



Case Study 2:

Oxfordshire Family Support Network - Working with Families Workshop

August 2022

Context

The Oxfordshire Family Support Network was set up as a peer support network by Gail Hanrahan (Programme Manager) and another parent with the aim of helping parents to become better advocates for their children. The Working with Families workshop was initially developed by Gail as training for staff and then adapted to be suitable training for anyone working with children and adults with learning disabilities. The workshop has been running since 2017 and Oxford County Council fund a small number of them each year. (Funded by LA and Oxford Health initially to run sessions for health and social care).

Everyone involved in the workshop is a family carer and, with over 50 years of caring experience, Gail and Angeli Vaid (Family Advocate) are the main trainers of the workshop whilst Kathy Liddell (Family Advocate) is the organiser, signing up participants to the workshop.

The workshop has been designed around the messages they believe professionals need to hear, as well as conversations with professionals finding out what they are struggling with and identifying key themes. It is also based on their own personal experiences and those of the 100s of people they support. This keeps the training current, bespoke and grounded in real experiences and gives it credibility.

The workshop has been running as a face-to-face full-day course starting at 9.30am and ending at 2.30pm. Due to COVID the workshop was moved online and is shorter running from 10.00am to 2.00pm.

Currently, the workshop has enabled over 300 people to be trained.

Aims

The purpose of the workshop is to improve relationships between families and those professionals working in Adult Social Care. It is also about enhancing work with families as everybody is there because they want to improve services. In addition, it is recognised that for family carers this is a life-long journey, and the professionals are only there for some of it. Therefore, the aim is to give the professionals an idea of how it **“feels to be in the shoes of a family carer”**. It allows professionals to begin to understand why families **“may be coming with battle fatigue – some may seem hostile as they have had to fight for everything for their son/daughter and they are still carrying the scars”**. To this end, they are uncompromising in their message that

families can have a rough time and are judged and often do not have the services they need, it is this they are aiming to rectify.

Who is it for?

The workshop caters for a maximum of 16 participants and four family carers with a mix of people from different health and social care services. The rationale for this is that people's lives are not separated into social and health areas, and it is about everyone working together to support the whole person, not one aspect of them. This results in a range of perspectives and experience which supports greater interaction between participants and increased joined-up thinking leading to a more holistic approach to support.

Oxfordshire County Council fund this training for their adult social workers, they almost see it as mandatory for them. They have also trained finance professionals as they can ask families questions that are very sensitive about money and their finances.

How does it involve people with learning disabilities/caring for people with learning disabilities?

Up to four family carers who care for family members with learning disabilities take part in the workshop and they are all paid. They include family carers in different situations and of different age groups to demonstrate different levels of need and stage of life of people being cared for.

They reflect the journey of different family carers. The people the professionals work with will be the product of their journey and this will be different depending upon their age. A lot of older family carers really find it hard to trust professionals so, professionals need to understand that lack of trust is not personal – it comes from a deep sense of frustration.

In addition, the person with learning difficulties needs to be at the centre of any decision being made and that is why having family carers involved is important.

They bring the reality that you are talking about somebody's family member. Not a case load, not a file.

There are benefits beyond the workshop as they try to skill up family carers to take a role in the workshop with the view to further involvement and doing training themselves.

The Workshop – what happens?

The workshop, whether face-to-face or online, follows a clear structure broken up with lots of chat and discussion. Group/breakout sessions are included, and a family carer is attached to each group. The focus of the workshop is families with learning disabilities, but they also discuss autism.

The workshop begins by looking at the history of the journey of a family carer. The professionals support people right through from diagnosis until later stages, so they need to know the history and that older carers will have been given information which will be different to that given today. This gives them a sense of who they support, the range of people and their circumstances.

There is an open round at the beginning where professionals and participants say who they are and share something about their family whom they love. This changes the nature of the relationship between professionals and participants as, in that moment, they are all family members talking about those they love.

They are thinking about people they love in exactly the same way family carers think about their family members – it makes it more personal.

This also brings positivity to the group as well as making them think about different families and understanding them.

Then there is a 'do's and don'ts' session where family carers list what they think professionals should and should not do and what is important to and for families. They also ask the family carers to provide some positive experiences they have had.

They do a real-life exercise – Judy's Noodles – whereby they use a scenario and work in small groups to look at the scenario from different people's perspectives. The scenario is about Judy, a young woman who has moved into supported living. She loves noodles but her mum is worried that Judy has put on a lot of weight due to eating too many pot noodles. Staff think it is great as Judy is being independent and see her mum as interfering when she raises concerns. The participants break into four groups and each group discusses what is working and not working from one perspective. The point of the scenario is to understand what it is like when someone moves into supported living. What are the ways of resolving all the different perspectives? It requires good communication and putting yourself in someone else's shoes. The exercise is very person-centred and gets people to come alive and problem-solve.

As a part of the session there is discussion of real-life situations where there have been devastating consequences. For example, the case of Connor Sparrowhawk and there is an interview with Sara Ryan, his mother, as part of this.

The session is broken up further with videos and discussion of:

- Language and the use of jargon which can alienate many families. Many professionals do not realise the power of language and how language and especially the use of acronyms can create a them and us situation.
- What 'good' looks like: working with the family to make sure they are involved in decision-making as they should be part of the decision-making process.
- Person Centred Planning – what it is and how to use it.

Participants are given written information to take away and they are expected to be aware of easy-read resources. Information is Oxfordshire based about the local offer and resources for families. There is also signposting to forums and other sources of support. Ongoing support is also offered, and participants are invited to get in touch after the workshop with follow-up questions. A big 'Better Together' event is held every year for all those who have taken part in the workshops.

Obtaining feedback - what difference does it make?

Initial feedback is obtained at the end of the workshop when participants are asked to share something they have learnt from the session. Further feedback is obtained through an evaluation form at the end of face-to-face sessions and a poll when delivering on-line sessions. They are asked what they find useful as well as using the "so what" question. You've done the training, so what now? What are you going to do as a result of the training now? Feedback is used to develop and refine future workshop sessions.

Overall, the workshop is rated as excellent or very good by everyone and 99% would recommend a colleague to come on the training and as one participant stated, "**it made me think again**". Information from the workshop is shared with colleagues. Participants say the "do's and don'ts" are really informative, raising lots of issues they would not have thought of. It is especially helpful that these are from real-life experiences. The scenario, Judy's Noodles, really helps participants think about a situation from different perspectives and is considered really useful:

A variety of participants, importance of family as experts, Judy's Noodle. It's validating to know that telling parents they are the experts, but we can problem solve together.

In addition, professionals like having family carers in the room, at the tables, and hearing their experiences in a non-clinical setting. This enables them to talk to each

Good to hear other people's perspectives (and the importance of communication is very important when addressing difficult issues.

other as human beings and ask honest and open questions as one participant said, it is:

Overall, the workshop is beneficial for both professionals and the family carers involved in the session.

Professionals report the following benefits:

- Understanding the person with learning disabilities and taking a person-centred approach. It places the person with learning disabilities at the centre of the training and that the approach taken should be the same whether you are from health or social care – it is about how you work with that family. As one participant said, **“it’s good to remind yourself of who you are – you sit there as a professional – and not to jump in with 2 feet”**.
- It is a really good way of helping professionals to understand what family carers are going through. It is good for new staff as one participant said she was **“fresh out of training so very useful”** and good to remind those that have become entrenched in the system.
- It helps them think about the different stages of the journey a family has been on and the possible journey to come.
- It highlights that the family carer is dealing with a whole range of other services: school, health social care, benefits amongst others.
- It demonstrates the importance of listening to families and the difference it can make. What would you want for your child?
- It enables professionals to engage with the reflective practice approach and ask, **‘what can we build on to make it better?’**
- It highlights that small changes can make a difference. For example, responding to an email quicker; putting an out of office on. Little things can make a huge difference to families.
- To be reassured that it is okay to say, **“I don’t know the answer, but I will go and find it for you”**. Family carers don’t expect people to know everything but if you say you are going to get back to someone then do.
- It reminds people why they started this work – it is easy to get engulfed by the systems and forget the family and the child with complex needs.

Family carers report the following benefits:

- They get insight into what professionals are dealing with. They learn, or are reminded, that they are juggling caseloads and up against budget cuts.
- They learn about seeing their world from other perspectives.
- They gain skills in group work and delivering training.

How it's changed?

After workshops they meet and discuss the session always thinking about changes or improvements that could be made. However, it has not changed hugely from when they first did it, occasionally they swap the order around or leave items out. They are more mindful of the emotional impact now and prepare for that, a box of tissues is always on the table, and they tell people to take time if they need a minute.

As a result of COVID and the pandemic the workshop moved online and now they can offer it to other local authority areas and charge for it. However, moving it online was difficult as some of the things they did in a room did not translate well into an online situation. In the face-to-face situation being around the tables opened up conversations which were lost online, and the interaction is not the same as body language cannot be seen. They do ask people to have their video on so they can see people and draw them in, but a lot of facilitation is needed.

As well as training individuals they are training whole teams now which makes a difference.

The future

The deputy director in adult social care at Oxfordshire County Council has indicated she would like to make this mandatory training for all social care staff.

They have tended to work with social workers and health professionals but have also delivered it to supported living managers and have been commissioned by support providers to deliver to individual support teams. They are keen to deliver to a wide range of staff.

Future delivery will be both online and face-to-face. They can reach more people online although the costs for the trainers are similar. However, it saves on travel costs for Oxfordshire County Council as they pay travel costs and time for their staff.

They would like to develop more of a trading arm to earn money for the charity through the training.

For further information about this training, please contact Gail Hanrahan, Gail.Hanrahan@oxfsn.org.uk

Contact Information

Anna Marriott, Research and Evaluation Programme Lead

Call: 01225 255 268

Email: Anna.Marriott@ndti.org.uk

National Development Team for Inclusion

www.ndti.org.uk

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