

Success story: A London borough delivers for families through tales that tell

Overview

Our client is responsible for the development and performance of the Children's Centres of a large London borough. Her goal was to develop and deliver a truly smart approach to measurement of service performance, ensuring ongoing appropriate and meaningful evaluation - and to provide an evaluative report for the current year. Our consultant, Julie, has been working with her to deliver the report and create an innovative evaluation approach sympathetic to the values of the centre staff and able to fully meet a range of inter-related objectives. The approach, now being embedded with Julie's support, combines appreciative inquiry and narrative to complement and cohere with the borough's existing methods.

About Children's Centres

- The **purpose** of a Children's Centre is to give all young children the best possible start, providing a lasting benefit to them, their families, communities and wider society.
- **Multi agency** working - the success of any centre depends on developing effective **networks** in their area. Examples include the Pre-school Learning Alliance, health visitors, community nurses, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, schools, domestic violence support, housing, Jobcentre Plus, adult education institutes, childminders, nurseries and many others
- **Multiple professions** are involved - some employed by the centres and some through allied or related organisations. They include: teachers, nursery workers, family support, speech & language therapists, psychologists, linguists/ translators, social services, legal advisors, career development advisers and skills trainers.
- There are **22 Children's Centres with 11 linked services**, including extended hours provision at weekends in partnering play centres
- Delivering to **local priorities** in the context of **national/governmental requirements**

What did our client want to achieve?

Truly smart, appropriate and meaningful evaluation of service performance, to know:

- "How much we have been doing, how well we have been doing it, and if anyone was better off at an individual or family level; to help us understand what it is we are doing well, and how." (Head of Centres, 2008 report)

This included needs to:

- Help maximise impact with resources
- Have a human and humane way of capturing information, retaining the important and informative texture of the lives of those accessing and providing services
- Understand and what works well and build on this
- Integrate and rationalise data gathering and reporting requirements (e.g. for internal appraisals, Ofsted inspection, governmental measures)

Who or what was helping?

- Many talented and capable staff in the centres and elsewhere
- Many excellent and beneficial relationships between staff, other agencies and families/individuals accessing the centres and services
- A central team with a vision for the future and a systemic view

Who or what was getting in the way?

- Pressures on staff time
- Time consuming unpredictability in some client populations
- Adverse perception of evaluation
- Adverse reaction to quantitative targets and those governmental requirements held to indicate a lack of understanding of the needs of families and therefore the activities of centres

Our contribution

See over

Our contribution

Phase 1

Working collaboratively, Julie created an evaluation process for the Children's Centres that combined three elements:

- Creating a storycatching framework, based on her expertise in narrative
- Taking an appreciative stance, drawing on the evidence base of positive psychology
- Aligning with the service's approach for measuring performance, to ensure good connections through all parts of the system

Julie used the approach as the basis for the early evaluative conversations in centres, explaining the approach as part of the process and using interview feedback to check, refine, and finally extend its use with assistance from centre staff. The initial remit was to catch the qualitative information, and the approach devised and used by Julie was then piloted in relation to some of the initial 'caught' stories. The outcome was a borough report reflecting the richness of information gathered, linked to priorities and desired outcomes. Furthermore, staff at some centres had been crucial in refining the approach, giving good information and helpful relationships for the next phase. This involvement had enhanced the development of a draft methodology for ongoing use by centre staff.

Ap-pre'ci-ate (verb)

The act of recognising the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems

Phase 2

We have an ethos of building internal capability, and our consultant was invited to develop the storycatching approach in a form that could be used to equip all centre staff and allied professionals. This involved: preparing a briefing pack and examples that also formed a controlled access section of the evaluative report; running half day training sessions; and working with the Head to consider how management practice and daily routines needed to be worked and developed to support successful adoption of the approach.

"Working collaboratively with Julie has been a very positive experience, and one that will enable Early Years Childcare and Play to develop staff skills and embed this reflective approach in our practice."

Benefits

Using a single consistent approach, Children's Centres now have the foundation for capturing and sharing complex and richly textured information in a way that has real meaning for the providers and recipients of the service. This provides a basis for:

- New insight and learning about what it means to deliver high quality support for children and their families
- Sophisticated management information to more effectively target resources for maximum benefit while appreciating the uniqueness of each situation
- Efficient method of data capture and evidence building so that one storycatching effort can be then adapted to meet multiple needs: assisting families, evidence for formal appraisals, information for Ofsted, enabling families to tell their own tales, and information for borough reviews.

If you're interested to learn more about how narrative and appreciative approaches might make a difference in your organisation, please contact julie@irvingallan.com