

Work-focused services in children's centres: Interim report

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The 'work-focused services in children's centres' pilot is one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008. It is operating in ten local authority (LA) areas in England, providing work-focused services through a dedicated Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser, as well as activities and provisions designed to support local parents into the labour market.

A comprehensive evaluation strategy is in place for the pilot, making use of in-house data sources and externally-commissioned research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES).

This summary reports findings from the interim stage of the evaluation undertaken by IES. It is based on qualitative interviews with 61 children's centre users; 64 in-depth interviews with pilot staff and partner organisations; and ten discussion groups with children's centre users – all of which took place across ten case study sites 11 to 12 months after the pilot went 'live' (November to December 2009). One case study site was selected from each LA.

Key findings

- Pilot delivery has been largely successful over the first year and overall, Personal Advisers have settled into their new roles well.
- Pilot delivery challenges have centred around implementation issues, which delayed start-up.
- Personal Advisers have grappled with the ad hoc demands of their new job. They have had to demonstrate flexibility, resilience and strong interpersonal skills. The positive support from their Jobcentre Plus line manager and children's centre managers was key.

- Most case study areas have delivered personalised, flexible and often intensive support for customers in order to meet their needs and respond to their circumstances.
- Case study areas have improved access to, and awareness of, work-focused services among children's centre users, both traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers.
- The range of partner organisations involved in the pilots to date is limited in some areas. Staff felt that this is because it takes time to build up effective working relationships with partner organisations and their staff.
- For children's centre staff, there is evidence of improved awareness of work-focused services and of the wider Government agenda on tackling poverty.

Background

The work-focused services in the children's centres pilot is one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008. The aim of these pilots is to test and explore new approaches at a local level and to build up the evidence base on what works in tackling child poverty.

The work-focused services pilot operates in three children's centres in each of ten LA areas (30 children's centres in total), running from January 2009 to March 2011, and will provide work-focused services through a dedicated Personal Adviser co-located in each children's centre, as well as activities and provision designed to support local parents into the labour market. The aim of the pilot is to test whether children's centres can offer an effective means

of engaging parents in labour market activity, moving them closer to work and ultimately into employment.

The ten LAs participating in the pilot are: Blackpool, Ealing, Kingston-upon-Hull, Lambeth, Nottingham City, Redcar and Cleveland, Sandwell, Somerset, Southampton and Westminster.

The wards served by the children's centres constitute some of the most deprived areas within their respective LAs, with high levels of economic inactivity and a high proportion of children aged 0 to 4 years in workless households in their reach areas. The baseline report found that most parents who used the children's centres were white women, aged between 25 and 34 years, from low-income households, who had at least one child under five years old.

Pilot delivery

Pilot delivery has been largely successful over the first year, with both communication arrangements and governance structures for the pilot working well. Most of the Personal Advisers have demonstrated a strong commitment to the task of balancing work-focused activity with 'softer' activities to engage children's centre users, and integrate themselves into the children's centre environment. Personal Advisers have demonstrated flexibility in adapting to the ad hoc demands of the role, often dealing with customers' complex and multiple needs by offering intensive, personalised support.

Challenges to pilot delivery have centred on implementation practicalities. Start-up has been delayed by Criminal Records Bureau checks for Personal Advisers, and technical problems in implementing Jobcentre Plus IT in the children's centres. A further challenge to the pilot has been a lack of capacity among Jobcentre Plus line managers to devote time to the pilot, which has been caused by both additional pressures placed on Jobcentre Plus during the recession, as well as the location

of the pilots away from Jobcentre Plus office with line managers often too removed from the day-to-day experience of the pilot.

In addition to these practical challenges, Personal Advisers continue to grapple with two key aspects of their job role: how to respond to the unstructured and ad hoc demands of their job, and how to manage more target-orientated expectations of their role among their line managers. To overcome these challenges, many Personal Advisers have needed to demonstrate flexibility, resilience and strong interpersonal skills, with the support and advice of children's centre managers and Jobcentre Plus line managers also key.

Overall, Personal Advisers have settled into their roles well, given the change in their environment and the need for new ways of working. This assessment is supported by the responses from pilot customers, most of whom report that pilot provision is accessible and convenient and that Personal Advisers are sympathetic, understanding, trustworthy and helpful.

Partnership working

The interim report identified that effective partnership working between the children's centres and Jobcentre Plus is characterised by the following features:

- flexibility on both sides to make the pilot work;
- regular communications between the Personal Adviser and the children's centre manager;
- referrals between children's centre staff and partners organisations, and the Personal Adviser;
- joining up partner networks and contacts;
- prior understanding of each other's organisational cultures;
- shared expectations of the Personal Adviser role and pilot outcomes;
- physical space to accommodate the Personal Adviser.

The range of partner organisations involved in the pilots to date is limited in some areas. Pilot staff commented that this is because it takes time to build up effective working relationship with partner organisations and their staff, with the pilot not in place long enough to expect this level of cooperation. Secondly, delays in pilot start-up and implementation limited opportunities for partnership working to get underway.

Engagement and outreach

Most case studies have been actively engaging children's centre users through a variety of methods, including referrals from partner organisations, outreach in the children's centres, outreach in the community and advertising. Word of mouth and referrals from partner organisations are emerging as two particularly successful routes of engagement.

Factors which have, according to pilot customers, facilitated their engagement with the pilot are: the informal nature of engagement, the easier physical access to the children's centre (as opposed to the Jobcentre Plus office), the more comfortable environment offered by the children's centre, the continuity of the Personal Adviser and the privacy offered by many of the children's centre sites.

Factors which have, according to pilot customers and staff, constrained ongoing outreach and engagement are low levels of children's centre users in some areas, a lack of physical working space within the centre for the Personal Adviser to engage with centre users, cases of potential fraud, transient local communities and language barriers for non-English speaking customers.

Observed pilot outcomes

From the qualitative findings, two key outcomes have been identified as being achieved by the pilot so far. First, most case study areas have delivered personalised, flexible and often

intensive support for customers in order to meet their needs and respond to their circumstances. Second, these areas have improved access to, and awareness of, work-focused services among children's centre users by successfully engaging them. Pilot customers have benefited from both these achievements, with many reporting:

- increased levels of confidence;
- increased awareness of opportunities and options around employment, training and childcare;
- access to job preparation skills and support.

There is evidence that the pilot has engaged both traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers. However, many pilot staff and partner organisations acknowledge that more work needs to be done to engage the hardest to reach groups that are not in contact with their children's centre or Jobcentre Plus services.

For children's centre staff, there is evidence of improved awareness of work-focused services and of the wider Government agenda on tackling poverty. Jobcentre Plus staff have shown improved links with children's centre networks and partners. Both findings indicate that the pilot is starting to address customers' needs in a more holistic way, as work-focused services begin to embed themselves within the children's centres and within their network of partner organisations.

Conclusions and policy considerations

Overall, the evidence from the interim evaluation research indicates that the pilot has had notable success in some key areas, including the range of outreach activities, the informal and trusted nature of engagement with children's centre users, and the personalised and intensive support provided by Personal Advisers. Crucially, there are early signs that work-focused services are beginning to embed themselves in many areas, with some partners

and agencies now co-ordinating their efforts alongside the pilot to address the needs of parents and families in a more holistic way.

One common theme that emerged is the ongoing challenge of 'cultural differences' upon the effectiveness of the Personal Adviser role and upon overall pilot performance. These differences were identified as a potential risk to the pilot in the baseline report, and the evidence from the case study research is that this remains an issue.

A number of critical success factors have been identified from the pilot:

Pilot delivery requires:

- Personal Advisers with the right mix of skills and Jobcentre Plus line managers willing to work outside of their usual targets;
- Personal Advisers supported by children's centre staff and line managers;
- tailored pilot provision and delivery to local needs and circumstances;
- a dedicated working space for the Personal Adviser.

Partnership working requires:

- a flexible and committed approach to making the pilot work among all partner organisations;
- opportunities for Personal Advisers to visit the children's centre or shadow staff prior to the pilot going 'live';
- regular communications between the children's centre manager and the Personal Adviser.

Engaging parents requires:

- Personal Advisers to be willing to make themselves accessible to parents;
- prioritising outreach activity over work-focused activities early on in the pilot to raise awareness of pilot provision and to allow Advisers to get to know parents.

Next steps in the evaluation

The final evaluation report will be produced in 2011. This will bring together all the findings from the different strands of the evaluation (including longitudinal qualitative research with children's centre users, further case study research, a user survey, a comparison study and pilot management information) to draw overarching conclusions and policy recommendations.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 803 4. Research Report 677. August 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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