also been able to share an abundance of fresh, organic produce with local people. During these health conscious times, loading up on vitamins and minerals to support the immune system is more important than ever, so we're happy to be able to help people to eat their greens!

We have had so many offers to help us continue the practical work and we are extremely grateful. We are finding safe ways to enable this to happen as we recognise the importance of our project to so many people in our local communities.

Hackney WellFamily Plus

WellFamily offers short term advice, counselling and practical support, tackling the social problems that can underpin attendance at GPs and A&E. During lockdown, all appointments and sessions moved to the telephone or video call, rather than taking place in GP practices. In addition to this, at the request of our commissioners, we also started to undertake welfare checks with different levels of priority cases across Health and Social Care to support the wider system in Hackney.



Bolton - Building A New Direction (BAND)

BAND is a mental health service in Bolton that uses a recovery model, helping service users to grow self-esteem and self-confidence, improve understanding of how symptoms can negatively impact on their lives and encouraging and motivating them to make positive changes. The service offers information and support, one to one befriending and mentoring, shared interest and activity groups, social groups and life skills courses. All our face to face groups closed during lockdown, with telephone and virtual support put in place instead. Where service users had no access to a telephone or technology, individual support plans were put in place, working at a safe distance. We have also started a service that supports digital inclusion to reduce future issues with access to online services. We are very proud that the Mayor of Bolton recognised BAND for their work during the COVID-19 crisis.



Friendship Works

At Friendship Works, we match up volunteer mentors with children and young people in London who've been through difficult or traumatic childhood experiences. They usually meet three out of four weekends every month for a minimum of two years during lockdown. During lockdown, the Friendship Works team supported matches to continue contact via telephone and video calls, but some of the children find communication by telephone much harder than face-to-face. Our committed volunteers have come up with other creative ways to interact, with one volunteer using weekly postcards and photographs to send to his mentee who was not able to engage over the telephone or virtually. This includes pictures of his hair growth in lockdown that he thought his mentee would find amusing!

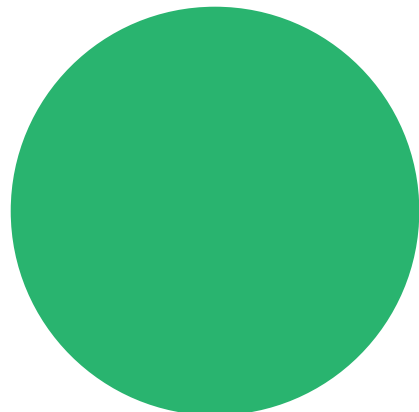
"You continued to work and contribute during this time to ensure vital services and productions kept running despite the dangers faced. It is this selflessness and dedication that you have shown for which the people of Bolton are truly grateful. So, I wanted to award you this certificate of recognition to say a heartfelt thank you to let you know you are appreciated and much valued."

Councillor Linda Thomas, Mayor of Bolton



"Once you're inside all the time you start losing your bearings, so it does help to talk. It's just good to have someone you can confide in to help you work through stuff. They have their opinion and I'm free to take their advice but they don't tell me what to do – they're not scared to say things because it's not that kind of relationship."

Mentee



Bradford Children's Trauma Therapy Service

Bradford Children's Trauma Therapy Service supports children as part of a trauma-focused stage-based approach to treatment, focusing on recovery in three specific areas; safety and stabilisation, trauma reprocessing, and integration/moving on. Careful consideration has been given to which parts of the process can be supported remotely through video link during lockdown.

Maya to externalise her anxiety, providing an opportunity to discuss both physical anxiety responses and triggers. She was able to begin exploring her childhood experiences and early attachments which allowed her to express her beliefs about herself, her expectations of others and relationships between self and others. Unfortunately, after only two sessions the intervention was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it was agreed that support would continue via telephone and video call. It is testament to both Maya and her therapist that the disruption did not cause her to lose motivation to engage with the service.

For the following two weeks sessions via video link involved contact with both Maya and her mother, offering support whilst they adjusted to a new way of living within the restrictions placed on daily life. Time was spent discussing ways to maintain a healthy routine, how to structure school work at home and to think about what a revised therapeutic offer might look like. Maya reported that she had experienced an increase in her anxiety as the prospect of the schools closing became more likely. She was able to reflect upon positive and negative aspects to the change in circumstances and acknowledge her upset without becoming overwhelmed by it. Maya and her mother were appreciative of the continued support, which helped them to maintain some stability during a time of uncertainty and upheaval. Maya was encouraged by her therapist to continue to express herself creatively as this provided a means of externalising her thoughts and feelings, which helped to contain her anxiety. Her images also contained valuable material to explore in future sessions.

Maya felt comfortable for sessions to continue via WhatsApp video and it was agreed that keeping sessions at the same time and day would offer some consistency. Maya negotiated with her therapist how best to share images which she had created so far and how they might explore future images during these sessions. It was felt that in-depth exploration of Maya's trauma experiences would not be safe in the context of video sessions. So with the therapeutic process still being in its early stages, it was agreed that sessions would continue to have a focus on helping Maya to understand how to manage her trauma symptoms, and making meaning from the content of Maya's images. It is hoped that Maya's continued engagement with the service via technology will enable her to gain further insight into managing the impact of her childhood and traumatic experiences and help her develop effective ways of managing her anxiety. This will enhance her sense of efficacy, improve her mood and self-esteem, and maintain hope for the future.

Maya's Story

(names have been changed to protect identity)

16 year old Maya began therapy prior to the COVID-19 crisis and was offered 12 sessions of art psychotherapy to help her manage trauma related anxiety. Early sessions focused on exploring the use of art materials and developing trust with her therapist. Her images and creative writing enabled

National programmes

HeadStart

With the help of our fantastic charity and corporate partners, our HeadStart programme inspires and supports thousands of young people every year to engage in a positive and meaningful way with people from different backgrounds through volunteering – with the added benefit of professional employability workshops and interview experience with leading brands. During lockdown the HeadStart team have been delivering workshops on interview skills, CVs and job hunting online to 87 young people so far. With corporate partners, we will deliver mock interviews online for young people, allowing them to receive feedback and help prepare them for real interviews in the future.

PAC-UK First Family Service, North West

Our PAC-UK First Family Service is an independent support service for birth parents who are affected by aspects of adoption. This is a relatively new service and we have started working with Adoption Counts, Adoption Now and Together for Adoption, providing support to parents who have lost their children to adoption, with the aim of helping parents to recover from the trauma, understand what happened, provide advice and improve outcomes for any future children they may have. Many birth parents feel isolated, and even more so



since the COVID-19 pandemic. All support to families is now offered via telephone, and we have an 'Action Line' that parents can call to leave a message and request a call back. We have also posted care packs, which include mindfulness activities, self-care ideas, therapeutic colouring sheets, creative art activities, facemasks, herbal tea and other treats.

"This service means a lot as I have been looking for help for a long time and knowing that after lockdown there will be a support group set up where I can meet others that have lost their child(ren) I feel a feeling of relief and will be able to move on with life without feeling guilty and can get proper advice and help I have been looking for. I am grateful to you for giving me hope."

Birth parent

"Being a birth parent and having your rights as a parent taken away from you is a traumatic experience and once the adoption process is completed there is no support for us. Which is why I believe this support is essential. Even after one session I felt like I wasn't alone and there is support available to me to get through one of the most heart breaking events in my life."

Birth parent

Separated Parents Information Programme (SPIP)

SPIP is a court-ordered four hour group course, usually held face to face, to help parents minimise the impact of separation on children. Facing each other through family courts can exacerbate conflict between separating parents. They are often angry with their co-parent and do not want to listen to what they might do differently themselves, or how the relationship is affecting their children. Due to COVID-19 and lockdown, SPIP has been running online.

We doubled the number of courses offered to 40 a month to reduce the number of people to four at each session, without reducing the number of individuals able to access the programme overall. We also ensured our trainers have the skills for the new way of working, together with changing our communications, monitoring and processes. Despite what is lost from face to face group contact, parents attending our courses have felt at ease and open to changing how they see their situation.

"Friendly, not biased, connected and really tries to draw you into the class, as usually I don't have concentration."

Parent

National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP)

The NSBP works with schools in disadvantaged communities across the country to improve access to healthy breakfasts. In partnership with Magic Breakfast, we provide schools with access to free healthy food for four terms, expert support from a member of the programme staff to encourage successful breakfast provision at the school and a start-up grant for any equipment required.

The NSBP has adapted very quickly to create a COVID-19 Response Programme, which will run until the end of March



2021. We have been supporting over 1200 schools to deliver term time breakfast provision, both to those children who are attending and for schools to distribute to those still at home. We have adapted the NSBP to enable schools to order food flexibly, including in take home packaging.

Vicky Ford MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families at the Department for Education, wrote a letter to all MPs about free school meals provision during the COVID-19 outbreak. This included recognition of the hard work of our National School Breakfast Programme team and our partners Magic Breakfast.

"I would... like to thank the Department's Breakfast Club providers, Family Action with Magic Breakfast, who are continuing to support families with free breakfast provision in many of the schools they work with especially those in disadvantaged areas."

Vicky Ford MP

Moving Forward

As this report has shown, we have endeavoured to offer continuity to the families we support during this difficult time. We will also work hard to ensure anything new developed as part of our COVID-19 response can continue to be offered. We hope that families who found that our different ways of working during the pandemic helped them will, as far as possible, still have that option open to them in the future. At the same time, we are doing everything we can now to reinstate the face to face services that are still so vital. As we all know, the pandemic is not over yet and we are balancing the phased reopening of services with keeping everyone safe – this is all shaping our planning for moving forward.

In June and July, a number of Family Action settings reopened and currently over 115 of our physical workplaces are now open, with more due to open soon. All of these workplaces have been made COVID-secure, managers have been trained to risk assess their buildings and staff, social distancing is still being observed and many of the settings are only open to staff rather than to service users – but we are making progress. We are aiming for all of our workplaces to be open again in some form by September, depending on continuing guidance from the Government. We are following the key principles that:

- We don't want staff to worry about coming back to our workplaces.
- Those successfully working from home should keep doing so, but begin returning to the workplace wherever possible, even if only on an occasional basis.
- We understand it will take time to go back to 'normal'.
- It needs to be done very carefully and adapted as necessary to the individual circumstances of every different service.
- In all cases we will take into account the safety and welfare of staff and the safety and welfare of our volunteers and service users.
- We need to be mindful that the systems that services have already put in place and the learning from the last few months will help us all to think about what steps we need to take as we gradually come out of lockdown.
- We are determined to get this right and to listen to concerns every step of the way.

We are also conscious that we are likely to need to do an increasing amount of face to face work with our most vulnerable service users even before our workplaces themselves are fully open. We want the families that we work with to feel safe when they come into contact with us, therefore, we have produced a leaflet which provides reassurance and information on what they can expect. We are also using the principles that:

- Our work to safeguard children and adults must continue whatever the current restrictions.
- The Coronavirus Act 2020 has not altered our duties to safeguard children and adults.
- We have already delivered many examples of creative practice to ensure that children and adults are seen and heard. This great work needs to continue.
- At the same time, we need to increase our attempts to see people in their homes where there is professional concern.
- Whenever home visits are needed, we will assess the risk

to staff and service users and provide the equipment and guidance to keep everyone safe.

To further understand what was needed in order for us to manage the return to our workplaces really well and increase the amount of face to face work we deliver, we undertook a staff survey in June and repeated it in July. This asked people to say more about their anxieties about returning to the workplace, what would help to reduce those anxieties, identify what had been working for them during lockdown, and the practices we would like to take forward that had been developed during lockdown to build our service offering and organisational strengths. In both surveys, 88% of our staff indicated that working from home during lockdown had been successful and just 4% felt it had failed to some degree. Many people mentioned embracing technology in a way that they have not before and how helpful this has been. For example, in many services, volunteer recruitment now takes place online, and digital support has worked so well with volunteers that this will continue. Once we are back to 'normality', one of the positives will be recognising that working from home/working remotely can be really effective some of the time for various elements of our different roles – we want to maintain at least some of that as we move forward.

But we also want to highlight that despite digital services working well for some families, this can never fully replace the impact of face to face support and coming together physically in groups or community settings for many of the people we work with. This is important for our staff and volunteers too. For that reason, we have continued to plan and develop new face to face services. For example, we will continue to expand our FOOD clubs to Cardiff, London and Birmingham throughout the autumn. We will also work closely with schools in disadvantaged areas so children most in need can continue to get a healthy breakfast in July and August through the National School Breakfast Programme.

As things continue to change for family life over the coming months, we will keep learning and adapting, just as we have done throughout lockdown. As part of this, we are actively engaging with research into the effects of COVID-19 by universities, such as UCL's 'Families and Community Transitions under COVID' study. Following on from our polling around family pressures in December 2019, we also intend to ask further questions in the autumn to find out how family pressures have changed as a result of the pandemic and the type of support people need moving forward. Our Family Voices campaign will also continue throughout the year, sharing families' stories, holding virtual events and distributing Back to School Packs, supported by NewDay and Bacofoil. In this way, we hope experiences continue to be shared and discussed together and we can provide resources that are suitable for a broad range of families. We continue to receive funding from a wide range of supporters, and will continue to develop these relationships to support the development of further ideas and services for families. We also plan to complete a follow up report later in the autumn to capture the changes and learning that happen over the coming months. Our services will continue to look to the future, adapting as the situation changes, to ensure that families who need support will always be able to access it. Family Action has risen to the challenge of COVID-19 and we will still be there whatever happens next.



Early Years



**Children &
Families**



**Adult Mental Health
& Wellbeing**



Grants



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