



Department
for Education

Evaluation of the North-East London Commissioning Partnership Programme

Final evaluation report

April 2019

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Acknowledgements

The evaluation team would like to thank the project delivery team staff in the London Borough of Havering, especially Nick French for supporting the evaluation activities and Joseph Jenkinson for facilitating consultations. We would also like to thank all individuals taking part in consultations, thereby providing crucial input for this process evaluation.

Due to the limited number of children and young people engaged in the NELCP and our process evaluation, we would not be able to ensure full anonymity if we reported findings from consultations with them. To eliminate the possibility of identifying individuals, we have removed young people's input in this published version of the report.

1. Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents final findings of the process evaluation of the North-East London Commissioning Partnership (NELCP). The findings have been informed by a number of sources, including direct observation of project meetings attended during 2018 and 2019, analysis of project documentation as well as a series of consultations undertaken with stakeholders, including young people between January and March 2019.

The project

The North-East London Commissioning Partnership (NELCP) is a strategic partnership between eight London boroughs and two private sector organisations: The Institute of Family Therapy and Silver Lined Horizons. Together, the Partnership aims to work collaboratively using a co-production model to achieve savings, sustainable relationships between the boroughs and children's residential care providers and improved placement stability for children and young people.

The project is currently in its second phase, during which the Partnership has developed an active role for children and young people through co-production; developed and launched the Invitation to Tender and is in the process of awarding the contract. Once awarded, the Partnership will begin to commission up to 35 children's residential care placements across the sub-region to a consortium of service providers.

The evaluation

The evaluation is assessing the extent to which processes involved in the project have worked well, as well as understanding the overall effectiveness of its three-way co-production model between service providers, young people and the sub-regional Partnership. More specifically, the evaluation covers the extent to which the contract specification has been co-designed, the effectiveness of engagement and promotional activities (such as mobilisation and communication events) in translating the purpose and aims of the Partnership, and to identify any external factors which can hinder or enable the success of the Partnership.

Key findings

Despite initial delays in its delivery, the Partnership has progressed at a good pace over the last 12 months. The project has demonstrated a unique approach to create a common strengths-based practice framework, having received ongoing input from

stakeholders involved in the design of the contract specifications underpinning the core features of the block-contract model.

Across local authorities, there has been varying levels of engagement with the Partnership, although this was seen by some as a consequence of stakeholders being sceptical of how the Partnership would work in practice. Stakeholders praised the governing structure of the NELCP, commending the level of senior buy-in commanded by the board's chair which raised the level of attention from other board members. The Partnership has utilised an array of multi-disciplinary skill-sets, with stakeholders of the impression that the board's membership was appropriate, and were especially pleased to see young people being invited to join and share their opinions.

The collaborative approach of this programme was looked upon positively by stakeholders, although not all felt they had been engaged effectively or at the right time. Some stakeholders believed it was difficult to identify young people willing to sit on the board. However, once they were identified and invited to sit on the board, the dynamic of the board meetings reportedly changed, with some highlighting that it brought the project closer to the 'actual world'.

Stakeholders reported good levels of engagement from providers in the series of events and workshops run by the project implementation team. Communication at these events was highly commended, with most service providers clear on the purpose and vision of the Partnership. They felt the routes available to communicate their feedback was effective and allowed the free-flow sharing of ideas. Most were particularly pleased to see the innovation factor within the contract specification, which sought to improve the long-term planning of placements, thereby improving placement suitability and other positive outcomes for children and young people.

A key feature of the Partnership is the professional development training offer, which was seen as an attractive offer for service providers to attract and retain high-quality staff, particularly due to its comprehensive content. Some however, saw unintended effects of the training provision which would see some service providers discontinue their training provision with existing training facilities with whom they had built a good relationship.

Another key feature of the Partnership was an updated cost model which sought to simplify cost estimates for children and young people with vary levels of support complexity. The new model was seen to be a good idea by all, although the extent to which the model was simple and easy to use was limited.

Key implications and recommendations for policy and practice

[Byrant et al.](#)¹ were commissioned by the Local Government Association to explore the enablers of and barriers to improving local children's services. The result of this was a list of seven 'enablers', considered as crucial to improvement. Our findings from this process evaluation have provided further evidence of the importance of four of those enablers. These are (1) *strategic approach*, (2) *leadership and governance*, (3) *engaging and supporting the workforce* and (4) *engaging partners*. These enablers lend themselves well for framing conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice. Key recommendations are to:

1. Attract the highest level of seniority to the board, and where possible, chair the board.
2. Ensure the right level of seniority among board members to enable fast decision making.
3. Ensure sufficient resourcing for scoping exercises to determine the purpose and agree the vision of the project.
4. Organise engagement events only once the purpose and vision of the project has been agreed, so as not to discourage engagement from providers at the project outset.
5. Consult each stakeholder group initially to discuss their involvement and at what point their input would be of greatest value.
6. Consider offering a professional development training programme to appropriate workforces.

¹ Bryant, B., Parish, N., and Rea, S. *Action Research into Improvement in Local Children's Services: Practical Implications for Lead Members and Senior Leaders*, LGA and ISOS, available from: https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/160621_LGA%20children%27s%20services%20improvement%20action%20research_practical%20sum%20%20%20.pdf

2. Overview of the project

Project context

The North-East London Commissioning Partnership (NELCP) is a strategic partnership including eight London boroughs: Havering, Barking and Dagenham, Tower Hamlets, Newham, Waltham Forest, Redbridge, Hackney and City of London. Two private sector organisations, the Institute of Family Therapy² and Silver Lined Horizons³ are also part of the Partnership. The eight boroughs, known as the 'North East London sub-region' or 'sub-region', work in partnership across children's services to ensure good practice and high quality residential placements for children and young people.

According to the partnership's innovation funding bid, one of the main challenges faced in the sub-region was the undersupply of good quality residential care placements within their areas. This led to difficulties in being able to place young people in care within the borough boundaries, often resulting in placements in unsuitable residential settings or out of borough (more than 20 miles away). In turn, these factors significantly impact the young person's experience and their ability to achieve positive outcomes.

In addition, the partnership bid also stressed the often fragmented way of commissioning residential care. This was most often by a spot-purchasing and/or access to a framework – both of which resulting in a variable quality of services from providers and high costs due to the sub-region competition and no long-term meaningful relationships with service providers.

With the above in mind, the partnership aimed to test Sir Martin Narey's view that coming together as a sub-regional commissioning partnership could lead to significant savings and improved outcomes for children and young people. As such, the initiative is based on evidence from the Buckinghamshire regional commissioning model which used block contracts and relationship management with providers to achieve savings, sustainable relationships between the boroughs and providers and improved placement stability for children and young people.

² The Institute of Family Therapy is a London based provider "of family therapy and systemic psychotherapy training" (www.ift.org.uk)

³ Silver Lined Horizons is a Surrey based private company which "provide[s] project-management support to organisations that are keen to find ways of involving children and young people as genuine partners in their work" (silverlinedhorizons.com/what-we-do)

Project aims and intended outcomes

The partnership aims to test the Buckinghamshire's approach and Narey's hypotheses with looked after children and young people in the densely populated North-East London sub-region. As such, it aims to work collaboratively across the eight boroughs to explore the commissioning of residential care placement through facilitating consortia bids.

The proposed programme of work consisted of six strands:

1. Developing a sub-regional commissioning partnership consisting of North-East London boroughs
2. Obtaining and practicing greater influence on the market and the shaping of its residential placement offering
3. Improving the tendering process to agree block contracts with one or more service providers to provide up to 35 residential placements within the sub-region
4. Improve the quality in residential placement setting by providing a career pathway into social work for residential staff
5. Creating a central brokerage system improving efficiency of residential commissioning arrangements
6. Developing a three-way co-production way of working that collaborates with young people and providers to co-create the offer of residential care placements within the sub-region

Based on the realisation of the above activities, the partnership proposed to provide up to 35 residential placements for children and young people in care aged 11-17. More specifically, it aimed to shape the market by supporting the creation of consortia within the sub-region and its children's residential placement service providers. Placements would be commissioned in eight-year block contracts with child and young people outcomes incentivised through payments by results contract clauses.

In addition, one of the main reasons children and young people are placed at a distance is that local providers are unable to cater for some specialist needs. As such, the Partnership will be offering an accredited training programme (delivered through the Institute for Family Therapy) for staff to ensure the provider workforce is suitably skilled to work with children and young people with specialist needs. This training will ensure staff are able to develop a sustainable plan to step-down from residential care for all young people. It was hoped that the duration of the contract would help the sub-region creating effective relationships with providers to achieve this vision.

Project activities

The project is currently in its second 'phase', during which the Partnership has developed an active role for children and young people for co-production; developed and launched the Invitation to Tender and is currently in the process of awarding the contract. This compares to the original project bid within which it was anticipated that the 'service specification and method statement questions' would be finalised in December 2017 and that a supplier contract would be awarded in June 2018. Other activities such as developing and agreeing the payment-by-result framework and agreeing the systemic practice training were also anticipated to be completed in June 2018.

Due to delays in other work strands, especially in terms of 'creating posts and advertising placement co-ordinator and business analyst posts', the project accumulated a delay of seven months⁴. A needs analysis carried out also suggested that there was less placement demand than originally anticipated. This led the project lead to liaise across participating boroughs to obtain and map placement data – thereby identifying the gaps and placements needs and adjust the tendering process accordingly. The delay means that placements with the winning bidder are now expected to start in September 2019. This has consequences for the evaluation with its scope limited to an ex-ante process evaluation (see section 6) and aiming to assess the following two project phases:

Phase 1 [Mar 2018 – Dec 2018]: Market mobilisation and co-production

- NELCP mapping care placement provision gaps
- Engagement with service providers
- Engagement with young people (through work carried out by Silver Lined Horizons)
- Development of project commissioning specifications
 - Co-design the commissioning model with identified providers and young people
 - Identify what success will look like and relevant outcome indicators

Phase 2 [Jan 2019 – Apr 2019]: Tendering process

- Develop an active role for young people into the service shaping, governance and its evaluation
- Submit Invitation to Tender
- Offer young people the possibility to assess bids, and assist site visits
- Award the contract

⁴ As a result of project delivery delay and to better understand the type of evaluation possible within the programme time-frame, the evaluation plan was signed off by the department in January 2019 to run until March 2019.

Project theory of change

This ToC had been designed by the Partnership and was integrated into the original evaluation plan. Consultations with the programme lead confirms that activities, outputs and outcomes remain unchanged.

Intervention rationale

At the time of the NELCP proposal for funding from DfE, commissioning residential placements across the sub-region had six main problems. Young people often experience placement instability and unsuitability which can affect the quality of their time in care.

Along with the effect on young people, commissioning arrangements across the sub-region often deliver poor value for money. Poor value for money is attributed to inefficient commissioning arrangements and variable quality of providers and residential staff.

These problems are worsened further by variability in the quality of relationships between local authorities and providers, which in some cases are short-term relationships, bearing limited incentive to provide high-quality services.

Activities

The NELCP had originally proposed a programme of work consisting of six strands. This included developing a sub-regional commissioning partnership between eight Local Authorities to try to influence the shape of the market. Through this approach, the NELCP endeavoured to improve the tendering process to agree block contracts with one or two providers to initially provide up to 35 residential placements locally.

Furthermore, the NELCP sought to raise the quality and standards in the residential setting by providing systemic practice and a career pathway into social work for residential staff.

The NELCP also created a central brokerage resource to enhance the efficiency of residential commissioning arrangements.

To maximise the effectiveness of this programme of work, the NELCP utilised an innovative model of three-way co-production which utilises relationship-based approaches to collaborate with young people and the providers and co-create the offer within the residential provider.

Outputs

Successful delivery of the above activities has resulted in the following outputs being realised:

- Sub-regional partnership agreement between the eight Local Authorities
- Sub-regional tender agreed across all local authorities and sent out to market, with favoured provider(s) awarded contract to provide up to 35 placements locally.
- A comprehensive, compulsory and accredited modular training package for the first three years of the contract, based on the theory of systemic practice.
- Central brokerage team established and have implemented a single referral process, maintained the data warehouse and managed the placement matching.
- Young people's consultation agreement finalised and young people consulted with.
- Provider's consultation agreement finalised and providers consulted with.

Outcomes

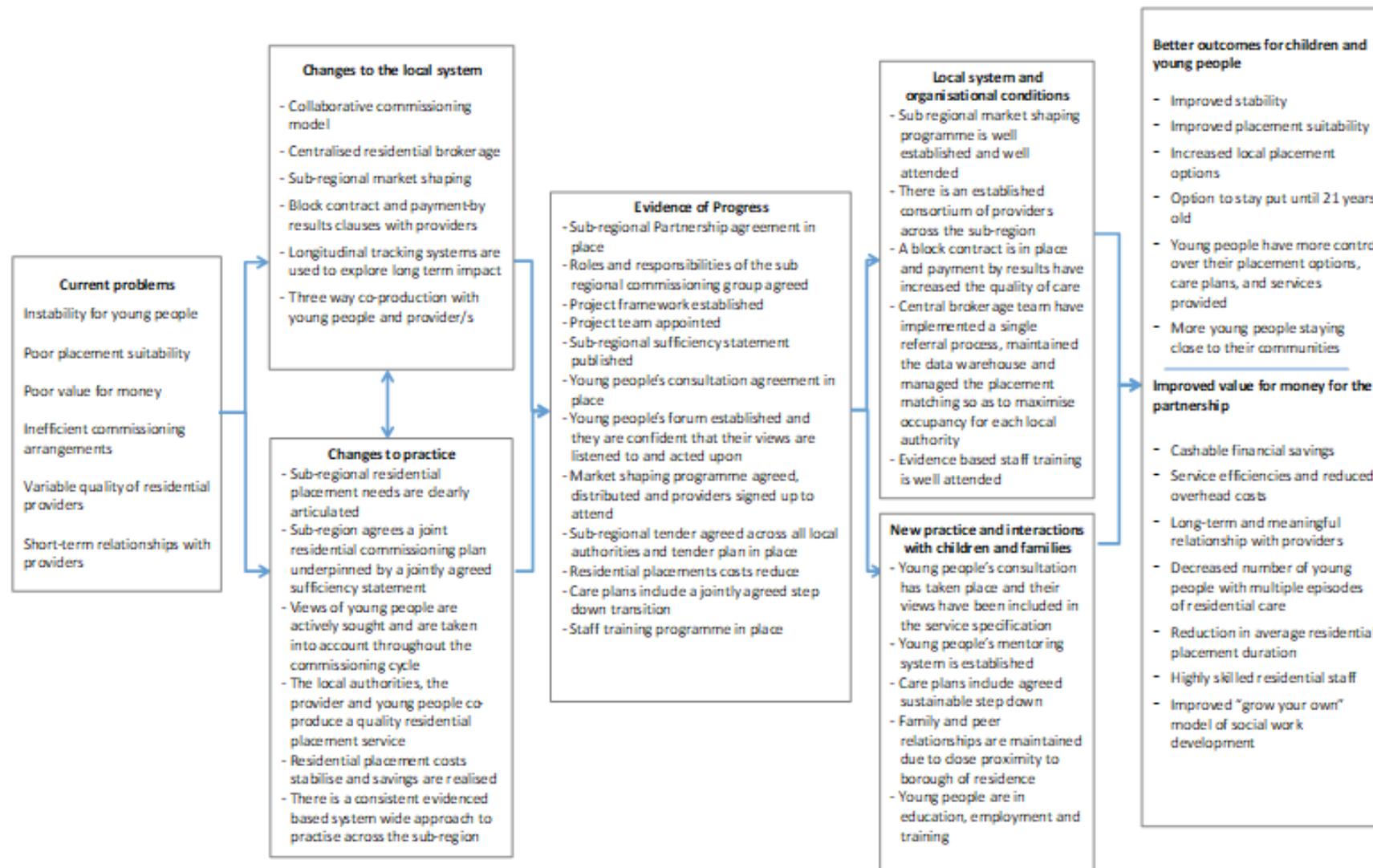
Through this programme, the NELCP hopes to achieve two key long-term outcome areas:

- Improved lived experience of young people in residential care, including:
 - Improved stability
 - Improved placement suitability
 - Increased local placement options
 - Option to stay put until 21 years old
 - Young people have more control over their placement options, care plans and services provided
 - More young people staying close to their communities
- Improved value for money for the sub-regional partnership:
 - Cashable financial savings
 - Service efficiencies and reduced overhead costs
 - Long-term meaningful relationship with providers
 - Decreased number of young people with multiple episodes of residential care
 - Reduction in average residential placement duration

- Highly skilled residential staff
- Improved “grow your own” model of social work development

Figure 1 overleaf details the project’s Theory of Change (ToC) as a diagrammatic logic model.

Figure 1: Theory of Change for the North-East London Commissioning Partnership project



Source: The NELCP

3. Overview of the evaluation

Aims

In light of the reduced time window to evaluate the NELCP programme, the scope evaluation is that of an ex-ante process evaluation designed to establish ‘what works’ and understanding the overall effectiveness of the three-way co-production between providers, young people and the sub-regional local authorities. As such, this evaluation covers the contract specifications design, promotional activities (e.g. mobilisation and communication events), application and appraisal processes leading to provider selection, due diligence and monitoring processes. Being an ex-ante process evaluation, this report will not seek to establish the effectiveness of care provided to children and young people once in placement.

The specific objectives of the process evaluation are to:

- Understand the effectiveness of the three-way co-production model in terms of the design of the contract specifications
- Establish how far this co-production model contributes to the achievement of quality applications/care home offering from children’s residential care home providers⁵
- Identify external factors that can hinder or enable the success of the NELCP partnership
- Establish the extent to which the three-way co-production model has engaged young people

⁵ Due to the bid assessment process not being finished at the time of reporting, this process evaluation has not been able to assess the extent to which the co-production model has contributed to the achievement of high-quality applications from service providers.

Evaluation questions

The questions set out in the ex-ante process evaluation plan are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Evaluation questions

Evaluation focus	Evaluation question
Clarity of purpose and objectives	Is there clarity of purposes and objectives with regard to the partnership?
	Are there clear structures and processes in place to deliver the project?
Clarity of roles and responsibilities	To what extent are the governing structures in place fit for purpose, and roles and responsibilities clear?
Engagement	Are young people consulted and involved in the selection of children's residential care home providers?
	To what extent are children's residential care home providers effectively engaged in the project?
Commitment to partnership working	Is there a strong commitment to the partnership working? If so, from whom? (young people, service providers, NELCP)
	To what extent has the NELCP supported the creation of consortia with children's residential care home providers?
Adequacy of project	To what extent is the offer of a free, compulsory, accredited training package for children's residential care home providers' workforce act as an incentive or deterrent for providers to bid?
	To what extent is the prices paid per placements, and payment system based on the young person's level of needs, adequate? Does it support the bidding of providers?
	To what extent does the incentive of payment by innovation in delivering outcomes for young people act as an incentive or deterrent for providers to bid?
Value for money	Is the NELCP block commissioning process potential leading to savings in young people's placement costs? ⁶
Identifying and managing risks	Are the partnership boroughs aware of the varying local context and do they have a mutual understanding of how differences can be overcome?

⁶ With the full evaluation period running from January to March 2019, and the successful provider not selected until April 2019, a value for money analysis was not possible within the scope of the evaluation.

Evaluation methods

Given the study is focused on evaluating the partnership's ways of working, young people's involvement and effectiveness of the three-way co-production model, a qualitative approach was taken to identify and understand key enablers and barriers. The evaluation team carried out interviews with a series of service providers, young people involved, project delivery staff and a representative from the project board. Interviews and focus groups were carried out in parallel to the tendering process (March 2019) and lasted between 45-90 minutes⁷. The following consultations and data analysis tasks were completed:

- One focus group with young people (aged 19-21) involved in project design and co-production
- Two interviews with engaged⁸ service providers
- One interview with a disengaged⁹ service providers
- One interview with a Silver Lined Horizons representative
- One interview with the NELCP programme lead
- Two interviews with board members
- One interview with a local authority stakeholder involved in the lead borough's young people's mentor service.
- Analysis of the minutes of the NELCP board meetings

Changes to evaluation methods

As outlined in the original evaluation plan, the team intended to conduct an impact, process and economic evaluation. However, the seven months delay in implementing the project led Ipsos MORI and the DfE to reconsider the scope of the evaluation. Indeed, the reduced time window to conduct data collection for a potential impact evaluation between September 2019 (assuming the first placement then), and March 2020 (final report date) greatly limits the potential quantity and quality of data. As such, the evaluation plan has been changed to an ex-ante process evaluation (between January and March 2019) with the consequence of reducing the number of consultations and

⁷ Interviews were conducted over the telephone and the young people focus group was conducted face to face.

⁸ Engaged has been defined here as a provider who has attended both the mobilisation event and the provider workshops set up to co-produce the specifications.

⁹ Disengaged has been defined here as a provider who attended the mobilisation event, but did not carry on engaging with the project during the provider workshop events.

volume of data analysis informing this evaluation. Also, the successful provider will be selected in April 2019, as such, a value for money analysis was not possible within the scope of the evaluation.

Context of evaluation implementation

From March 2018 to March 2019, the evaluation team had fortnightly programme update calls, keeping us informed of the progress made across all activities. Even though the evaluation did not receive official go-ahead until January 2019, this was deemed necessary to establish the kind of evaluation that would be possible to achieve. The team has also been invited to programme meetings including mobilisation events and board meetings, which were attended as part of the evaluation.

The evaluation team experienced varying levels of engagement from the programme lead, board members, service providers and young people to contribute to all stages of the evaluation. Particular issues stemmed from conflicting priorities within the project implementation team which led to delayed responses in terms of gathering prospective stakeholder information and contact details. Furthermore, due to the disengaged characteristic of some service providers which were targeted for consultation, there was limited interest, and as such, only one disengaged provider was consulted.

The main limitation the evaluation faces is the project delay which led the team to reduce the evaluation to a process evaluation herewith presented.

4. Key interim findings

This section outlines the headline findings identified through this process evaluation through consultations with key stakeholders, observation at engagement events and board meetings, and assessment of board meeting minutes. These findings concentrate on the co-production aspect of the Partnership and the extent to which the three cohorts of stakeholders have been effectively engaged. As part of this, the governing structure has been tested and evaluated to understand how feedback from each stakeholder group has been communicated and embedded into the contract specification. Further detail is also provided on the innovation factor included within the contract, as well as additional features on the professional development training provision and an updated cost model.

Co-production

The NELCP has clearly demonstrated its appetite to extend their work with service providers beyond historic spot-purchasing contractual arrangements, having held numerous service provider engagement events to encourage participation in the NELCP.

“Before the partnership, we were spot purchasing the placements and there was no sense of partnership, there was no sense of ‘we are working together on this as partners in order to best meet the needs of the person and provide value for money’... The project is a small step in the right direction to try and change the relationship between commissioning authorities and providers and local authorities themselves whilst giving young people more of an influence over how these services are provided.” Stakeholder

Stakeholders consulted noted that there has been reluctance by some providers to engage as they viewed other providers as competitors in the context of the NELCP. As suggested by one stakeholder, this raises the risk of tensions arising between service providers, particularly those bidding with one another. Tensions could result in breakdown of relationships between the successful bidding consortium, particularly if once the contract is awarded, placements are not perceived to be fairly allocated. This was raised by one service provider during the process evaluation. One stakeholder noted that at the beginning, providers did see each other as competitors, although once discussions began and a common interest of ‘evolving’ the market was established, the conversation between providers then moved to one of achieving outcomes for the children and young people. Some providers, however, still indicated they would be less willing to work with competitors.

Children and young people’s engagement in the first instance was on a consultation basis, having taken part in a four-months consultation process which included a survey deployed by Silverlined Horizon and in-depth interviews. The purpose of this was to better understand children and young people’s perceptions of children’s residential

homes in the eight NELCP boroughs. One stakeholder interviewed felt that it was challenging to get children and young people to respond to the survey. This was due to the challenges faced in setting up initial introductions for this cohort; there was an impression that each local authority had a dedicated team to signpost young people, however it was later found that local authorities were not well-placed to identify the relevant communication channels between children and young people and local authorities. Instead, the Partnership was required to obtain contact information for youth workers which in turn would be able to provide access to young people.

For the co-production stage¹⁰, one stakeholder involved in the implementation of the project highlighted the difficulty to identify young people willing to sit on the board and give opinions/ideas within a complex network of processes and bureaucracy.

Confusion was expressed by service providers as to the reasons behind the delayed presence from young people on the board, as their views were seen as essential in the design and development of the project. Indeed, one board member noted that the dynamic of the board meetings changed substantially since the inclusion of young people, highlighting that it brought the project closer to the 'actual world'. Without such presence, stakeholders believed it would be difficult to relate young peoples' views effectively into the design of the specifications and the delivery of the projects. For example, young people explained that 'beds' is not the preferred terminology when speaking about placements. Having received this feedback direct from the children and young people cohort, the Partnership thereafter changed their terminology when referring to placements.

It was thought that the approach to co-production should not only be about being involved in the design process, but should also include opportunities for exposure to other care service models. One stakeholder raised this as an issue with the approach to co-production with young people. They believed that this co-production model could have been more effective had the young people been exposed to other models of care. This may have raised their expectations and aspirations in their ask of providers:

"I would like to have seen children and young people touring the UK to understand the different service provider offerings. I wonder, have they [the Partnership] introduced children and young people to other delivery models to help them better understand the merits of each of the bids put in for review under the NELCP? If so, that might've changed their view on what innovation is and would've influenced the questions the

¹⁰ Co-production is defined here as the approaches taken to collaborate with young people and the providers and co-create the offer within the residential provider.

children and young people asked during interviews and their input into the specification of the ITT.” Stakeholder

Governance

Where they were able to comment, service providers had positive feedback on the NELCP board and its chair. It was raised that since the chair is the Director of Children’s Services for his borough, this brought a level of seniority and commanded buy-in and attention from other Board members, providers and local authorities:

“He has chaired the board for the last 18 months which has been really important to have someone at that level sitting and chairing the board (...) he is good and consistent”.
Stakeholder

A perceived problem for projects of this type, however, was that Directors of Children’s Services are seen to be staying for only around 18 months within a given local authority, meaning there is a risk of loss in senior buy-in should senior members engaged in the project move on.

Concern was raised by one stakeholder that board members must be of appropriate seniority and have decision-making powers in the local authority. In the case of the NELCP board, members were assumed to be of the right level of authority, indicating that the selection of board members was appropriate.

However, some stakeholders were not fully clear on the roles of board members, highlighting their perceived lack of clarity on who sits on the board, what their roles are and which local authority they are representing. One board member noted that it is the lead authority (Havering) which takes control of the NELCP project. The remaining board members are assumed to be there to represent their local authority, with representation also coming from the implementation team. One stakeholder involved in the implementation of the project however noted that there are Terms of Reference for board members from the eight local authorities to refer to, thereby adding clarity to the structure.

Engagement

Engagement from the three core groups (local authorities, service providers and young people) was seen as particularly difficult during the first six to nine months of the project, and was also seen as the reason for the delay in delivery according to stakeholders. One stakeholder felt that a large effort was directed at engaging local authorities to ensure buy-in, with less attention given to providers and young people. This was seen to have changed more recently (i.e. from January 2019). There was a perceived risk that

engagement could be diverted from the project should local authorities reprioritise their spending commitments. On the other hand, one stakeholder suggested that due to tightening budgets, austerity and growing demand for residential placements, local authorities are in fact becoming more collaborative in nature.

Local authority and service provider engagement

Stakeholders felt there to be varying levels of interest among local authority stakeholders, which implicitly reflects the differing commitments by those local authorities to the project. Adding to that, it was raised that there were also varying levels of staff capacity to engage with the project.

“There are 33 separate authorities in London who all like to do their own thing, despite some exceptions, we’re all in competition with each other – competing for placements, staff, all the time.” Stakeholder

Stakeholders were generally of the view that the project did not anticipate the amount of time it would take to get all eight local authorities to work together in practice. One stakeholder reflected on their previous attempts to work on cross-borough projects, highlighting the onus placed on the lead authority to carry the project forward as other local authorities “come along for the free ride”. The first six to nine months were highlighted to be particularly troublesome in terms of achieving consistent, appropriate attendance from local authority representatives:

“There’s a level of cynicism and a sense that maybe this is too big a deal. Getting people to believe that you could make change actually happen was a big obstacle... You will find different local authorities have different levels of interest, commitment, capacity to engage and culture in how they respond, faster or slower, etc.” Stakeholder

One stakeholder highlighted the importance of establishing strong bonds between the eight participating local authorities to actively encourage new ways of thinking around how to commission services. Despite the Partnership being viewed as a significant piece of work, it is only a small part of their total commissioning activity, with one stakeholder noting that fostering is a bigger challenge for local authorities to respond to. Nevertheless, it was highlighted that local authorities have been collaborating with one another more and more. This was believed, in part, to be related to other ongoing regional engagement work which is starting to bring local authorities together.

Service providers shared the view that to maintain effective engagement, the project required strong leadership from the lead local authority. Without this, local authorities would be unlikely to engage at the necessary level of intensity. This process evaluation also identified a risk in the delivery of the programme which may impact on engagement across the project. Reliance on one person to lead the project implementation poses a

risk not only in terms of capacity to maintain motivation/commitment from service providers and engage with children and young people, but also the capacity to manage bureaucratic processes associated with this project.

Staff changes were also seen as a contributing factor to the project delay; they imply a loss of knowledge, undermining some of the progress made and requiring re-explanation of the project and its aims to new stakeholders. This also had implications for the data sharing agreement to be established between local authorities in that new staff had to familiarise with both their local authority and the NELCP processes.

Stakeholders reported good levels of engagement from providers in the first event run by the project implementation team. Providers then attended a series of workshops and events where feedback was given either verbally, through roundtable session with facilitators taking notes, or through a post-it note approach. Service providers consulted raised an issue with the timing of the tender release-to-bid timeframe. They believed there to be too little time to form a consortium in preparation of the bid, thereby affecting service provider engagement.

Ipsos MORI attended a provider workshop in December 2018 to observe engagement among service providers. This workshop had relatively low attendance (three service providers present), compared with the previous workshop attended by c. 10 providers. Provider feedback at the workshop suggested that only one provider was interested in bidding. Concerns by other providers revolved around the block contract model, where providers felt this would allow the Partnership to place the children and young people with the greatest level of need, with little power by providers to object.

Children and young people engagement

Due to the limited number of children and young people engaged in the NELCP and our process evaluation, we would not be able to ensure full anonymity if we reported findings from consultations with them. To remove the possibility of identifying individuals, we have removed young people's input in this published version of the report.

Most of the senior stakeholders consulted were of the general impression that the project had engaged as best it could with young people in gathering their views on the design of the specifications. Some stakeholders queried the delay in young people representation on the board, believing they should have been invited a year prior to their eventual engagement. However, other stakeholders explained that young people engagement cannot precede full buy-in from local authorities, otherwise there could be significant energy expended in developing something which simply may not be feasible due to lack of engagement from local authorities.

By engaging with young people, new skills were introduced and utilised within the context of the Partnership. As noted during the Board meeting minutes, going forward, young people will be heavily involved in setting up a social media page to promote positive project communications with other young people.

Clarity of the NELCP purpose and objectives

Feedback from board members and 'engaged' service providers, indicated the centrality of the implementation lead to the project delivery. Recognition of the implementation lead was demonstrated through feedback on their ability to obtain partnership agreements from all eight local authorities and to ensure all eight local authority Cabinets agreed and sign the procurement agreement.

The Partnership board acknowledged that there are differing local contexts across the sub-region. One of the aims of the project is to improve within-borough placements; however, one stakeholder highlighted that seven out of the eight boroughs have higher rates of gang violence. Therefore, staying 'close to the community' is only a desirable outcome for young people where this is safe, and especially concentrated in one partnership local authority.

Market mobilisation events were viewed as essential in ensuring clarity around the purpose of the project and the role of providers in achieving the long-term vision of the project. The April 2018 market mobilisation event was attended by 124 service providers, although at that stage, service providers reported that they were not clear of their roles. This is to be expected however, as the partnership was just introducing the concept of the project. However, from that point onward, there has reportedly been a clear understanding that service providers are part of the co-production and as such, their role in providing feedback. Consultations highlighted that this has been made clear to service providers and that without this element of proactive feedback, the Partnership would have failed to incorporate all opinions and views in the specification. To properly reflect on the feedback provided and embed the views of providers in the design of the specification, these were discussed during board meetings. There, board members discussed the feedback and actions were taken by the implementation lead to update the specification based on the conclusions of the board.

This process evaluation found that most service providers were clear on the purpose of the project and its long-term vision, although one stakeholder raised concern with regard to *how* the project will deliver this long-term vision.

Innovation

Integrated into the service provider contract was an innovation clause operating on a payment-by-results basis. In addition to the standard fee they receive for delivering the services, providers can earn up to an additional seven percent of their total income if they develop innovative approaches to improve outcomes for young people:

“There is an innovation factor... we want to make sure that providers listen to what young people are telling us. This could shape the way that children’s homes look and feel, improving the stability, friendliness, approachability and training of the staff.” Stakeholder

Stakeholders believed this to be integral in providing children and young people with greater choice in terms of placement location, limiting placement moves and ensuring stability in placements. One service provider also reflected on this point, praising the long-term planning element of the NELCP which allows for greater focus on achieving outcomes for children and young people. Part of the model would be for children and young people to visit the home before moving to ensure they feel comfortable, thereby aiming to improve placement suitability. Another innovative element the partnership aims to test is a transitional ‘step-down’. Here the Partnership aims to place the child for 6-9 months before then stepping down to fostering or semi-independent care.

Service providers were generally of the view that the new commissioning model was innovative in nature. One provider explained that it acted to reduce unnecessary interaction with multiple local authorities when placing children and young people. The Partnership has included a signed leadership agreement, allowing Havering local authority to act on the behalf of all other local authorities within the Partnership, including entering into contracts with providers through the Partnership. One service provider highlighted this as an added benefit in that providers are only required to engage with one local authority (Havering) for multiple placements, thereby fostering a long-term relationship with commissioners which is conducive to effective placement processes.

There were however, some conflicting views on some elements of the contract specification. For example, it was noted during the process evaluation that there was perceived pressure to fill vacant placements, raising the risk of not placing a child in a suitable environment. Another stakeholder noted that the Partnership had identified 6 children and young people ready to place already, all of whom had three or four placement breakdowns in the last few months. This same concern was raised by another stakeholder.

“If the Partnership is going to place the most difficult children through the NELCP, then it will fail. If you place two high needs children in a four-bed house, then it’s difficult to fill the rest of the rooms.” Stakeholder

Despite innovation being a core part of the NELCP, one stakeholder questioned the partnership's definition of innovation and what that means to them. They also suggested that the contract specification was not clear in its ask for innovation from providers, supposedly making it difficult for bidders to implement innovative practices into their service delivery model.

Training provision

Included within the NELCP ITT was a training provision for successful providers, provided free of charge by the Partnership. The training will be a comprehensive, compulsory and accredited training package for the first three years of the contract. It will be a modular package based on the theory of systemic practice, with modules ranging from Foundation to Level Five in subjects such as systemic practice, residential care, organisational development and social pedagogy.

A stakeholder involved in the design of the professional development training offering explained that the need stemmed from wanting a common language and common approach across the children's residential care provision in North East London, and part of the offer was ensuring that staff in residential care have better access to training that feels relevant and shows investment and commitment to developing the workforce. It was not necessarily for all staff to become qualified social workers but to provide a sense of career progression, which was hoped to make staff more committed to their work and more engaged in improving practice.

"We don't know if it's going to work, but the idea is to attract people who might see this as a part of their pathway and that you retain the better people who might pursue further professional development." Stakeholder

There were mixed views from providers as to the overall value of the training offer. For one provider, the training offer had no influence on their intention to bid, but thought it was a great feature of the NELCP and believed the training to be adding value. The stakeholder also felt that the training provision would act to improve child and young people's outcomes, and would also help their organisation attract and retain good quality residential care staff. The view of attracting and retaining staff was common across providers consulted:

"Having an offer to broaden your own organisational offer to employees is great." Provider

Another service provider highlighted that the training provision was very comprehensive and more wide-reaching than other training provision available. Their organisation tries to maintain good practice across all areas and so this training provision would have been in-keeping with the general staff skill strategy.

Not all views were positive however, with one provider noting that the training offering meant that they would not have the choice to select the training organisations of their choice and would also have to discontinue their relationship with their existing training provider with who they had a good relationship.

Furthermore, one programme board member was wary that the training offer may divert service provider staff away from their daily responsibilities to attend training, although this could be offset by the fact that the training is provided for free.

We're [local authorities] are paying for the training. That is the real incentive to providers, because they haven't got to make that direct cost...but there's still a cost to them because if we say this is the training on this day, they still have to release those staff to go on the training, so it's not quite a nil cost, but it's still an advantage." Stakeholder

As part of the process evaluation, one stakeholder consulted noted they were unaware of any gaps in service providers' current provision of skilled workers, therefore questioning the necessity of the training offering.

Cost per placement model

The Partnership has adopted a new costing model for placements, under which the fee paid for placements will be determined by the level of need, the placement requirements and outcomes that will need to be delivered. The level of need is divided into four categories: low, medium, high and specialist. Stakeholders involved in the implementation of the project felt that the pricing model was clear and that providers agreed about levels of need and how these were defined.

Conversely, providers did not reflect this in interviews. A provider raised concern as to what would happen if a child was placed in a 'low' needs placement, but it then transpired that the child should have been placed in 'medium' needs home. These are queries which will likely be answered once the partnership goes live and could be investigated in further evaluation of the NELCP.

Another service provider explained that during the bidding process, they felt there to be a lack of clarity in understanding where a child should be placed, depending on their needs. They believed that local authorities which set these thresholds are more familiar with their definitions compared with service providers.

A local authority stakeholder was of the view that the new costing model would provide more clarity for service providers in terms of the income by placement. This was expected to facilitate planning, such as financial forecasting.

5. Summary of findings on 7 practice features and 7 outcomes

As reported in the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (IP) Round 1 Final Evaluation Report ([2017](#))¹¹, evidence from the first round of the IP led the DfE to identify 7 features of practice and 7 outcomes to explore further in subsequent rounds.

This section provides an overview of how the seven features of practice and seven outcomes relate to this evaluation. Four of the seven features of practice are relevant to this project from a commissioning and multi-stakeholder collaboration perspective rather than on-the-ground social work practice with children and young people. Although four features are relevant, the evaluation period limits our ability to observe progress against these. Note that the seven outcomes do not apply to this process-led evaluation.

Practice features

Strengths-based practice frameworks

The NELCP project is demonstrating its intention to create a common framework and feature of practice through its co-production model between local authorities, service providers and young people. This co-production model supports the work and various activities encompassed within the partnership.

The purpose of the three-way co-production model was communicated to service providers at the mobilisation event, with service providers expressing a clear understanding of the purpose and objectives of the co-production model during consultations. This has enabled realistic expectations to be agreed between local authorities and service providers as to the requirements of each party to effectively engage in the partnership. This led to service providers sharing ideas of what good quality children's residential placements would look like for the partnership to then embed in the Invitation to Tender specifications. Providers felt sufficiently engaged in this regard.

Systemic theoretical models

¹¹ Sebba, J., Luke, N., McNeish, D., and Rees, A. (2017) *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: Final evaluation report*, Department for Education, available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-innovation-programme-final-evaluation-report>

The programme does not explore the family relationships and the difficulties that the young person's family may face. As such, this feature of practice does not apply to the NELCP.

Multi-disciplinary skill sets

The programme is governed by a board, working groups and a project lead with an array of different social work experiences. It was raised that since the chair is the Director of Children's Services for his borough, this brought a level of seniority and commanded buy-in and attention from other board members, providers and local authorities. A review of programme board documentation highlighted the actions taken to effectively deliver its work stream package; specifically, the workforce development programme was organised to be delivered by the Institute for Family Therapy, a family therapy organisation which provides training and clinical work in the field of systemic psychotherapy with families, couples and individuals.

Skills of the young people involved in the project were also utilised with young people setting up a social media page to promote positive project communications with more young people. They will be using social media to include photographs, advertise meetings and events, and show how far the project has progressed. The young people are also acting as youth mentors within the NELCP footprint.

Group case discussion

This feature of practice does not apply to NELCP

Family focus

This feature of practice does not apply to NELCP.

High intensity and consistency of practitioner

A key outcome of the programme relates to placement stability. This is hoped to be achieved through the preservation of family and peer relationships by having more placement options within the NELCP footprint. This feature of practice is an outcome of the NELCP project, although the extent to which this has been achieved cannot be ascertained in this process evaluation.

Skilled direct work

As part of the specifications design, a free, compulsory, accredited professional development training service is on offer to successful service providers, ensuring that staff in children's residential care homes have better access to training that feels relevant

and shows investment and commitment to developing the workforce. This evaluation has explored the extent to which this service offering has acted as an incentive or a deterrent to service providers bidding for the contract. Consultations with service providers showed there to be mixed views on the professional training provision. While all agreed that the training broadens the service providers' organisational offer to employees, thereby attracting and retaining talent, one stakeholder expressed regret in (if successful) having to terminate the training contract with their existing provider. However, the comprehensiveness of the training was reflected on positively by stakeholders, with all believing it to be step in the right direction in helping to achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

Outcomes

Being an ex-ante process evaluation, the seven outcomes cannot be observed in this evaluation (Reducing risk for children; Creating greater stability for children; Increasing wellbeing for children and families; Reducing days spent in state care; Increasing workforce wellbeing; Increasing workforce stability; Generating better value for money).

In a longer-term evaluation, it is anticipated that all outcomes would be relevant and observable.

6. Limitations of the evaluation

This ex-ante evaluation has limitations that must be kept in mind when interpreting findings outlined in this report. Key limitations are:

Timeline: Due to commissioning of the evaluation in January 2019, there was limited time to conduct consultations with young people, programme staff, board members and service providers. The consultations therefore occurred during the tendering and bid assessment process and could not include further possible learnings about the tendering process.

Sample sizes: Linked to the above, the evaluation timeline did not permit to carry out more consultations with service providers, especially those less engaged. Despite the support from the partnership to achieve this, the success in being able to extend the consultations to them was limited.

Changes of staff: The delays in getting the programme started contributed to the difficulty in tracking views over time as different staff would represent different aspects of the co-production model. This led, for example, to limitations in exploring the development of the initial project proposal, milestones and implementation which would have been beneficial to compare against current outcomes.

Appropriateness of evaluation approach

The revised process evaluation plan was thoroughly prepared to ensure all aspects of the three-way co-production, market mobilisation and context were taken into account. The approach allowed the evaluation team to understand the processes from the perspective of young people, the programme team (commissioners), service providers and other stakeholder. The evaluation approach was, therefore, appropriate in evaluating the partnership's collaboration and key process outcomes in breadth and depth.

7. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

Key Recommendations

1. Attract the highest level of seniority to the board, and where possible, chair the board.
2. Ensure the right level of seniority among board members to enable fast-decision making.
3. Ensure sufficient resourcing for scoping exercises to determine the purpose and agree the vision of the project.
4. Organise engagement events only once the purpose and vision of the project has been agreed, so as not to discourage engagement from providers at the project outset.
5. Consult each stakeholder group initially to discuss their involvement and at what point their input would be of greatest value.
6. Consider offering a professional development training programme to appropriate workforces.

Four of the seven identified enablers of improvement in children's services are relevant to this programme. These enablers lend themselves well for framing conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice:

Strategic approach

Rigorous and forensic self-assessment; open and honest to external feedback; develop a vision and strategic plan that is right for the organisation.

This process evaluation has identified several aspects of the NELCP project which have enabled improvement in children's services through a strategic approach.

The vision of the project has been created following a thorough needs analysis with the participating boroughs, along with additional consultations with Silver Lined Horizons and the Institute of Family Therapy.

This vision has been translated directly to local authorities, service providers and children and young people, all of whom are involved in a three-way consultation programme. This three-way co-production approach has opened up new communication channels which have allowed for timely input and feedback on the design of the partnership to achieve its core aims.

External feedback was shared with the programme board, which was structured to ensure reflection on feedback was achieved at appropriate levels.

Leadership and governance

Maintain the right, stable, focussed leadership at all levels; don't rush into a restructure; establish effective, professional governance.

The NELCP project has clearly acknowledged the need for appropriate leadership within its governing structure. Having senior-buy-in has ensured strong levels of engagement from local authorities, required to deliver the project in practice. The appropriateness of the selected board members is also a key enabler for fast decision-making.

Future projects funded under the Innovation Programme should consider attracting the highest level of senior buy-in, and where possible, should have these individuals chair the board. This should act to attract sufficient attention from participating stakeholders and provide clear direction. Furthermore, having the right level of seniority among board members enables fast decision making, thereby reducing delays in delivery and mitigating disengagement caused by arduous bureaucratic steps. Taking the necessary steps to identify these board members is crucial and should not be rushed.

Engaging and supporting the workforce

Change the rhetoric and avoid the 'blame game'; articulate high expectations and ambitious goals; stabilise the workforce; develop staff from within.

The project has shown considerable support for the service provider workforce, having embedded a professional development training service, delivered through the Institute of Family Therapy, into the contract specification. This is a key enabler for achieving a minimum standard of practice across service providers staff in the NELCP footprint, who can better serve the needs of children and young people.

Where possible, it is highly recommended that future projects consider a professional development training offering, whether that be for internal local authority staff or service providers.

Engaging partners

Engage senior partners; align thresholds; review practices through multi-agency audits; remain outward facing.

Findings from this process evaluation have shown there to be some difficulty in engaging partners initially, particularly during the first six to nine months, causing project delivery delays.

Service providers were largely positive when reflecting on engagement events and the extent to which they clearly outlined the purpose of the Partnership and its vision.

A key recommendation for future projects is to ensure the scoping exercises undertaken to determine the purpose of the project are sufficiently resourced. It is understood that this may not always be possible. However, projects should ensure that all engagement events are organised only once the vision has clearly been agreed, so that potential partners are not discouraged from engaging early on.

The timings of engagement with certain stakeholders has also been raised as an area for improvement within the context of the NELCP project: Some stakeholders would like to have seen earlier engagement from young people, although identifying young people proved difficult.

In future funding rounds, it is recommended that projects consult each stakeholder group initially to discuss their involvement and at what point their input would be of greatest value.

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Department
for Education

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Reference: RR1050

ISBN: 978-1-83870-168-0

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