

# Mental Health Social Workers Delivery of Family Focused Practice

16 June 2025

## Event themes

The workshop brought together 29 mental health social workers and other mental health professionals and researchers with an interest in how family focused practice can be embedded within mental health services. The focus was on how mental health social work in England could be strengthened to incorporate a greater degree of family focused practice.

A series of short presentations covered the following:

- 1) Family focused practice amongst mental health social workers in a south-east English mental health trust.
- 2) Young people's experiences of professional support whilst growing up with a parent with mental health difficulties.
- 3) Using the Family Model in Northern Ireland.
- 4) Family focused practice amongst mental health social workers in the Republic of Ireland.

These presentations highlighted that attitudes towards family focused practice were broadly positive amongst social workers, but that individual and systematic barriers were identified as preventing practice. The need for better engagement with the children of parents with mental illness was illustrated in Dr Blake-Holmes work. Insights from a national top-down (Northern Ireland) and regional bottom-up (Republic of Ireland) initiatives to embed family focused practice were shared. Learning from what had succeeded and what had hindered change were considered.

Subsequent discussion was focused on how to define family focused practice for mental health social workers. This used a participatory approach.

First the group considered how family could and should be defined – this included legal and self-defined conceptualisations.

The core purpose of family focused as identified by the group can be represented as follows:



With the following values held at its core:



The group then established a working definition of family focused practice:

*Family Focused Practice in mental health social work is an approach that considers the wider family context of a patient [adult or child]. This will include their self-identified family [i.e., those individuals they deem close and important] as well as those identified by legal or service definitions. It actively acknowledges the dynamic and reciprocal impact of mental health difficulties within a family and takes a holistic and collaborative approach to minimise them. Working with the patient and/or family, maintaining a focus on clarity and transparency, it seeks to identify strengths, vulnerabilities and gaps in provision to promote recovery and minimise poor outcomes.*

### Next steps

Members of the workshop will work with the chair to consider how this definition could be operationalised in practice. This may include co-producing a pilot training programme.

### Participant quote

“Today was really fantastic and I look forward to any future events and opportunity for collaboration and learning across UK and Ireland.” K. McVeigh

### **Acknowledgements**

Dr Kate Blake-Holmes for her assistance in organising the event. .