# Evaluation of Phase 1 of the Local Family Offer Pilot

January 2019

# Contents

# The Authors

A report of research carried out by Francesco Arzilli, Kate Lager, Hazel Tetsill and Michael Berry on behalf of the Family Analysis team at the Department for Work and Pensions. The editing and publication process was overseen by Anisah Kaleemullah, Kate Warner and Ailsa Redhouse.

# Acknowledgements

# List of abbreviations

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| LA | Local Authority |
| LFO | Local Family Offer |
| DWP | Department for Work and Pensions |
| EIF | Early Intervention Foundation |
| CAMHS | Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services |
| PaP | Parents as Partners |

# Glossary of terms

| | |
|---|---|
| Local Family Offer (LFO) provision | Changes that Local Authorities put in place to support couple or parental relationships, which included: improving data collection, training frontline staff/practitioners to recognise relationship difficulties, and supporting couple or parents via courses or counselling provision. |
| Innovation Unit | A UK social enterprise with a stated aim of using innovation to create different, better, lower cost public services that better meets social challenges. |
| OnePlusOne | A UK organisation with a stated aim of helping people to build stronger relationships by equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need. |
| Opportunity Assessment | Stage of the process where coaches worked with LAs to provide a comprehensive needs assessment. |
| Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (now renamed Tavistock Relationships) | A UK organisation with a stated aim of ensuring that effective relationship support is accessible to all. |

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Local Family Offer pilot was developed from an evidence-based understanding of the importance for child outcomes of supporting current and prospective parents to create and maintain good quality relationships. The Local Family Offer piloted provision of the expertise and evidence for 12 local authorities in England to develop innovative local strategies to support families to sustain a safe, stable, and nurturing family environment for their children in 2 phases:

- phase 1 aimed to reduce family breakdown and improve relationship quality through local authorities by supporting them to develop innovative strategies to promote family stability and relationship quality

- phase 2 built on learning from the first phase, refocusing on reducing parental conflict to improve outcomes for children in light of a review of the evidence base

This research report provides evidence from the initial grant funding application stage of phase 1 only. It also includes research with local authorities who were invited to participate in the pilots but ultimately did not proceed.

In addition, Annex A summarises interim evaluation findings from the 12 local authorities that received grant funding. The local authorities each opted to implement slightly different programmes or interventions as part of their Local Family Offer, as well as different combinations of these. These involved:

- staff interventions
- parent/couple interventions
- system interventions

# The Pilot Model

A staged process leading to an application to grant funding was implemented to support local authorities to develop Local Family Offer provision. The staged process consisted of:

1. Opportunity assessment - coaches worked with each local authority to produce a needs assessment to gain a fuller understanding of how each area supports couple and co-parenting relationships, and where improvements could be made.

2. Strategy development - coaches worked with each local authority to co-develop a strategy for Local Family Offer provision, based on a theory of change (an evidence and theory-based model).

3. Application for grant funding - coaches worked with local authorities to develop business cases with costed delivery proposals for Local Family Offer provision. Local authorities were able to submit their business cases to DWP in order to apply for funding to implement provision.

Consultative support (coaching) was available to local authorities throughout the staged process. Coaches provided local authorities with access to evidence and expertise at each stage of the pilot.

Local authorities participating in the pilot also received free access to Parents as Partners training. The training was delivered by Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships to enable frontline practitioners to help parents improve the quality of the co-parental relationship and parenting skills through delivering the Parents as Partners programme.

# Evaluation aims and methodology

There were 3 main research objectives:

- to explore local authorities' experiences of participating in the Local Family Offer pilot

- to describe the Local Family Offer provision developed as a result of the pilot

- to identify key learning

These objectives together supported the overall evaluation aims: to inform how DWP might structure similar support for local authorities in the future, and what might be recommended as best practice for local authorities when embedding support for parental relationships within family-centred support.

One-to-one or paired qualitative interviews took place either over the telephone or in person with:

- 17 local authority staff, covering 11 of the 12 local authorities that participated in the pilot and the 3 local authorities that withdrew before the grant-funding process (principally due to resource constraints and perceived lack of alignment with local priorities)

- 4 coaches

- practitioners from one training provider

# Participants

For several local authorities the Local Family Offer fitted neatly with their strategic direction at the time, whereas for others the pilot was an additional standalone project. This was reflected in their level of experience in supporting couple relationships and the level of priority assigned to the process.

Local authorities varied in the level of involvement by senior staff. Wide involvement of local authority staff was common, and supported by coaches, but there were differences between local authorities in whether they involved partners in the development of their strategy.

Coaches from both Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne worked together to provide support to local authorities. It was felt to be a collaborative relationship with each organisation providing support tailored to their expertise. Coaches provided a range of support to local authorities throughout the staged process of the Local Family Offer.

# Experiences of participating in the pilot

Overall, the **pilot process** was seen to improve the quality of local service offers made to families. The pilot model was positively regarded by LAs in terms of providing structure and increasing their engagement/motivation, although local authorities did display a range of views with regards to the specific elements of the staged process.

For example, some concerns were raised regarding the **clarity of the pilot timeline and the coaching support** on offer; application deadlines were thought to be too tight or set without enough notice in some cases, and some LAs were unsure about the type and extent of support coaches were able to offer. Some LAs reported a need for further coaching support, some would have preferred choice in the type of support they received, and others would have liked coaches to have supported the sharing of learning between local authorities.

The key **success factors of the coaching** offer included coaches' abilities to provide focus and motivation; to supply relevant information and evidence data in an accessible format for local authorities; to provide feedback/challenge needed to improve the quality of Local Family Offer strategies and applications for grant funding; and to facilitate meetings in ways that added value.

Take up of the **Parents as Partners training** offer for staff varied across LAs, with a range of reasons reported as to why LAs did or did not take up the offer. Where training had taken place it was delivered to a mixture of job roles, with positive feedback. Some were considering adopting a train the trainer approach.

The 3 LAs that withdrew from the LFO highlighted **limited resources** in terms of time and money, as well as what they saw to be **misalignment between their own immediate priorities and those of the pilot**. All 3 local authorities, however, expressed an interest to learn from others continuing to take part in the pilot.

# The LFO provision

All 12 local authorities that completed the staged process of the pilot reported an intention to deliver Local Family Offer provision. This provision had one or more of the following features in common across all local authorities:

- workforce development and culture change
- delivery of relationship services or programmes
- wider systems or measurement changes

However, strategies for delivering the provision varied in targeting primary prevention, support for at-risk groups, and intensive support for individuals with high levels of need.

Local Family Offer provision tended to be perceived as being sustainable beyond the timescales associated with the pilot by local authorities and coaches. Important factors associated with having capacity for sustained change included:

- involvement of stakeholders and partners
- breadth of Local Family Offer provision
- depth of Local Family Offer provision
- level of innovation
- strategic fit

# Longer term perspectives

Interviewees generally felt that the pilot model was implemented successfully, it had raised the profile of supporting relationships, and put it on local authorities' agendas. It encouraged them to think in new ways and provided credibility to carry out work to support couples' relationships.

Sharing of learning between Local Family Offer local authorities and more widely was seen as having real benefits, particularly for the longer term. At the time of the research this was not necessarily being maximised though local authorities were conscious of the potential benefits this would bring.

Generally it was felt that central government should continue to work with local authorities to expand support for relationship issues, although there were mixed views on what this should look like. It was felt that this work should not all be outsourced to local authorities – central government has a role to play in supporting local partnerships, conducting evaluations to capture people's experiences, and sharing evidence nationally. Local authorities were generally wary about the

introduction of central targets in the area of relationships, although it was suggested that locally-relevant targets could help.

# Main lessons for the future

Local authorities should:

- ensure an integrated approach - this work should be considered as cross cutting; extending across a number of local authority departments and key partner agencies

- develop provision as a multi-agency offer to ensure well-integrated services, referral pathways, and workforce development across all relevant services

- identify a senior local authority lead as point of contact, with a remit to engage others as appropriate

- consider developing and implementing provision at opportune time to maximise strategic fit and increase sustainability of provision

- include a focus on systems changes as a mechanism to embed provision

- encourage innovation and experimentation to address local needs, particularly where local authorities are faced by significant challenges

- develop an accessible evidence base to share learning and best practice between local authorities and to support wider implementation of relationship services

- develop robust data collection and evaluation approaches to measure the impact of provision and sustain buy-in to this agenda

# Policy developments since this research was undertaken

Following the positive response to phase 1 of the Local Family Offer, a decision was made to extend the trial for a further period, refocussing on reducing parental conflict in response to the newly published Early Intervention Foundation report 'What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children?'.

The Reducing Parental Conflict Programme, which aims to encourage councils across England to integrate services and approaches which address parental conflict into their local services for families, has used many of the important lessons emerging from the Local Family Offer to influence the current programme.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The Local Family Offer pilot

### 1.1.1 Policy intent

The Local Family Offer (LFO) pilot was developed from an evidence-based understanding of the importance for child outcomes of supporting current and prospective parents to create and maintain good quality relationships, in order to sustain a safe, stable and nurturing family environment for their children. This included recognising the importance of extending and supporting the development of frontline and local provision in this area, and maximising the central role of Local Authorities (LAs) in providing family-centred programmes.

DWP therefore tested a Local Family Offer pilot with 12 LAs across England. Through this pilot, DWP sought to encourage LAs to adapt their family support offer to include a greater focus on supporting couple and parental relationships, by introducing 'LFO provision'.

Through the LFO pilots, DWP provided 12 LAs in England with expertise and evidence to develop innovative local strategies to improve outcomes for children in two phases, although this research report only provides evidence from phase one and concentrated on the staged process of applying for grant funding:

- **Phase One** commenced in September 2015 and aimed to reduce family breakdown and improve relationship quality through LAs by supporting them to develop innovative strategies to promote family stability and relationship quality. Active delivery of Phase One in LAs ran from April 2016 to April 2017. This research was undertaken in early 2016 before active delivery began.

- **Phase Two** started in July 2016 with a period of strategic thinking and planning, which built on learning from the first phase, refocusing on reducing parental conflict to improve outcomes for children in light of a review of the

evidence base. Active delivery of this phase commenced in April 2017 and formally ended in April 2018.

The evaluation did not seek to establish quantitative impact estimates of LFO provision. However, participating LAs committed to conduct their own internal evaluations of the LFO provision introduced. A summary of their interim findings can be found in Annex A.

## Corroborating evidence to support policy intent

Towards the end of the research (March 2016), an evidence review published by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) concluded that parental relationships, specifically how parents communicate and relate to each other, affects parenting practices and children's mental health.[1] More specifically, the evidence shows that children exposed to frequent, intense, and poorly resolved parental conflict are at elevated risk of experiencing increased rates of internalising problems which are characterised by symptoms of withdrawal, inhibition, fearfulness and sadness, shyness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicidality in the extreme. Longitudinal studies suggest that the direction of this association is from parental conflict (i.e. cause) to internalising problems in children, specifically anxiety and depression (i.e. effects). Studies also suggest that parental conflict increases the risk of negative child outcomes even after genetic factors are accounted for. On this basis, it can be inferred that the LFO pilot could confer benefits on children's outcomes by supporting couple or parental relationships.

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[1] Harold, G., et al (2016). What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children. Early Intervention Foundation. http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/What-Works-To-Enhance-Inter-Parental-Relationships-and-Improve-Outcomes-for-Children.pdf

## 1.2  The pilot model

The pilot model consisted of 3 elements:

1. **A staged process leading to an application for grant funding (seed funding) to deliver LFO provision**

A staged process was implemented to support LAs to develop LFO provision. The staged process consisted of:

   a.    an **opportunity assessment**

   b.    **strategy development** (including **theory of change**)

   c.    **application for grant funding** to implement **LFO provision**

The **opportunity assessment** stage consisted of coaches working with each LA to produce a comprehensive needs assessment, taking into account current provision, and identifying potential gaps in order to gain a fuller and more objective understanding of how each area supports couple and co-parenting relationships and where improvements could be made.

During the **strategy development** stage, coaches worked with each LA to co-develop a strategy for LFO provision, covering support for couple and family relationships in the near and long term future. The strategy was based on a **theory of change** (an evidence and theory-based model).

The **application for grant funding** stage consisted of coaches working with LAs to develop a business case (informed by the opportunity assessment and strategy development stages) outlining a costed delivery proposal for LFO provision. LAs were able to submit their business cases to DWP in order to apply for funding to implement the provision.

2. **LAs received consultative support (coaching) during the staged process**

Coaches were responsible for supporting LAs through the staged LFO process and providing them with tools, evidence/resources, methods and feedback needed to develop their LFO provision.

3. **LAs received free access to Parents as Partners training for staff**

DWP offered free access to Parents as Partners training for LA staff participating in the pilot. The training was delivered by Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships[2]. The aim of the training was to enable front-line practitioners to run the programme (a 16-week group intervention supported by a male and female facilitator) to help parents improve the quality of their co-parental relationship and their parenting skills.

## 1.2.1 Overview of participating Local Authorities

15 LAs originally started on the pilot. 12 of these applied for grant funding and were participating in LFO at the time of this research, whilst 3 withdrew from the process before applying for grant funding[3]. A full list of participating LAs can be found in Annex C. 14 out of the 15 LAs were interviewed as part of this research.

One or more member(s) of LA staff acted as the main LA point of contact during the pilot. These LA staff received relevant communications, were invited to attend learning events, and received coaching support to help them to progress pilot work. In some instances, stakeholders and partners (such as people with specific expertise in population groups or system design) also became involved with the pilot.

Coaches from Innovation Unit[4] and OnePlusOne[5] were appointed to provide LA staff with consultative support (coaching) during the pilot process. One or more of the coaches worked with LA staff (and sometimes stakeholders and partners) in each locality.

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[2] Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (now renamed Tavistock Relationships) is UK organisation with a stated aim of ensuring that effective relationship support is accessible to all. http://www.tavistockrelationships.org/

[3] Principally resource constraints and perceived lack of alignment with local priorities - their reasons for withdrawal are further discussed in section 4.7

[4] Innovation Unit is a UK social enterprise with a stated aim of using innovation to create different, better, lower cost public services that better meets social challenges http://www.innovationunit.org/

[5] OnePlusOne is UK organisation with a stated aim of helping people to build stronger relationships by equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need. http://www.oneplusone.space/

## 1.3 Evaluation aims

The primary aim of the pilot evaluation was to establish which elements of the pilot worked well and which elements were less effective, to inform how DWP structures any similar support for LAs in the future.

The secondary aim of the evaluation was to inform a number of sub-decisions about what DWP recommends to LAs as best practice for embedding support for couple or parental relationships within family centred support; for staff training; and for overcoming common delivery barriers.

## 1.4 Report structure

This remainder of the report is separated into 6 sections. These are as follows:

- **Chapter 2: Methodology -** outlines the evaluation design and the methods used to collect data from research participants

- **Chapter 3: Decisions on, and approach to, participation** - discusses how LAs came to be involved with the pilot; how this was positioned within the context of wider LA work; and the roles of people (including LA staff, stakeholders, partners and coaches) involved with the pilot

- **Chapter 4: Experiences of participating in the pilot -** outlines LA staff and coaches' experiences of participating in the pilot. It considers their experiences of the overall pilot model, as well as individual elements of this

- **Chapter 5: The LFO provision -** discusses the types of LFO provision that LAs developed as a consequence of participating in the pilot, as well as the perceived sustainability of this provision

- **Chapter 6: Longer term perspectives –** outlines the perceived benefits of the pilot; approaches to and views on sharing learning; and views on DWP's role in supporting LAs in delivering provision

- **Chapter 7: Conclusions** – reflects on key learning from the pilot, suggests critical success factors and covers policy developments since the research was undertaken

- **Annex A: Summary of LA interim evaluation reports -** summarises LAs' own interim findings of delivering LFO provision

- **Annex B: Example of qualitative research topic guide -** provides an example of an interview topic guide that was used to conduct qualitative interviews with research participants

- **Annex C: List of LAs that participated in the pilot**

# 2   Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and objectives. It also describes the methods used to collect qualitative data from research participants.

## 2.1  Overview of the research design

The research aimed to provide a **qualitative evaluation** of the pilot. It aimed to establish which elements of the pilot worked well and which elements were less effective. It also aimed to identify areas of best practice. An assessment of the impact of LFO provision was out of scope; however, participating LAs conducted their own internal research on LFO provision. A summary of **LA interim research findings** can be found in Annex A.

**Research objectives:**

- To explore LAs' experiences of participating in the LFO pilot.

- To describe the LFO provision developed as a result of the pilot.

- To identify key learning and best practice.

## 2.2  Qualitative evaluation

### 2.2.1 Recruitment and qualitative interviews

Participation in the research was voluntary. Those approached to take part were:

- LA staff that acted as main points of contact during the pilot

- Coaches responsible for supporting LAs (from Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne)

- Training providers from Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships with responsibility for Parents as Partners training

Those eligible to take part in the research were sent an email informing them about the evaluation and inviting them to take part in a qualitative interview. Ultimately the qualitative interviews were conducted with:

- 17 LA staff. They covered 11 of the 12 LAs that fully participated in the pilot and the 3 LAs that withdrew before making grant funding applications. In a few LAs more than one member of staff was interviewed, as there were shared responsibilities for acting as the main point of contact. As these staff members each worked as the key point of contact for their LA, their views have been reported throughout this research as representing the perspective of their LA

- 4 coaches

- One training provider representative

One-to-one or paired interviews were conducted during January and February 2016. The interviews took place either in person or over the telephone, and lasted for up to 1.5 hours. The interviews followed a discussion structure based on topic guides designed specifically for each participant group (LA staff, coaches, or training provider). The data was analysed using a framework approach. An example topic guide can be found in full in Annex B.

## 2.3  LA interim evaluation findings

As part of the agreement for LAs to receive grant funding for the LFO, each LA was required to evaluate the outcomes of the provision implemented. Annex A summarises interim evaluation findings from the 12 LAs that received grant funding.

The LAs each opted to implement slightly different programmes or interventions as part of their LFO, as well as different combinations of these. The summary explores different approaches that LAs took as part of their LFO:

- Staff interventions
- Parent/couple interventions
- System interventions

Within each section, the summary discusses what was done, what the reported outcomes were, key challenges, and lessons learned.

The information presented in this annex has been provided by LAs; therefore, the findings and basic statistics presented cannot be independently verified by DWP analysts. Caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings as they are based (in many cases) on small population samples.

Findings were supplied by LAs in January/February 2017, approximately 10 months after they received grant funding to implement LFO provision. At this time, LAs had not run their provision nor evaluation strategies to completion.

# 3 Decisions on, and approach to, participation

This chapter discusses how Local Authorities (LAs) came to be involved with the pilot, and how the pilot was positioned within the context of wider LA work. It also describes the roles of people who were involved with the development and implementation of the pilot. This includes LA staff, broader stakeholders and coaches[6].

## 3.1 LAs' decision to take part

Participating LAs varied in terms of their local populations, size, and existing services offered to families[7]. Several (but not all) of the LAs were also Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) Pioneering Places[8] that were already receiving support to develop early intervention strategies and approaches.

Most LAs said they were approached directly by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and invited to participate in the pilot due to their previous experience as EIF Pioneering Places. A few joined the pilot later than others: this was due to local resourcing/capacity issues or because an opportunity arose to replace another LA that had withdrawn from the process early on.

The approaches that LAs took to incorporating the LFO with their delivery fell into 2 principal categories:

- The LFO **fitted neatly with their strategic direction** at the time

- The LFO was seen as an **additional stand-alone project**

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[6] See also section 1.2.1 for introductory information about pilot participants

[7] For example, one LA reported that they completed a lot of work with complex families and estimated that 40% of this work related to domestic violence. Another LA described carrying out widespread preventative work to educate people about healthy family relationships and support those at risk.

[8] EIF works with local partners to extend the reach and impact of effective early intervention approaches (http://www.eif.org.uk/our-work-with-local-places/)

### 3.1.1 **Decision to integrate the pilot into strategic or service development work**

Local strategic context was a key factor that influenced some LAs' decisions to take part in the pilot. Several LAs had already initiated work to redesign their Early Help strategies/services for children and families, and the pilot was felt to be well-aligned with changes already underway.

> *"At the time when DWP first approached us about the pilot, we had just completed the commissioning for our early help services and a big shift in focus had gone onto parents and couples around family stability. For the first time we were commissioning services that would work with parents and couples…recognising that that relationships could be one of the biggest influences on the stability of the home. We had already done that work when the DWP got in touch with us and [the pilot] just seemed to fit nicely" (LA Staff)*

Some LAs reported that they already had an interest/focus in supporting couples' or parents' relationships: this shaped their tendency to engage with the pilot. For example, some had established relationships with delivery organisations involved in the pilot (for example, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships) prior to the launch of the LFO. Some reported they had already started to look at evidence around family relationships and recognised that it was important to address, but felt that having the LFO pilot as a specific project with a specific amount of funding attached to it would help to make things happen.

### 3.1.2 **Decision to conduct the pilot as a stand-alone project**

Other LAs decided to take part in the pilot but viewed this as a 'really small part of their work portfolio' or as an 'additional piece of work'. The pilot was not specifically integrated with ongoing strategic or service development work.

Some LAs reported that the perceived stand-alone nature of the pilot, and relatively small amount of funding, meant that for them it was not going to be a very high

priority project. Conversely, other LAs viewed the pilot as an important opportunity to conduct a bespoke, innovative project and to test this robustly, with a view to informing wider LA strategic/commissioning decisions at a later date.

## 3.2 Staff involvement and engagement

### 3.2.1 LA staff acting as main point of contact during the pilot

The typical structure was for one member of staff within each LA to act as the main point of contact during the pilot. In some LAs, this responsibility was shared between 2 or 3 LA staff (such as job-share partners or where colleagues specifically led on different elements of the pilot).

LA points of contact commonly held management and/or commissioning roles that focused on the delivery of social support (ranging from housing support for young people, to youth justice and crime prevention). Several were based in Early Help and Children's/Family Services teams, and their roles generally included an element of service commissioning. In others, LA points of contact held job roles that focused on corporate development (such as workforce training) or more technical aspects of local data collection (for example, data systems management for the local Troubled Families programme).

Seniority of LA points of contact

A success factor highlighted was for LA points of contact to have executive decision-making power and the ability to achieve senior buy-in to the pilot. The successful development of LFO projects was seen as being influenced by the seniority of LA staff with responsibility for the pilot, and their ability to get the project delivered:

> *"It depended on who was ... given responsibility for this [LFO]. They had to have a level of seniority because that meant that they had a sphere of influence, an ability to get things done. If you were not in that position…whilst you might be personally*

*extremely enthusiastic and passionate about this actually you couldn't get the right people in the room" (Coach)*

In practice, however, the level of seniority of LA points of contact varied. Some points of contact described their role as having decision making power and strategic oversight over services which tended to encompass Children's Centres and Troubled Families programmes. More commonly, however, LA points of contact were middle managers. Coaches reported that this created challenges: they were working with LA points of contact who had skillsets based on delivering front line services, but who lacked expertise in writing strategy documents, decision-making capacity, and convening power.

It was also highlighted in some LAs that over time, staff turnover resulted in other people taking over and being the point of contact for pilot work, with momentum subsequently dropping.

### 3.2.2 Involvement of wider LA staff

Besides LA staff acting as the main point of contact, it was common for numerous other LA staff to become involved in the pilot. Some had expertise in specific areas of commissioning of services, systems design, analysis or evaluation, or domestic violence. For example, one LA point of contact described immediately putting together a team of 6 LA colleagues to work on the pilot: this included a mix of people with knowledge of children and family services, and people with knowledge of children and family issues in the locality.

*"You need a team which includes permission-givers, decision makers, some people who have the time to actually write the stuff or to go out and do the research and make those conversations happen. So as long as you've got… that good mix then that will work. If you just have decision makers but nobody to actually action the actions then that's not a good way of going about it." (Coach)*

Several LAs developed LFO strategies through a series of conversations and stakeholder meetings to build the offer through a collaborative approach. For example, one LA described forming a theory of change after a coaching session, before bringing a variety of stakeholders together with relevant expertise and in-depth knowledge to test the theory as well as cross-referencing with the LA's own data.

Differing from this, other LA points of contact said that while they worked very closely with partners, they were the only person within their LA who was formally involved with the pilot. It was also mentioned that frequent restructuring in local government was a challenge with the potential to negatively affect wider LA buy-in.

> *"It's definitely easier … working through a designated contact but you do need a multi-agency group behind that person to be able to deliver the change." (LA Staff)*

Senior buy-in

The issue of senior buy-in and engagement was raised by LA staff and coaches alike. There was agreement that this was important, but LA points of contact reported that they differed in their success in achieving this. In some cases, LA senior management and directors were thought to be sufficiently involved with (or aware of) the pilot, even if they were not a point of contact. In other instances, however, less senior LA staff members acting as a point of contact reportedly had difficulties obtaining senior engagement.

Coaches emphasised that getting senior buy-in was important throughout the pilot staged process as it meant that the work could progress. In some cases this worked well; coaches were sufficiently engaging with the senior staff at LAs which, they felt, made the process easier. In cases where coaches struggled to get the right level of senior buy-in they reported that it made the process difficult and resulted in a loss of momentum and focus. Coaches emphasised that it was important when approaching LAs about the LFO to 'go to the top' and establish high level support for the pilot even if that person subsequently delegated the work.

LA staff judged that it was right that senior sign-off for LFO strategies was not a requirement for the pilot. It was commented that the amount of funding involved was not substantial enough to warrant elaborate or bureaucratic sign-off routes, which could often be difficult to organise quickly.

### 3.2.3 Broader partners and stakeholders

There were mixed views from LAs on the role of wider partners and stakeholder in the LFO and whether it added value.

Where external engagement during the pilot was undertaken and was felt to have added value, LAs described involving stakeholders or partners in various ways. Examples included engagement with specific relationship support intervention organisations such as Relate (as this reportedly helped to provide some real clarity for the LA about the outcomes they could expect from certain programmes, based on the organisation's experience), and convening a stakeholder group with representatives from Relate, as well as children centres, health visitors, midwives, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and others. LAs that developed strategies with extensive workforce development components (involving staff from across different LA teams/business areas or partnerships) also tended to have felt that they had wider involvement from stakeholders or partner organisations.

Conversely, other LAs limited the scope of partner or stakeholder involvement. When discussing the reasons for limited stakeholder involvement, staff identified 3 main factors. First, they viewed LFO as a discrete piece of work that did not have cross-cutting implications across the LA or partnerships. It was noted that this could be the case where LFO strategies did not have a focus on workforce development, which would have required wider buy-in. Second, staff said that the amount of funding meant the LFO was not seen as having a high enough priority to warrant wider involvement. Third, the timing of the LFO was identified as a barrier to wider involvement - it was suggested if the pilot took place at a different point in the calendar year then it might have been easier to obtain a wider level of involvement.

Others suggested that LFO provision could have been improved if wider partners and stakeholders had been involved with the pilot but hadn't been done in practice.

> *"This isn't a multi-agency offer, this has been a Council offer which we will then take forward across the partnership…. We've briefed people through our normal partnership boards as we would do, but this hasn't been a co-designed offer, whereas everything I've been working on as part of my early help strategy for the last 13 months we've co-designed with a whole range of partners." (LA staff)*

Where this wider engagement hadn't happened, there were differing views between LA staff and coaches on who was best placed to convene and facilitate stakeholder groups. On the one hand, LA staff felt that coaches could have offered support by bringing stakeholders/partners together and facilitating meetings. On the other hand, coaches sometimes felt that the responsibility for involving a wider group of stakeholders/partners was with LA staff.

## 3.2.4 Coaches

The coaches interviewed for this research were employed by Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne. Some had previous experience of coaching within the public sector or on other innovation programmes. In the context of the pilot, coaches understood that their role was to support LAs through the staged LFO process and to provide them with tools, evidence/resources, methods, and feedback needed to develop LFO provision.

Coaches' contributions included facilitating meetings and challenging LAs' thinking; providing momentum and encouraging LAs to meet deadlines; providing content knowledge and translating evidence bases; reviewing draft documents and offering feedback; supporting LAs to write their applications for grant funding; contributing to the design and implementation of the pilot model as well as leading pilot workshops. Some coaches facilitated conversation across a wide group of stakeholders, while others focused support on one individual within the LA who would drive forward change.

Coaches spoke about the partnership between Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne during the pilot, and how the organisations worked together to support LAs. The Innovation Unit was reported to lead on pilot process and coaching elements (as this was their area of expertise), whereas OnePlusOne brought extensive knowledge and expertise around couple relationships. Coaches felt that theirpartnership worked well; it was described as a 'successful collaborative relationship'.

## 3.3  Summary and key learning

- **Participating LAs had mixed levels of previous experience in supporting couple relationships.** Some had previously been involved in initiatives specifically focused on this agenda.

- **The pilot was generally integrated into strategic or service development work (for example, redesign of Early Help services) or developed as an additional project.** Local strategic fit was an important factor in determining how the pilot was positioned within LAs.

- **The participation and engagement of LA staff, stakeholders and partners with the pilot varied across LAs. Senior-level commitment was identified as a success factor for many of the LFO pilot projects due to associated decision-making and convening power.** However, there were mixed experiences of senior colleagues' actual participation in the pilots**.**

- **There were mixed approaches in the involvement of stakeholders and wider partners in the pilots. Reasons were given both for why wider participation was beneficial and not needed.** In some cases, LFO provision was developed as a single-agency offer (by the LA only) rather than a multi-agency offer (by the LA, relevant partners and stakeholders).

- **Coaches from both Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne worked together to provide support to LAs.** It was felt to be a collaborative relationship with each organisation providing support tailored to their expertise. Coaches provided a range of support to LAs throughout the staged process of LFO.

# 4 Experiences of participating in the pilot

This chapter outlines LA staff and coaches' experiences of participating in the pilot through the different stages of the offer. It considers their experiences of the overall pilot model, as well as individual elements of this. Finally, the chapter discusses how pilot processes were linked to 3 LAs' decisions to withdraw from the pilot.

## 4.1 Overall views on staged process

Section 1.2 provides an explanation of the pilot model. At a high level, the staged process consisted of:

- **Opportunity assessment**, where coaches worked with LAs to provide a comprehensive needs assessment

- **Strategy development**, where coaches worked with LAs to co-develop a strategy for LFO provision

- **Application for grant funding**, where coaches worked with LAs to develop a costed delivery proposal for LFO provision

A range of views were expressed on this process and how successfully it operated.

LAs reported that the model consisting of a staged process was a strength of the pilot. The logical, sequential process encouraged LAs to think through the rationale for the LFO provision they were proposing to implement.

It was apparent from the interviews that there was fluidity and overlap between the strategy development and grant application stages. It was suggested that these two stages could have been combined into one, in order to simplify the process and reduce duplication. Others, however, said that the strategy development stage correlated well with the application for grant funding. One LA interviewee likened the process to a 'spiral' where you move forward and go back; therefore, the idea of

splitting the process in stages was helpful in giving distance between stages and introducing a structure.

Views were mixed between LA staff and coaches as to the extent to which the staged process supported innovation. LAs reported that the pilot provided a good opportunity to determine their own provision and think creatively. Yet, coaches suggested that the staged process limited innovation - in part due to pilot timescales that they felt limited the 'experimental stage' for thinking time and creative ideas. Others judged the staged process to be very resource-intensive for the amount of grant funding available at the end of the process.

> *"I think for me the lesson is building in some stages of experimentation, prior to going into the local pilots. When you go into a pilot, you should be pretty confident that the thing works and I don't think we're there yet." (Coach)*

LA staff also reported that timescales attached to the staged process were too short. In addition, as pilot milestones shifted later into the financial year, this was expected to restrict the time available for LAs to commission LFO provision in time for 1st April 2017 start. Linked to this, there was some discussion about communications and support received from DWP, with feedback that LAs would have benefited from more guidance in terms of what DWP was looking for from strategies and applications for grant funding. For example, a clearer sense of timescales, and a better understanding of the context in which LAs are working (including an awareness of commissioning cycles).

## 4.2 Opportunity assessment

Coaches and LA staff reported that data required to complete the basic opportunity assessment was already available to LAs.

Coaches reported different approaches being taken to complete the opportunity assessment by LAs. Some coaches said that they worked collaboratively with LAs: for example, the coaches collated basic data and shared with LA staff, who then

added in-house data to produce a visual map showing areas of opportunity or risk, to inform strategy development. Other coaches said that none of the LAs they worked with supplemented the basic opportunity assessment with further quantitative or qualitative data. They felt that this reflected a lack capacity and resource within LAs to analyse the data available to them.

LA staff, however, recognised the need to match or overlay opportunity assessment data (externally available) with local data sources (available in-house only) in order to draw sensible conclusions (for example, in terms of the outcomes they wanted to achieve as a result the pilot). However, there were some problems identified with this process. For example, it was mentioned that information from the opportunity assessment (prevalence of needs) did not always match in-house and information sources and references needed to be sent to LAs alongside the opportunity assessments by coaches so that it was clear where the information was from.

Potential improvements

Upskilling staff as part of this assessment stage was a key theme raised by interviewees with regards to potential improvements. For example, it was suggested that data visualisation for the opportunity assessment could be done by LA staff or analysts *together with* the coaches, to upskill those LA staff in data visualisation techniques. Another suggested improvement was to involve LAs' analysts in coaches' meetings so they could contribute additional in-house data to the process and compare this with data from external sources. Going further, others preferred to receive funding specifically to develop capacity for data analysis at local level, rather than opportunity assessments being completed by an external organisation.

Another potential improvement that emerged from the research with coaches was to ensure that such opportunity assessments were informed by people's lived experiences. This was highlighted as an approach that had been followed when coaches carried out other opportunity assessments. It was felt that by carrying out community engagement, storytelling or deeper exploration of local issues, different insights that may have challenged (or enriched) the existing evidence base could have been obtained.

### 4.2.1 **How opportunity assessments influenced development of local service offers made to families**

From the research it was apparent that there were 3 main ways in which opportunity assessments influenced the development of local service offers made to families, although the degree of influence the assessments had varied between LAs:

- Informing through data/mapping (for example, revealing where LA outcomes were poorer than other LAs or National averages)

- Supporting broader thinking and innovation (for example, recognising links between different factors)

- Underpinning the process of strategy development (for example, acting as basis for making decisions about the focus of LFO strategies)

<u>Informing through data and mapping</u>

Staff using the opportunity assessments in this way thought that they complemented LAs' own data or insight: it backed up anecdotal information/hunches or could be added to other LA data to fill in gaps. These respondents generally perceived that the assessments matched or overlaid LA data. Examples of key opportunity assessment outcomes cited by respondents included high local levels of children living in poverty, gang violence, child emotional and behavioural problems, workless families, lone parents, sole parent birth registrations[9], domestic abuse, children in care, children with special educational needs, and parents receiving alcohol treatment.

Other staff described new insights in terms of identifying possible links between relationships and child outcomes by bringing data together, or in terms of identifying the geography where there were issues around family stability. The data also provided value presentationally in terms of demonstrating the key areas of focus.

Conversely, other staff felt that the opportunity assessments did not provide any new information, as they reported that their LAs were previously aware of information. It

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[9] Sole parent birth registrations: where only one parent's name appears on a child's birth certificate.

was noted that this was not necessarily a negative; indeed they would have been alarmed if it did reveal things that they were unaware of. Others did, however, suggest that the opportunity data had actually failed to identify key local issues.

> *"To an extent the needs assessment didn't give us any data that we weren't already very aware of, but it did direct our thinking a little bit in terms where [in terms of specific groups or issues] the best place to intervene was." (LA staff)*

Supporting broader thinking and innovation

Coaches reported the benefits of the opportunity assessment in terms of encouraging LAs to 'think differently' when developing theories of change. For example, one coach described how opportunity assessments could be used to help LAs recognise opportunities that they may have not have previously considered, by seeing connections between different factors.

> *"If I do something over here in employment…if I intervene at the point where people are losing their jobs I can protect against poor quality couple relationships which might affect the outcomes that I'm seeking to deliver. So [the opportunity assessment] allows people to see opportunities for prevention that otherwise they wouldn't see." (Coach)*

Coaches stated that without the opportunity assessments some LAs would have found it very difficult to understand where the opportunities for intervention were. For example, some LAs had taken steps to establish couple relationship support in children's centres, but the opportunity assessments provided a chance to think more broadly about other opportunities to intervene and prevent poor quality couple relationships/poorly managed conflicts from escalating to cause poorer outcomes for children. Their view was that without the opportunity assessments, the LFO pilot would not have led to the same breadth of innovative LA responses.

<u>Underpinning the process of strategy development</u>

LAs credited the opportunity assessments with informing the development of LFO strategies to a varying extent. While some LA staff felt that opportunity assessments only had "a little" impact on the whole process of strategy development, others considered these to have influenced strategy development quite extensively.

Some LA staff described very clear, logical links between opportunity assessments and the resulting strategy development. Here, the opportunity assessments were viewed as a "basis" for making decisions about the focus of LFO strategies. For example, opportunity assessments were reported to have helped LAs to identify key issues/priorities/gaps to focus on, to develop a theory of change and test assumptions, and to specify target outcomes.

Where the opportunity assessment was being used to inform the development of an LFO strategy, coaching support (referred to in terms of facilitated and focused conversations) was seen to be critical to this process. Coaching sessions were used to establish and clarify links between opportunity assessments and strategy development: the coaching was reported to have provided useful challenge and encouraged LAs to consider problems from different angles to develop more credible solutions. In these instances, respondents described how the opportunity assessment influenced and informed strategy development in meaningful ways (for example, by challenging assumptions, ensuring that strategy development was grounded in data, prompting further development of the theory of change model, and informing the focus for interventions).

In other LAs, it was apparent that strategy development was less of a systematic process underpinned by opportunity assessment data, and more a case of ensuring that LFO strategies aligned with wider LA work or direction of travel (for example, vision for review of early help services). In these cases, the LFO strategies were determined primarily by considering alignment with LAs' existing offers, strategic plans, or future direction of travel (for example, wider LA vision for review of early help services). Opportunity assessments or local data were not reported to have had a strong influence on these decisions. That said, opportunity assessments were still felt to be helpful in refining the minor aspects of LFO strategy development.

## 4.3 Strategy development

The process of strategy development varied between LAs. However, this tended to be based on coaching sessions and completion of a theory of change (TOC) template that was provided to LAs, to help them to consider the links between interventions and anticipated outcomes. In some cases, coaches facilitated a coaching session/workshop to encourage LAs to develop their theory of change in a discursive and iterative way. The process of refining the strategy document was similar across LAs and coaches generally provided feedback on an on-going basis. Staff in some LAs specifically reported learning a lot from the process and said that they found the Theory of Change a really useful exercise to do.

> *"So with the opportunity assessment, with the change theory of change, and then with this prompt sheet…we actually used that as the basis of one of our coaching sessions to try and tease some of this stuff out. We came up with our own theory of change 'version 2' as a result of that." (LA Staff)*

## 4.4 Application for grant funding

LA views on the grant funding process were split. On the one hand, some found the process straightforward and described working closely with coaches, gathering feedback and acting on this. They stated that the process was not too onerous and generally did not feel that there was room for improvement. LAs reasoned that while it was challenging to meet word limits and limited the detail that could be included within the grant application (for example, regarding details of the interventions to be delivered), this ultimately helped them to hone down and improve the clarity of their grant applications to keep them focused.

Other LAs felt that the grant funding stage required improvements to address problems with timescales and word count limits. They reported timescales for the grant application stage as 'too tight' and more clarity was need in terms of timeframes. Word limits were reported as having prevented some LAs from incorporating coaches' suggestions on grant application draft documents and

subsequently they were concerned that it was hard to make the grant application stand alone as a robust document.

# 4.5  Coaching support

Coaches worked closely with LAs to understand the work they were currently undertaking, their capacity for developing their LFO bid and specific areas in which they required support. This then influenced the nature of coaching support delivered to LAs (i.e. tailored to individual LA needs).

## 4.5.1 Mode of coaching contact

Phone calls and email communications were the most commonly used modes of coaching contact; this was considered to be the most efficient use of everyone's time. Many LAs also participated in one or more face-to-face coaching sessions. LA staff felt that it was vital to meet their coaches in person at the pilot kick-off event, as communication during the course of the pilot would have been more problematic if this initial face-to-face meeting had not occurred.

## 4.5.2 Qualities of coaching support

LA staff and coaches described the main qualities associated with coaching support, and offered their perspectives on this.

Positive coaching relationships

The coaching support was commonly seen as helpful, useful and supportive. Words used to describe the coaches themselves included: personable, constructive, approachable, thorough, accommodating, available and professional. LA staff reported that it was good to be able to go to someone who was not connected to DWP for ideas and suggestions. Some said that they would consider accessing coaching support again in the future, and would recommend it to other LAs.

According to coaches, the relationship between the coaches and the LAs they were supporting was important because a good relationship meant that LA staff could be honest with coaches and come to them with any questions.

<u>Informative and knowledgeable</u>

LAs said they found the coaching experience informative because of the extra knowledge that the coaches were able to bring. Some said they would not have been able to come this far in the pilot process without the support from the coaches because of the additional knowledge they brought. It was also noted coaches sometimes lacked detailed local knowledge, however, this was not seen as a particular problem.

There was a view from the coaches that LAs' knowledge of the research and evidence around couple relationship interventions/ programmes was limited. Coaches were identified here as having a role to identify, collate, and convey the evidence base for the LAs in an accessible and understandable format that could be used by LAs.

> *"It was the application of that [evidence base] to the practice area that was so important…I mean you can have the evidence base but you can have no idea what that might mean for practice. I think it was that translation for them [LAs] that we did a lot of." (Coach)*

<u>Responsive and Prompt</u>

Some LAs specifically mentioned that the coaches were responsive and prompt in terms of providing inputs/feedback, and that this was provided in a clear and timely manner.

<u>Providing constructive challenge</u>

From the research it was clear that LAs appreciated the rigour with which the coaches challenged them to think through their ideas for LFO provision, by identifying things that needed tweaking or changing. There was a common view that the role of coaches was to provide guidance and support during the pilot process, rather than to make decisions or to exert a dominant impact on the outcomes of the pilot. LA staff valued the feedback from coaches, describing this as thorough,

extensive, constructive (with suggestions for improvement), and critical where it needed to be.

> *"[The coach said] 'have you thought about this', 'have you thought about that'. Whatever ideas we had [they] just came in with questions around it which made us sit back and think really, and evaluate." (LA staff)*

Facilitating engagement

Some respondents reported that during the initial stages of the pilot, communications with DWP could be slow and not particularly fluid. There was some feeling that once Innovation Unit became involved with the pilot, communication improved, and the work took off, became clearer and gained pace. LA staff credited the coaching with helping them to focus and maintain momentum during the course of the pilot.

Coaching support was seen as particularly successful where this facilitated wider stakeholder engagement/ conversations, or encouraged LAs to involve partner organisations in the pilot. It came out strongly in the research that coaches facilitated face to face discussions particularly well, and identified this as an important contribution to pilot progression.

### 4.5.3 How coaching influenced development of the LFO provision

A mixture of views emerged from the research in terms of the extent to which the coaching element of the pilot was seen as having made an impact on the development of the LFO provision.

Made an impact

Local Authorities provided examples of how coaches were felt to have positively influenced development of their LFO provision. For example, one LA respondent explained how the coach had laid the ground work for their LA to think about whether they needed to bring in a partner organisation who understood the topic area better

and had more expertise. Another discussed how the coaching support had helped them to think about how to put relationship support as an integral part of their early help model.

> "I think this is where the coaching really came into effect because, left to ourselves, we probably would have just gone, you know, 'one plus one is two', whereas I think with the coaching, it really helped us to kind of move beyond the conventional." (LA Staff)

Respondents highlighted that the coaching gave them a focus for the LFO. The coaches helped the LA staff have a more targeted approach, one that they felt was more likely to get approval for grant funding. For example, one respondent said they started off with a hugely ambitious plan and the coach reined it in and ensured it was focussed on 3 or 4 things rather than 9 or 10. Coaches were reported to have helped make the strategies clearer, more realistic and sustainable; offering practical ideas about measurement of outcomes and generally helping the proposals be 'brought to life'.

Coaches also shared some positive views on the coaching support they offered to LAs. They felt it was a useful vehicle for helping LAs develop their strategy, especially via face-to-face communications. Coaches suggested that without the coaching element: fewer LAs would have submitted their grant funding applications, applications would have been of poorer quality, and that LAs would not have progressed forward with the LFO. Coaches saw themselves as adding value at different stages, as they provided tailored support to the LAs and their needs. The local context was seen to work well; the ability of the coaches to tailor the support to individual LAs was seen as important.

<u>Less of an impact</u>

Other respondents were more measured in their views about how much the coaching influenced the development of their LFO. Here, the coaching was reported to have provided reassurance rather than directing the development of the LFO, with

respondents surmising that they would have reached the same conclusions and submitted the same grant application regardless. In this context it was felt that the coaches didn't really do much and didn't offer any ideas or suggestions for things to do. In one example, the research respondent reported they felt pushed to do something they did not want to do.

### 4.5.4 Suggestions for improving the coaching support offer

As part of the research, participants were asked to provide suggestions on how the coaching support offer could be improved. Not all respondents felt that the offer could be improved, but for those that did, a number of themes emerged.

<u>Clarity over the coaching offer</u>

It emerged that there was some lack of clarity about the role of OnePlusOne in the context of the pilot, and in some LAs the coach was either not felt to have made a contribution to the pilot, or not pursued by the LA to provide support. A lack of clarity regarding the level of support on offer from the coaches more generally, and how Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne fitted together was also reported, as well as a lack of a clear structure to the coaching sessions. Therefore it was felt that having more information on what the coaching was all about and what the offer was (and from whom) would have been beneficial.

> *"One of the things that wasn't clear, on reflection, was the triad of the LA, the Innovation Unit and OnePlusOne … it just felt a little clunky in terms of who was doing what… some duplication… that could do with sorting out." (LA Staff)*

<u>Additional coaching provision</u>

It was also suggested that there would be benefits from having more coaching input, particularly when developing applications for grant funding, to help LAs to create space for this work and refine the grant application. The lack of time also impacted on the relationship between the LAs and the coaches, and it was reported to be hard

to build a powerful relationship. Coaches' time was based on delivering outputs rather than a set number of hours.

> *"Our normal day to day job will just absorb everything we do 10 hours a day…so space and capacity to do new work is great and we want to do it, but I think we probably would have benefited from another face to face visit to help us nail our bid a bit more." (LA staff)*

Supporting knowledge sharing

Some LA staff members said that it would have been beneficial to have more sharing of what other LAs were doing, and that coaches could have played a facilitating role in this. They acknowledged that each LFO must be designed to fit local circumstances but it would have been useful as it would have inspired ideas.

Providing choice

For those LA staff who were not convinced that coaching support had added much value, it was suggested that DWP could offer LAs a choice about whether they sought external support, what sort of support they sought and a list of possible organisations to approach. For example, one member of LA staff said that they would rather have had funding for developing analytical capacity at a local level than having outside support.

> *"If we had laid out clear guidance at the beginning of this process that said 'you will need to pay attention to the following…you may want to consider seeking external help with that…here are some organisations you might want to consider going to'… I would probably have found that more helpful." (LA Staff)*

# 4.6  **Parents as Partners training offer**

DWP offered free access to Parents as Partners (PaP) training (a specific parental relationship support intervention) to LAs participating in the pilot. The aim of the training was to enable front-line practitioners within the LA to run the programme (a 16-week group intervention supported by a male and female facilitator) to help parents improve the quality of their co-parental relationship and their parenting skills.

This was delivered by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR).

In the research, LA staff were asked whether or not they took up the Parents as Partners training offer, as well as the reasons behind their decision. The research also explores who participated and planned next steps for those LAs that had taken up the offer.

## 4.6.1 Uptake of the Parents as Partners training offer

It was not always clear from qualitative interviews whether the PaP staff training had been taken up as a free offer as per the LFO pilot intention, or whether staff training had been funded separately outside of the pilot. There was confusion among some LAs about the training offer and what was being provided.

The table below shows the status of Parents as Partners staff training according to LA staff interviewed. It was not always possible to establish whether the training had been taken up as a free offer as per the pilot intention: it was clear that at least one of these LAs had completed the PaP training but not as part of the LFO pilot.

| Parents as Partners staff training – completed or arranged* | Number of LAs |
|---|---|
| Yes | 7 |
| No | 5 |
| NA - LA withdrew from pilot | 2 |

## 4.6.2 Reasons for taking up Parents as Partners training

One clear theme emerging from the qualitative interviews was that LAs had taken up PaP training because it was seen as a good strategic fit, or aligned with existing work strands. For example, one LA had already trained some staff prior to the LFO;

the opportunity to train additional staff was seen as a chance to scale up an existing approach. Another LA was in the process of redesigning their Early Help Services and the training was positioned as an integral part of the new provision. Coaching was perceived to have facilitated the integration of workforce development and service redesign (which were previously viewed as two parallel processes). It was therefore apparent that, due to wider contextual factors and the timing of the pilot, some LAs were particularly receptive to the PaP training offer.

Other enabling factors identified were:

- There were available resources (for example, staff availability and capacity) within LAs to deliver the Parents as Partners programme to parents.

- There was widespread buy-in and recognition of the benefits of Parents as Partners delivery, and more generally to the concept of supporting relationships between couples or co-parents.

- A workforce development survey in one LA revealed that practitioners did not feel very confident or skilled about asking questions about relationship difficulties; this lent support to the concept of staff training in this area.

- It was clear that there were well-established relationships between the many of the LAs and the training providers TCCR. These relationships were noted to have been established before and outside of the LFO pilot context.

## 4.6.3 Reasons for not taking up Parents as Partners training

There were a number of reasons provided by LAs for not taking up the training.

- As mentioned earlier, there was some confusion over whether the PaP training was a free offer, as well as a lack of awareness about the offer.

- There were concerns about the feasibility of delivering the course to parents once staff had been trained: staff welcomed the concept of the programme but felt that the length of the course may be an issue for parents and for staff

resourcing (as a fairly long programme which needs to be co-facilitated by a male and female).

- Implementing the programme was considered but ultimately the LA decided against taking up the training offer due to a multitude of local factors. Factors mentioned as having influenced such decisions included: being "inundated" with similar training offers, poor fit with LA circumstances and existing programme delivery, and perceived lack of flexibility regarding PaP programme delivery. Staff were conscious that whilst some things might work in one LA they might not be suitable in another.

> *"Some of these things are quite difficult to take up when you're already delivering programmes…and how many programmes do you deliver? We're trying to build an evidence for what works in [own LA]…we are a little bit more considered about what we take up and do think it through quite carefully." (LA Staff)*

- Some LAs had not yet taken up the training offer, but intended to do so in the future. For example, one LA reported that they were in the process of a very intensive workforce development process and therefore, before implementing other programmes, they felt a need to coordinate and plan what they were asking staff to do and when.

### 4.6.4 Staff receiving the Parents as Partners training offer

The roles and professions of the staff trained varied between LAs and included early help practitioners, parenting practitioners, parenting coordinators, an analyst, Child and Adult Mental Health (CAMHS) practitioners, and Children's Centre staff.

An element of best practice was identified by TCCR in terms of training staff who have the ability to 'work across boundaries' and involving partners/stakeholders, in order to train a 'mixed-agency' cohort. This was linked to perceptions of the programme sustainability: if the training was only embedded in children's social care then it may be difficult to sustain in the context of competing priorities. However, in

practice only one LA mentioned that they had involved staff from stakeholders or partner organisations in the training.

### 4.6.5 **Next steps post training**

Feedback on the training itself was very positive. The training was felt to meet the expectations of attendees. LA staff also emphasised that the training enthused and engaged attendees, motivating them to go back and 'crack on' with delivering the programme. Where staff had completed or were due to be trained, it was apparent that there were plans to deliver the Parents as Partners programme locally. LAs had not begun programme delivery at the time of the interviews, except where this had been completed outside of the pilot.

Some LAs reported that they would consider implementing a 'train the trainer' approach in order to upskill other LA staff; a few stated this would be dependent on additional funding or central government training. It was felt that a 'train the trainer' approach was a good idea in principle, although in practice this would depend on overcoming resource and funding constraints.

## 4.7  **Withdrawal from the pilot**

3 LAs reported withdrawing from the pilot. The 2 key factors that emerged as to why they did not progress with the pilot are outlined below.

### 4.7.1 **Staffing/resourcing constraints amidst tight pilot resources**

One of the main reason highlighted for withdrawing from the pilot centred around resources - both time and money.

There were reported difficulties with LA staffing and resourcing constraints (for example, due to coinciding Ofsted inspection) in the midst of tight deadlines by which pilot plans needed to be submitted.

The amount of funding attached to the LFO was also highlighted. It was reported that the pilot funding was too small considering the size and breadth of existing

commissioning. It was perceived that the LFO funding could only have a very small impact and therefore that LA staff time and resource would be better spent on commissioning work that, they felt, would affect the relationship support system more widely, and where larger contracts were involved.

> *"The amount of effort and extra time I would have had to put into it to make up the time that had been lost wasn't really worth it and to be honest we were going to be doing something of that ilk anyway and so we abandoned it." (LA Staff)*

It was also mentioned that it was not considered feasible to set up a service or put on an external programme with the amount of pilot funding available. Therefore it was perceived that the only provision that could be introduced with the funding available was workforce development.

### 4.7.2 Perceived lack of alignment between immediate LA priorities and the aims of the pilot

Another reason given for withdrawing from the pilot was a perceived fundamental lack of alignment between immediate LA priorities and the aims of the LFO pilot as they were understood.

It became apparent in the research interviews that in at least one of these LAs, LFO pilot aims were understood to include a prevention of relationship breakdown. This contrasted with the LA's view that outcomes are sometimes more positive, particularly for children, if parents separate. Therefore the LA did not feel that the LFO would fit with their approach of "positive co-parenting in all circumstances". Prevention of relationship breakdown was not one of the stated aims of the LFO.

### 4.7.3 Continued commitment to learning

Despite withdrawing from the pilot, there remained enthusiasm from these LAs to learn from other authorities that continued to take part, in terms of sharing best practice and learning about which elements of the LFO pilots worked well.

## 4.8 Summary and key learning

- **Overall, pilot processes were seen to improve the quality of local service offers made to families.** The pilot model was positively regarded by LAs in terms of providing structure and increasing their engagement/motivation, although LAs did display a range of views within the specific elements of the staged process.

- **However, some key concerns were raised regarding timescales of various stages of the pilot** (too tight or not enough notice) **and clarity of the coaching offer** (more upfront information about the type and extent of support available). Suggestions were made by research participants on how to improve the process.

- **The key success factors of the coaching offer included coaches' abilities to provide focus and motivation**; to supply relevant information and evidence data; to provide feedback/challenge needed to improve the quality of LFO strategies and applications for grant funding; and to facilitate meetings in ways that added value.

- **Take up of the Parents and Partners training offer varied across LAs, with a range of reasons reported as to why LAs did or did not take up the offer.** Where training had taken place it was delivered to a mixture of job roles, with positive feedback. Some were considering adopting a train the trainer approach.

- **The 3 LAs that withdrew from the LFO highlighted limited resources in terms of time and money, as well as what they saw to be misalignment between their own immediate priorities and those of the pilot.** All remained interested in learning from others continuing in the LFO.

# 5 The LFO provision

This chapter discusses the types of LFO provision that LAs developed as a consequence of participating in the pilot. It also discusses the factors that were associated with capacity for sustaining provision beyond the timeframes associated with the pilot. The 3 LAs that withdrew from the pilot staged process are not discussed in this section.

## 5.1 Types of LFO provision introduced

All LAs reported an intention to deliver LFO provision[10]. While all strategies had an overarching aim to address relationship difficulties experienced by parents, the specific nature of the provision varied considerably between LAs as they developed a localised approach aimed at different target audiences. For some LAs the focus was on a specific cohort (for example, young parents at risk of domestic abuse or experiencing low level mental health problems), whereas other LAs aimed to identify parents interacting with Early Help or universal services. It was clear that LFO strategies were variously targeted at primary prevention, support for at-risk groups, and intensive support for individuals with high levels of need. LAs were mixed in terms of whether or not they included relationship services or programmes within their provision.

Despite these differences, there were also commonalities between LFO provision, with all incorporating one or more of the following elements:

- workforce development and culture change

- delivery of relationship services or programmes

- wider systems or measurement changes

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[10] At the time of the research, the LAs intended to submit an application for grant funding to DWP, detailing their proposals for LFO provision and the costs linked to this.

The combinations of these elements varied, although there was a focus on systems and measurement changes in many. Some LFO provision focused predominantly on workforce development, while some combined workforce development with delivery of relationship services or programmes. The following sections discuss in more detail these 3 main types of provision.

### 5.1.1 LFO provision that focused predominantly on workforce development

In these LAs, there was a clear intention to upskill staff and bring about culture change, rather than introducing relationship services or programmes. A strategic focus on workforce development was reported to be an appealing option; it was felt that changes could be sustained relatively easily as part of frontline staff day jobs and without additional requirements for funding once the initial staff training investment had been made.

Some LAs delivered workforce training through internal seminars, whereas others commissioned external courses such as Brief Encounters[11] or Think Couple[12]. Typically, the aims of workforce training were twofold: (i) to upskill staff to identify relationship difficulties, and (ii) to have conversations with parents or couples about their relationships or signpost to services.

Training usually involved elements of staff awareness-raising, professional skills training and dissemination of educational resources. In some cases, LAs also introduced a designated relationship "navigator" or "champion" role to support and increase the skills of the workforce (for example, to ensure that frontline practitioners were aware of services available for couples who may have been experiencing difficulties). Where LAs carried out staff skills audits or surveys, this was felt to

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[11] *Brief Encounters* is a short training programme that is available as an e-learning package / skills workshop. The aim of the training programme is to enable frontline practitioners to recognise relationship difficulties; respond using active listening skills and solution focused techniques in a time managed way; and review the need for further support.

[12] *Think Couple is a* relationship awareness one-day training course for professionals working with children and families. The course objective is to stimulate awareness and thinking about relationship issues in order to raise awareness and support change in ways of working.

support the case for workforce development and to inform the focus of training activities. In some cases workforce development included partners.

> *"It's about really embedding that ethos… a real focus on what our work across our services and within our new early help model and really thinking about, really kind of setting out our workforce development plan and ensuring that goes across not just our own team but across a whole range of agencies we work with, our partner agencies. Obviously we want to see kind of a sense of supporting families within our hub, supporting that work within our hubs." (LA Staff)*

## 5.1.2 LFO provision that combined workforce development with delivery of relationship services or programmes

Here, LAs generally implemented basic workforce development activities similar to those outlined in the previous section. In addition to this, some staff then received intensive training to enable them to deliver relationship programmes to parents including Parents as Partners[13], Me You and Baby Too[14], Caring Dads[15] (an adapted version), or LAs commissioned external organisations to deliver couples counselling or mediation services. In some LAs the provision of tiered services was considered: for example, working in partnership with Relate to develop high intensity family interventions (counselling services or parenting programmes) as well light touch interventions (for example, increased family support or signposting elsewhere).

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[13]*Parents as Partners* is a 16 week programme delivered to parents by trained facilitators/group leaders. The programme is designed to improve relationships between parents and to increase children's well-being and success.

[14] *Me, You and Baby Too* is a programme of psycho-educative resources. The resources can be included within antenatal provision to prepare parents for changes to their relationship and strengthen support for one another.

[15] *Caring Dads* is a 17 week group-based course that aims to help fathers improve their relationship with their children and to end controlling abusive and neglectful behaviours.

### 5.1.3 **LFO provision that included wider systems or measurement changes**

Some LFO strategies included elements of wider systems (or measurement) changes. Systems changes were seen as necessary to build the infrastructure required for the workforce to integrate a relationship agenda into their usual practice (for example, through the inclusion of questions about relationships into early help assessments), and to identify or recruit participants for programmes (for example, Parents as Partners). Systems changes were required to embed support for couple or parental relationships within local service delivery. These included changes to early help assessments, referral processes, data collection, joined up working and outcome measures:

- Establishing shared systems and processes within new Early Help partnerships, with a view to embedding support for couple or parental relationships at the heart of new services

- Improved data collection to drive (and monitor) improved standards of practice, for example, by quantifying referrals to specialist relationship services/programmes; carrying out staff skills audits to inform the focus of future workforce development; embedding a 'relationship measure' to raise the priority of this agenda and collect evidence to measure the impact of LFO provision

- Improving the join up between universal services (gateway services) and Early Help pathways - by upskilling staff and introducing a focus on couples'/parents' relationships - so that universal services become a full extension of Early Help pathways

- Inclusion of a relationships outcome within the Troubled Families outcomes framework, to align relationship outcomes with wider LA targets or priorities

- Linking relationship support for couples with broader positive outcomes, by encouraging Jobcentre Plus and key worker colleagues to adapt assessments to support couples participating in a Jobcentre Plus pilot

Where there were multiple elements to LFO strategies, including systems changes, LAs felt there were benefits to enlisting the support of a project manager to coordinate the relationship support work and ensure that all aspects were in place.

## 5.2 Sustainability of LFO provision

LAs spoke about their intention to sustain or mainstream LFO provision beyond the timespan of the pilot. Where LFO strategies were seen as being sustainable, this was attributed to a number of key factors:

Involvement of stakeholders/partners

Establishment of partnerships or co-production of LFO provision helped LAs and external organisations to recognise the mutual benefits of continuing to work together to drive forward this agenda.

> *"We're actually going to test a model, have an opportunity to test the model, to work with different organisations and different partners to get it right." (LA Staff)*

When reflecting on why provision might not have been developed sustainably, it was suggested that small LAs may not have a great deal of capacity to conduct work with external organisations and agencies and therefore not be able to support a big change endeavour.

Breadth of LFO provision

Breadth of provision was seen as key success factor in ensuring LFO sustainability. For example, it was reported that a range of systems changes were required to supplement workforce development, to enable staff to embed changes into usual practice (for example, by making educational resources readily available, establishing a set of tools for assessment/referral, introducing questions about relationships into common assessment forms, collection and monitoring of performance management data/outcome measures). Similarly, systems changes and workforce development were seen to help to embed relationship programmes by the training provider:

*"I was really keen when we talked with the DWP about embedding [Parents as Partners], that our work would include something around system change so that's why I think the LFO is so necessary and vital because in order to create the momentum for change it has to operate in an environment that's somewhat different to the one that we're operating in now." (Training provider)*

It was suggested that some LAs had bought into workforce development or relationship programme provision, but without an ambition to implement the breadth or depth of change needed to ultimately increase the sustainability of that provision.

Depth of LFO provision

Several LAs were keen to implement LFO provision that involved in-depth change and whole system transformation, thereby also demonstrating a commitment to implementing sustainable change. Some considered themselves as ambitious and wanted to be a centre of excellence for the LFO; they expressed a commitment to implementing substantial change and "getting it right" because of the significant challenges faced by their LAs in terms of high levels of needs and deprivation.

The pilot was seen to provide protected resource and time to focus on complex social problems. In these cases there was reported to be sufficient interest locally to consider extensive change and it was felt that the pilot supported wider LA agendas and helped LAs to "go in the direction" needed to realise longer-term ambitions/visions. For example, one LA said that they saw the pilot as being about more than just children's services: it was a whole council approach and therefore should be adopted in terms of thinking about co-parenting, family stability, and supporting families with complex needs.

Research participants suggested that the timing of the pilot could have impacted negatively on the breadth or depth of change that LAs outlined in their LFO provision: if the pilot was introduced at an inopportune time (i.e. at a time when LAs were particularly busy) it may have been easier to just implement a 'quick fix' rather than a longer term change.

<u>Extent to which provision was innovative</u>

LFO provision was seen as being more 'innovative' when this led LAs to question their current strategies and services, or to think in fundamentally new ways – leading them to implement a specific change in direction or to establish new links between strategies and services (rather than simply 'boosting' their existing ones). Again, a high level of need within local communities was linked with LAs' preparedness to do something different. Where LAs introduced LFO provision that they recognised as being genuinely innovative, this was generally associated with sustained commitment to continuing provision in order to provide a strong evidence base of effective practice.

> *"I think the greater the needs within the community then the greater the need to do something different…" [Coach]*

<u>Strategic fit</u>

Public service reforms were recognised as a key activity that was taking place when the LFO pilot began. In particular, several LAs were in the process of re-designing their early help, children's or families' services. As part of this transformation, relationship provision was often integrated into their early help, prevention, or early intervention strategies. It was clear to these LAs that their LFO provision would be sustained as part of mainstream service transformation.

LAs reported pre-existing agendas to support couples' or parents' relationships. Some LA staff noted having already done work around relationship support, with the LFO therefore seen as an opportunity to carry out further learning to inform their future commissioning and re-design work. The LFO was consequently seen as a "good strategic fit" and was reported as providing an opportunity to embed support for couple relationships at the heart of service transformation: it complemented work that was already underway.

> *"LAs were thinking in a deeply thoughtful way about service configuration and how service users use services…and they thought that it would make a difference to*

*put something that attends to relationships in the mix…[LAs] were saying 'this is something that fits so well within what we're doing'." (Training provider)*

## 5.3  Summary and key learning

- **With the exception of those that withdrew, all LAs reported an intention to deliver LFO provision. The exact nature of this provision varied considerably as LAs developed a localised approach.** LFO strategies were variously targeted at primary prevention, support for at-risk groups, and intensive support for individuals with high levels of need.

- **Despite these differences, there were also commonalities between LFO provision.** All incorporated one or more of the following elements: workforce development and culture change, delivery of relationship services or programmes, and wider systems or measurement changes.

- **LFO provision tended to be perceived as being sustainable beyond the timescales associated with the pilot, though not in all cases.** Key factors associated with having capacity for sustained change included: involvement of stakeholders/ partners, breadth of LFO provision, depth of LFO provision; level of innovation, timing of the opportunity, and strategic fit.

# 6 Longer term perspectives

This chapter discusses longer term perspectives relating to the pilot, as perceived by participating LAs and coaches. It explores perceived benefits of the pilot, the role of sharing learning between LAs, and considers DWP's role both in the LFO and more generally.

## 6.1 Perceived benefits of the pilot

Generally, at the time of conducting the qualitative interviews, LAs had not yet implemented LFO provision. However, LA staff spoke generally about "outcomes" of the pilot in two main ways.

- They valued the pilot as a means of **raising the profile of supporting couple and parental relationships** within LAs. The factors seen as responsible for this included cultural/attitudinal shifts driven by workforce development, exposure of the pilot to senior management and at strategic meetings, as well as embedding plans for LFO provision within new Early Help models
- The pilot was seen as **an opportunity to test a model for delivering support** for couple or parental relationships. Some LAs had attempted similar work in the past but reported encountering difficulties

### 6.1.1 Raised the profile of supporting couple and parental relationships

It was reported by LAs that the LFO had raised the profile of supporting relationships within their authorities. Some felt that this change had only occurred to a limited extent, others said that that the pilot had already generated substantial increased awareness and buy-in among senior management (including LA directors of children's services).

Staff who felt the pilot had raised the profile of relationship support to a limited extent also said they expected this to increase with the progression of the pilot. Although at

an early stage, one member of staff envisaged the pilot as a "pivotal moment" in terms of LA policy development; they anticipated that going forwards, the pilot would lead to substantial work in the relationship support space with partner organisations and community hubs. Others expressed views that the profile of relationship support would increase with the roll-out of pilot provision (i.e. as services or programmes become more visible) or as larger pieces of strategic development work take place.

> *"To an extent it still feels like we're still in fairly early days of developing what we will do in terms of relationship support. I think one of the big pieces of work that we're looking at the over coming year is really about re-focusing our children's centre programme, and I think within that we will need to focus on family and relationship more and think it's at that point that we will get more senior buy-in."*
> *(LA Staff)*

Several respondents expressed views on the LFO being the catalyst for generating relationship support provision within their LA. One respondent said they didn't think their LA would have done the LFO by themselves but the LFO offered them a focus for what they wanted to do. Similarly, another respondent found the LFO funding and deadlines provided the focus to make things happen, and they were unsure how far they would have got on their own without the LFO as a focus, having already identified parental conflict as an area to address.

Staff gave illustrative examples of how the LFO pilot had already raised the profile of relationship support within LAs, for example by:

- prompting discussions about this agenda among senior management and at strategic meetings
- embedding relationship support into new LA Early Help models
- establishing cultural/attitudinal shifts through workforce development
- acting as a driver for increased stakeholder engagement
- prompting local launch events and press releases to disseminate information about the pilot

It was also apparent from the research that, due to engagement with TCCR and a focus on relationships emerging prior to the pilot, some LAs were particularly primed/ receptive to the relationship support agenda and in these cases the LFO pilot was felt to have helped to elevate the profile of this even more.

> *"The pilot has definitely raised the profile of relationship support, it has given us a driver and lever to take to stakeholders and say this is a national priority, we are one of the 12 pilot areas, this is special, get involved." (LA Staff)*

Coaches generally echoed the views held by LA staff. However they contrasted LAs involved in this pilot with those that were not, noting that many LFO areas had a long-standing interest in relationship support unlike wider non-LFO LAs who may not have changed their approach[16].

> *"I think for people who are kind of either sceptical or indifferent to it, I don't think it made much of a difference, I don't think we've engaged them yet. Maybe we need to… start thinking about winning their hearts and minds, whereas this project's been strengthening the advocates, rather than winning over the sceptics." (Coach)*

### 6.1.2 Provided an opportunity to test a model

LAs reported that they had been trying to implement work to support couple relationships for a long time, but had encountered difficulties and risks in doing so. The LFO was seen in this context as an opportunity to progress and test a model to deliver support. On a similar theme, for LAs that had not considered implementing relationship support before the pilot, the LFO was seen as an opportunity to address an important gap in provision that had now been uncovered. Coaches felt that the pilot provided evidence to support their own views on supporting relationships, and so had given LAs credibility to do work in relationship support.

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[16] See section 3.1 for further information on LAs' decision-making processes to participate in LFO.

> *"I think this bid has allowed us to test an approach so that feels really reassuring…we're not just saying 'right we now know how to do this and this is how we're going to do it'…we're actually going to test a model, have an opportunity to test the model, to work with different organisations and different partners to get it right and to have the opportunity to prove it rather than just saying 'this is how we do business here'." (LA Staff)*

## 6.2  Learning

### 6.2.1 LA approaches to generating learning

All LAs planned to evaluate new and/or expanded provision introduced as a result of the pilot. At the time of the qualitative interviews, most LAs were still formulating their evaluation approaches. However, it was clear that they had already given consideration to various options and potential challenges. Due to the number of elements included in some LFO strategies, a multifaceted evaluation approach was required to evaluate the whole range of new and/or expanded provision. This necessitated development of a specific evaluation framework or strategy.

LAs generally distinguished between shorter and longer-term outcomes. Shorter term, several LAs expected to see improved standards of practice in the assessment of relationship quality, increased understanding of relationship services among staff, as well as improved timeliness and quality of referrals to relationship services. Coaches highlighted that, as LAs progress to implement LFO provision, it would be important for them to understand the impact of the changes they are making, through iterative and action learning.

Longer-term outcomes that LAs expected to see (typically set out in theory of change and strategy documents) included a reduction in mental health disorders, a reduction in teenage pregnancy, fewer persistent school absences, fewer children in care and fewer child protection plans.

Longer-term, several LAs identified a need to improve their data collection around family stability to support evaluation of the longer-term impacts of LFO provision. There was a view that LAs had some performance data but that this needed to be tested and used better, particularly around early intervention and evaluation.

## 6.2.2 Sharing Learning

<u>Benefits of sharing learning</u>

The benefits of greater opportunities to learn about others' LFO strategies were mentioned by research participants. It was anticipated that this would be useful for 'cross-fertilisation' and exchange of ideas, as well as the identification of potential barriers. Although it was recognised that LFO strategies needed to be tailored to local circumstances, it was still felt that sharing of ideas would be very worthwhile, as it was sometimes possible to apply the 'essence' of what other LAs do.

Respondents said that if LAs could learn from past examples and hear testimonials from other LAs on what they've gained from the LFO, and share evidence and experiences then this would generate more engagement. It was felt that LAs working together, being buddied up, or meeting up at events would be something other LAs would be willing to get on board with.

Coaches felt that there was a grass-roots demand for this type of project as lots of people were working in this policy area and appreciated the encouragement and approval provided by this programme. They were optimistic that awareness would spread across LAs through media, conferences and networks, and said there was more scope to build on the work done and to build engagement and interest. They felt that in the next stage of the programme there would be a real opportunity to mobilise demand more broadly across the system.

<u>Levels of knowledge sharing</u>

At the time of the qualitative interviews[17], it was felt that there was not enough sharing of learning between the LAs participating in the LFO pilot, with a lack of knowledge about the plans and strategies that other LAs were developing within the pilot.

It was suggested that whilst it was a helpful idea in theory for LAs to learn from each other and make links, sometimes in practice this was difficult to make happen due to different priorities and pressures. There was also some concern that LAs were competing for funding, and would potentially lose out if another LA took on the same idea. This perception was not in line with the policy intent of LFO. The short timeframe of the pilot was also raised as a potential limitation to opportunities for sharing learning.

To facilitate shared learning from the pilot, LAs suggested that it would be useful to have a LFO 'knowledge hub' established by DWP or developed locally. It was suggested that this could be used to share the LFO strategies developed by each LA. It was also recommended that learning should be shared incrementally at each stage of the pilot, as LAs developed their strategies[18].

## 6.3 Views on DWP's role in supporting LAs in expanding relationship provision

The relationship between DWP and the LAs was raised by interviewees, though views were mixed on what that relationship should, and did, look like.

One view was that the existing relationship between DWP and the LA needed to be built on; by doing this they felt it would increase the buy-in within their LA. Others felt that there were different ways in which the DWP could work together with LAs,

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[17] The qualitative research was undertaken relatively early in the LFO. As the pilot progressed, more structured learning opportunities were facilitated by DWP to enable sharing of best practice and lessons learned.

[18] The Early Intervention Foundation Resource Hub was subsequently developed to meet this need.

although the examples respondents gave were vague. For example, one respondent thought that there was a role for central government, but it was for them to devolve and delegate the work to the LAs so that LAs have ownership to design and deliver their own services. The role for the central government more generally was seen to be about supporting local partnerships, conducting evaluations to capture people's experiences and sharing the evidence nationally.

However, others queried whether the DWP sat in the right place to run the pilot. It was felt that the DWP and central government were more widely removed from delivery on the ground. Others felt DWP needed to be more aware of the work LAs do, the context that LAs were working in, and the complexities they faced. Others suggested a more joined up approach between different government departments on family support, nursery provision, and the review of early years funding.

Some LAs felt they could be further supported by the DWP with increased levels of funding to, for example, upskill their staff to support cultural change and make relationship support a priority for the wider workforce. Conversely it was also argued that money was not always the answer and that it was about getting the system to operate effectively.

Creating a culture change within local government to prioritise the importance of relationship support emerged as a key theme from LA staff. Suggestions were given for the government to use media advertising and mass communication to ensure that information was widely available and couples' relationships were on the agenda. Mixed views emerged with regards to cross-government targets and whether this would support the prioritisation of relationship support, or whether the focus should instead be on behaviour change. It was also suggested that if DWP really did want to make relationships an integral and important part of service provision then targets should be locally contextualised and be embedded into LAs' commissioning programmes.

Coaches were wary about central government setting targets for LAs. They felt that whilst it was important to measure and evaluate the impact, targets distorted the space for meaningful intervention. Targets were viewed as limiting and coaches warned that there was a danger that they led people to focus narrowly on only those

outcomes that are being measured. They felt that serious thought needed to be given about how best to balance the need to have evidence and giving people space to interpret. It was suggested that targets from central government often undermined local buy-in, context, and knowledge, and so DWP should instead support LAs by being flexible and not too prescriptive.

## 6.4  Summary and key learning

- **Interviewees generally felt that the pilot model was implemented successfully, it had raised the profile of supporting relationships and put it on LAs' agendas**. It encouraged them to think in new ways and provided credibility to carry out work to support couples' relationships.

- **Sharing of learning between LFO LAs and more widely was seen as having real benefits, particularly for the longer term**. At the time of the research this was not necessarily being maximised though LAs were conscious of the potential benefits this would bring.

- **Generally it was felt that central government should continue to work with LAs to expand support for relationship issues, although views on what this should look like were mixed.** It was felt that this work should not all be outsourced to LAs – central government has a role to play in providing leadership and ideology. LAs were generally wary about the introduction of central targets in the area of relationships, although it was suggested that locally-relevant targets could help.

# 7 Conclusions

## 7.1 **The pilot and its successes**

This research has examined the views and experiences of 14 Local Authorities who participated in some or all stages of the LFO pilot.

The pilot was implemented via a staged process consisting of an opportunity assessment, theory of change and strategy development. At the end of the process LAs were encouraged to apply for DWP grant funding (seed funding) to implement their strategies. Participating LAs were offered free access to consultative support during the course of the pilot. LAs were also offered free access to Parents as Partners training to enable front-line practitioners to help parents improve the quality of their relationships. The model led to the development of provision encompassing workforce development, delivery of relationship services/programmes, and systems changes.

Core elements of LFO design and delivery that were generally considered successful were:

- **Staged process for developing provision**, for example, structured in terms of opportunity assessment, theory of change and strategy development; informed by consideration of the evidence-base

- **Consultative support (coaching) and events** to engage LAs and improve the quality of provision

- **Culture change and workforce development** to increase staff awareness of the evidence base around relationships and how to offer support

- **Introduction of relationship programmes/services and development of referral pathways**

## 7.2  Key lessons for the future

A number of 'critical success factors' also emerged through the research that should be considered as part of any future work to support local provision for improving couple relationships.

- **Ensure an integrated strategy approach**: this work should be considered as cross-cutting in that it extends across a number of LA departments and key partner agencies (for example, early help / children's and family services / social care / health / housing services), partners and stakeholders.

- **Develop provision as a multi-agency offer** to ensure well-integrated services, referral pathways, and workforce development that spans across all relevant services.

- **Identify a senior LA lead as point of contact, with a remit to engage others as appropriate**, for example, to increase support and commitment to agenda and expose senior staff to the evidence base.

- **Consider developing and implementing provision at opportune times**, for example, during periods of LA strategic re-design or service transformation, to maximise strategic fit and increase sustainability of provision.

- **Include a focus on systems changes** as a mechanism to embed provision.

- **Encourage innovation and experimentation to address local needs,** particularly where LAs are faced by significant challenges or populations with high levels of need.

- **Develop an accessible evidence base** to share learning and best practice between LAs and to support wider implementation of relationship services and pathways.

- **Develop robust data collection and evaluation approaches** to measure the impact of provision and sustain buy-in to this agenda.

## 7.3 Policy developments since this research was undertaken

Following the positive response to Phase One of the LFO, a decision was made to extend the trial for a further period, refocussing on reducing parental conflict in response to the newly published EIF report 'What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children?'

The 12 LAs were invited to revise their business plans and apply for further grant funding, with continued support from the coaches. Two of the LAs decided that whilst remaining supportive of the programme and committed to the approach they would not apply for further funding. Ten LAs therefore took part in phase 2, successfully submitting revised business plans to draw down the funding.

At this point we commissioned the coaching organisations to gather insight and feedback from the LFO areas, this is available on their website[19], and was used to inform the case studies in the EIF Reducing Parental Conflict Hub[20].

The second phase concluded in April 2018, with all 10 LAs continuing to integrate services to reduce parental conflict into their family support strategies.

In April 2017, the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme was announced. This aims to encourage councils across England to integrate services and approaches which address parental conflict into their local services for families, and has used many of the lessons emerging from the LFO to influence the current programme. These include:

- The importance of strategic planning and buy-in to provide a framework for change across the wider partnership
- The impact of workforce development to support culture change and empower frontline practitioners to engage parents on this topic
- Availability of effective interventions to support parents

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[19] https://www.innovationunit.org/projects/local-family-offer/

[20] https://reducingparentalconflict.eif.org.uk/

We also learned from the process evaluation which highlighted improvements required in communications and to reduce the bureaucratic burden; this has had a significant influence on the design of the new programme. Nine of the LFO areas are now acting as Ambassadors for the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme.

# Annex A: Summary of LA Interim Evaluation Reports

## 8.1  Introduction

As part of the agreement for LAs to receive grant funding for the LFO, each LA was required to evaluate the outcomes of the provision implemented. This annex summarises interim evaluation findings from the 12 LAs that received grant funding. The LAs have been anonymised in this summary.

**Themes**

The LAs each opted to implement slightly different programmes or interventions as part of their LFO, as well as different combinations of these. Therefore this summary is structured thematically; each section explores different approaches that LAs took as part of their LFO:

- Staff interventions (Section 8.2)

- Parent/couple interventions (Section 8.3)

- System interventions (Section 8.4)

Within each section, the summary discusses what was done, what the reported outcomes were, key challenges and lessons learned.

**Data caveats**

The information presented in this summary has been provided by LAs; therefore, the findings and basic statistics presented cannot - and have not been - independently verified by DWP analysts. Caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings as they are based (in many cases) on small population samples.

LAs took a variety of approaches to gather evidence on their provision for these interim reports. One of the key challenges with any assessment of impact is being

able to attribute changes to a specific set of changes or activities. For example, the evaluation data on staff training courses was taken via surveys after the training had taken place so no comparison between attitudes and views before and after the training can be made.

It is also important to note that this is summary of interim evaluation findings. Findings were supplied by LAs in January/February 2017, approximately 10 months after they received grant funding to implement LFO provision. At this time, LAs had not run their provision nor evaluation strategies to completion. This means that for some of the activities undertaken there was limited or no outcome data available, and no longer term effects could be explored. Some LAs did report that they were planning on undertaking research to explore longer term impacts, but that data wasn't available at the time of these interim reports.

## 8.2  Staff interventions

11 LAs opted to **upskill staff,** often with more than one type of training programme:
- 7 LAs ran OnePlusOne's 'Brief Encounters' training
- 4 LAs ran various programmes focused on more general awareness training

### 8.2.1 Programme: Brief Encounters

**What was this training trying to achieve?**

According to the training providers, OnePlusOne, 'Brief Encounters' is an evidence-based training programme that prepares professionals to use a brief, solution focused, intervention framework designed to:
- Recognise the signs of relationship distress at an early stage
- Respond effectively and help partners understand what is happening and how they might be able to find their own solutions
- Review actions and refer where appropriate

**What was the approach?**

The course was delivered to practitioners in 7 LAs over 4 sessions, or full day training courses.

**Reported outcomes**

There was a range of available information on outcomes, with some LAs reporting they were in the process of commissioning the training and others having completed training for around 100 staff.

In several LAs where data was collected and analysed, an increase was seen in the self-reported confidence, knowledge and abilities of practitioners who had undergone the training. For example, after the training, professionals (for example, frontline workers such as those in early help services, GPs, midwives and health visitors) reported that they felt more confident in helping a parent deal with a problem in their relationship and felt more likely to ask questions about a parent's relationship with their partner if the practitioner suspected there were difficulties.

Feedback on the training course was also positive with the vast majority (100% in some locations) of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the training was appropriate, relevant to their work, enhanced their understanding and developed their skills. The majority agreed or strongly agreed that the training increased their confidence. Some of the practitioners found the training too basic and requested more in-depth training. In addition, some practitioners with more experience in supporting families felt the training could have been condensed into half a day and been more tailored to their particular needs.

The E-Learning had mixed feedback: it was felt in one LA that non-interactive E-learning had its place as a back-up or as a refresher. More interactive E-learning, with questions and video clips for example, was seen to be much more engaging.

**Challenges**

LAs identified various challenges to both delivering and measuring the impact of this training effectively:

- One training session was hampered by late arrivals of some of the participants

- Not all delegates were encouraged to fill in the pre and post surveys and at one of the training days none of the paper copies of the surveys arrived at the venue
- In 4 LAs the group of training participants was relatively small therefore it was reported the impact of the training on day to day practice across the LA might have been limited
- People's context of engagement with the work varied, for example, GP versus children's centre family worker
- Differences in training impact between the different professional groups attending the training were observed: non-medical staff who attended gave feedback that although useful, they did not feel that they would be able to apply the knowledge in their work situation

**Lessons learned**

LAs took it upon themselves to learn from the training experiences of staff. In one location, the 'Brief Encounters' training was so popular they ran another 3 training days for staff and commissioned the more in-depth 'Parents at War' training course for staff, providing more practical skills-based training. This course was also reported to have positive feedback and evaluation scores, and was perceived as being good value for money to commission.

Where feedback was mixed on the training course, specifically where it was seen to be more relevant to some participants' job roles than others, one LA had used this to influence the approach to future workforce training on inter-parental relationship skills.

## 8.2.2 Programmes: Think Couple, You, Me and Baby Too, Couple Conflict

**What was this training trying to achieve?**

Four LAs did some general staff training aiming to build knowledge and understanding across their workforce. The training was also designed to raise awareness of the importance of parent/couple relationships and to highlight the services available for referring or signposting parents to.

Two LAs included in their staff training the 'Think Couple' course, run by Tavistock Relationships.

In one LA, staff also undertook a course which aimed to help them embed key relationship messages into existing antenatal provision. The 'Me, You and Baby Too' course set out to increase practitioners' understanding of the importance of parent/couple relationships and to improve practitioners' ability to recognise, respond to and signpost couples experiencing relationship distress, as well as to help practitioners feel confident to deliver training about relationships to parents.

**What was the approach?**
This more general awareness raising was done via information workshops, delivered by Senior Practitioners, to staff identified by the LAs as those best placed to implement these new skills and knowledge into their practice.

The Tavistock Relationships 'Think Couple' course was delivered to frontline staff as a one day skills-based training course aimed at frontline staff such as midwives, health visitors, early years support staff as well as others.

The 'Me, You and Baby Too' course was delivered to practitioners who were providing antenatal provision in the LA.

One LA decided to build on the 'Think Couple' training directly and commissioned a more in-depth training course for practitioners from Tavistock Relationships called 'Couple Conflict'. The training was designed to improve awareness and understanding of relationship and couple dynamics in the context of couple conflict.

**Reported outcomes**
Large numbers of staff (at least 180) attended workforce development sessions and general awareness workshops in several LAs. Feedback from these sessions was positive, with practitioners reporting that they: felt more confident in recognising relationship difficulties, felt more informed about the causes of relationship difficulties, were more likely to ask questions, and more confident in helping people

experiencing relationship difficulties. Further feedback from those that delivered some of the general training was that practitioners would have welcomed additional/refresher training to support them in this work. At the time of these evaluations, LAs had made plans to build upon this work and some had planned further training sessions.

For the (over 200) staff that attended the 'Think Couple' training course the reported results from the course were increased awareness and understanding of relationship issues and family dynamics. Feedback from participants was positive with staff saying that they were keen to implement the training in their everyday work with families and were planning on sharing their learning with colleagues. The LAs identified that staff felt they would benefit from further training in this area, in particular: more skills-based learning, practical examples and cultural differences, and sensitive topic areas to encourage parents' engagement.

The impact of the 'Couple Conflict' course was also reported to be positive with participants stating that they had improved awareness and understanding after receiving the training. When asked, the majority of staff said they planned to apply their new learning to their practice.

One LA reported an increasing number of referrals of parents to further support from their staff (as opposed to self-referrals) and they were working with Relate to identify those staff members.

**Challenges**

- LAs were aware of some of the shortcomings of the training they offered to staff and used feedback from the courses to modify the content of subsequent courses
- Changes made included grouping staff by job role instead of offering the courses as multi-agency, with the intent that this would make for more effective learning
- One LA noted that awareness raising sessions had less success (as indicated by a pre/post evaluation tool) within wider family support teams as most referrals of parents to further support came from early years practitioners

**Lessons Learned**

According to one LA, having relationship sector specialists deliver the training was welcomed by the practitioners who received training. This same LA noted that they needed to be realistic that workforce development was not just short-term training that participants found useful, but was about meaningful training that leads to long-term change.

# 8.3  Parent/Couple interventions

10 LAs ran a variety of **programmes for parents**:
- 6 LAs ran Parents as Partners training.
- 6 LAs ran programmes on couples counselling.
- 2 LAs ran bespoke programmes focusing on improving fathers' recognition and prioritisation of their child's needs on the arrival of a new baby, with one of these LAs reporting plans to integrate resources into their existing "Dad's Nurture" programme for parents.

## 8.3.1 Programme: Parents as Partners

**What was this programme trying to achieve?**

The Parents as Partners programme focuses on developing parenting skills within the context of systemic theory. It aims to help parents improve their relationship with each other for the benefit of their children, designed to increase children's success and well-being. The course looks at the whole family, not just at parent-child interactions and parenting skills. The group helps parents to reflect on their relationship, their individual sense of well-being and exploring family patterns that have been passed on through generations, as well as improving their parenting skills. The stated aims of the programme include supporting and strengthening the family unit and improving family relationships.

**What was the approach?**

6 LAs opted to offer a Parents as Partners programme for families needing support in their area. Some LAs had a specified target group for whom the course was aimed

at; others developed referral routes (such as providing training or workshops to facilitators or recruiting a family case worker dedicated to support the programme) through existing systems of provision.

**Reported outcomes**

The initial course take-up volumes were judged to be relatively low. One LA reported a ratio of 4 referrals to one take-up of the programme; from 80 referrals, 20 parents started the course. Similarly, in other LAs the number of couples going through the course was low with 6 out of 7 participating couples completing in one location and 5 couples finishing the 16 week course in another location.

However, there were also examples that indicated long-term benefits and sustainability of the programme. One LA reported a 100% retention rate on the course and that the parents had set up a social media group and were meeting regularly for peer support after the course had been completed. In another LA, reported outcomes included improvements in communication skills in parenting and co-parenting skills, and reduced parental conflict, as indicated by the ENRICH, PHQ-9 and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) outcome tools. Reports using the SDQ suggested an improvement in children's behaviour.

**Challenges**

There were a number of challenges reported by LAs when it came to delivering and evaluating the Parents as Partners course:

- Different LAs reported the same problem of getting both parents to attend the course – which was an established requirement of the programme. According to several LAs, in numerous cases only one parent was willing to attend the course whilst the other was not
- In some cases only one parent spoke good English, which was an additional barrier to recruitment
- Low recruitment and retention was also attributed to couples considering the topic of relationship issues as private. It was reported that some parents had such distress in the relationship that they withdrew from the programme

- Recruitment also took a long time in some locations in terms of securing parents who were in the target group and were willing to commit to the programme

- One LA reported some confusion over the aims of the programme and the need for parents' consent which resulted in a list of referrals to the Parents as Partners programme which did not meet the eligibility criteria or where parents were unwilling to commit

- Arranging a venue which had in place appropriate child care facilities was reported as difficult, as well as a place where both parents were able to get to. One LA pointed out that one of the sessions on the course was a split session and required 2 extra separate confidential rooms, which they managed to negotiate at the last minute

- Timing was an issue mentioned by more than one LA in relation to school holidays needing to be factored into sourcing appropriate venues.

- Commitment from both parents to attend the16 weekly 2-hour sessions was also a challenge

- One LA reported that they had not factored in contacting the parents to remind them of the weekly sessions and that this contact often turned into situations of workers needing to provide immediate support to the families who were experiencing relationship distress

- The impact on staff was mentioned as a challenge by some LAs, as the Parents as Partners programme provided an extra workload to staff. Concerns were raised by staff around managing their workload and according to one LA this programme cannot be considered a bolt-on to a worker's main job role

- Evaluation resources proved a problem in one LA as the pre and post course measures of evaluation were being done by Tavistock Relationship and the LA had not been sent the post-programme evaluation forms so evidence on outcomes had not been collected at the point of writing the evaluation report

**Lessons learned**

The LAs were clear in setting out how they were going to address the challenges they had faced in delivering this course going forwards. Timing, venues, and staffing

resources were discussed in the evaluation reports with recommendations for what would be done differently next time, such as factoring in timescales for sourcing venues and arranging child care provision, as well as managing staff workloads.

The issue of recruitment was being addressed by several LAs: for example, by widening the criteria of eligible parents able to go on the course or adapting some of the course material such as re-writing hand-outs to cater to language and disability barriers. For several, they were reviewing the path of referral to the course.

## 8.3.2 Programmes: Couples counselling and other relationship programmes

**What were the aims and approaches?**

<u>Couples counselling</u>

LAs adopted a range of different approaches when offering relationship support provision. A number of LAs introduced couples counselling as provision in their area. The aims were to provide evidence based relationship counselling for families in order to improve the relationship quality, stability, and improvement, as well as improving the overall family functioning and providing safer, nurturing environments for children.

Some LAs targeted families they were already providing the support to, in particular those who had complex presenting needs, including those who had a child with special educational needs or disabilities and those living in temporary accommodation. One LA offered a bespoke intervention service, designed with experts in the parenting field, for parents in relationship difficulties. It applied counselling and coaching methods to respond to parents with complex problems.

<u>Other relationship programmes</u>

One LA focused their programme of support around fathers and their families and aimed to reduce the number of violent incidents between couples, reduce the number of child protection plans required for children in participating families, and increase the number of families with both parents having unsupervised contact with

their child. One to one sessions were also offered, aiming to build trust and confidence in young fathers to enable them to share their experiences to ensure the programme achieves the best outcome for young dads. Alongside this, the LA also offered a specific programme for young mums affected by domestic abuse. This was a weekly support group for young mothers who had experienced domestic abuse or were in abusive relationships.

One LA linked key workers to a pupil referral unit which piloted a co-parent intervention with school staff and families. This LA also worked closely with prison key workers in a prison to develop co-parenting interventions to support prisoners and their families.

**Reported outcomes**

One LA that offered couples counselling reported an improvement in the psychological distress of the parents and an improvement in the communication between couples. Similarly, a different LA reported positive shifts in the personal and family lives of parents who completed the programme. In particular, the outcomes suggested that the programme may have alleviated symptoms of parents' psychological distress, and equipped them with ability to better regulate their own feelings and reactions in light of relationship challenges.

In an LA where frontline staff had been specifically trained to initiate conversations about relationships with the people who used their services (and subsequently signpost them to services appropriately), they reported that out of 42 customers who received an in-depth conversation, 35 of these had talked about relationships and signposting and there were 7 referrals to early help. They also reported 154 hits on their self-serve website which had been introduced. The LA also reported that there was an improvement in the quality of couple and inter-parental relationships among participants of an intensive 'Parents as Partners' support programme, although the evidence given for this refers to outcomes such as the number of parents from the group finding work or receiving help with budgeting, rather than measured relationship outcomes.

Another LA reported 22 referrals to mediation and counselling services offered, however, at the time of the evaluation report only 3 families had part-completed the courses (partial completion was due to lack of engagement with one party), and 4 families made it through full courses. According to the LA, the early indicators – percentage change in CORE distress points following counselling, and percentage change in professional assessment of relationship following counselling and mediation - were positive however, the full evaluation had yet to be completed.

The LA that focused its provision around young fathers reported positive outcomes where the dads were engaged and motivated by the programme, able to establish trusting relationships with their co-parents and wider family network, and both parents demonstrated positive, child centred parenting. Child outcomes were also measured with results reported as an increase in the number of families with both parents having unsupervised contact with their child and a reduction in the number of families participating in the programme whose children had a child protection plan.

**Challenges**

The LAs faced similar challenges whereby they struggled to recruit parents to the programmes and had low referral rates. Some suggested reasons for this were:

- The confidence of staff was low when it came to identifying risk and prioritising families needing additional support
- The offer was insufficient for families who required a more graduated response
- A lack of understanding amongst staff of the compelling evidence behind interventions aimed at reducing parental conflict
- Also mentioned was the time pressure frontline staff were under to complete assessments, often denying them of the opportunity to hold conversations about relationship issues
- Additionally, for those LAs that targeted certain groups of parents, they reported that their criteria excluded many families from accessing support
- Staff capacity was again mentioned as a challenge with one LA citing the number changes to their service in the past 12 months. Limited staff capacity

was seen to reduce employee engagement in the development and delivery of new provision, which may have hindered LAs' outcomes of the pilot

- The level of missed counselling appointments was raised by LAs as a challenge. According to one LA, clients' personal problems restricted them from attending the course, although a different LA reported that feedback they had received did not give a clear answer as to why a high level of sessions were missed

- Venues were again listed as a challenge for the LAs' provision, school holidays proving an obstacle when it came to booking suitable spaces

- One LA admitted that they had underestimated the amount of time needed to establish their provision which meant that their programme was slow to start and consequently they do not have any data for evaluation yet

- The methods of evaluation were also mentioned as a challenge as one LA reported that the use of questionnaires was a barrier for some couples participating due to the amount of form filling they were required to complete

**Lessons Learned**

To improve recruitment and referrals onto the programmes, LAs took steps to widen the eligibility criteria for the courses they offered.

The LA that provided support to young fathers identified the challenges and outlined plans to mitigate them going forwards. Some of the improvements proposed included providing additional support to the fathers and their families which is outside of the standard model. This requires further intensive support from staff which would have cost implications, but the LA felt that it would be worth it to achieve the potential positive outcomes.

Evidence gathering was raised as an issue by some LAs who reported that they were reviewing how they captured information about the needs of families at the assessment stage but also how they effectively measured the outcomes of the interventions they had employed as part of their LFO.

## 8.4  System interventions

11 LAs implemented **system changes**. Key common changes included**:**

- Clarifying and standardising referral pathways
- Assessment changes and embedding conversations about relationships into front line delivery
- Collaboration and partnership working

It is worth noting that although various system changes were reported, many of these were not evaluated to the same extent that staff and parental interventions were. Therefore the following section synthesises what the LAs did with regards to systems changes, but provides relatively limited information on outcomes, challenges and lessons learned.

### 8.4.1 System Change: Referral Pathways

**Aims and approaches**
Several LAs had made changes to the referral pathways to make them easier to navigate and to increase awareness amongst practitioners of the various services available to parents, whilst also ensuring that referrals were better targeted and more suitable to parents. Various different approaches were taken in improving referral pathways by LAs.

One LA marketed the LFO and provided materials, along with intentions towards digital publication of those materials, in order to inform practitioners of the various services available. Improving signposting became a key feature of this LA's implementation of their provision.

Referral pathways were also redesigned to help improve their efficiency and appropriateness. One LA that had implemented the 'Parents as Partners' programme outlined a referral pathway as part of the training of its facilitators, with the programme also integrated into referral processes across the LA. The LA had also established and promoted a 'couple therapy' pathway, with a "menu" of therapy

options that were accessible to potential users of the service, and those who could make the referral. Furthermore, the LA had established a directory for relationship services, further ensuring that there were accessible and clear referral pathways for those involved in services relating to the LFO.

Disseminating referral criteria to the agencies who made referrals a part of staff training was adopted in various other LAs. This raised awareness of different programmes and the new referral processes, and also ensured that appropriate referrals were made, especially in the light of changes to referral pathways.

Several LAs designed and implemented a toolkit as another approach of raising awareness and disseminating information to practitioners. This aimed to improve the quality and number of referrals, as well as standardise pathways around users' needs. The promotion and training of the toolkit often included workshops to familiarise and upskill staff in the use of the toolkit, and begin the implementation of its use in day-to-day operations. These toolkits were also intended to include broader information and training materials in, for example, identifying intimate partner violence in young couples.

Another LA sought to standardise the pathways and referrals by undertaking a pathway mapping exercise for practitioners, to encourage them to reflect more on interpersonal relationships when having discussions with couples and consider the best course of action.

One LA established targeted referral pathways to focus on groups which were less likely to engage with the services available, and to increase the number of referrals to suitable services. This LA also sought to stop what they termed a local 'referral culture' by ensuring that any referrals were appropriate for each parent and part of a coordinated and wider package of services that was being used, rather than referrals being seen as the only option for support. Similarly, another LA planned to ensure that practitioners were able to provide relevant and immediate support to couples as an alternative to referring them elsewhere when appropriate.

Another LA developed a Parenting and Relationship Hub which aimed to offer advice, support and access to programmes when parents sought to strengthen their relationship. One LA provided a web offer to coincide with the beginning of their other provision.

Joining up early help and family support services or embedding programmes within existing early years provision was recorded by the LAs as working well; it offered a joined up, whole family approach. Staff were able to share and discuss ideas and learn from each other's approaches. Several LAs also mentioned that they had been sharing best practice learning amongst themselves.

**Reported outcomes**

The measuring of outcomes for changes in the referral pathways was limited, largely due to many of the changes being only implemented for a short time and measuring the outputs at the time of writing the report was too early.

However, one LA reported that it expected there to be an increase as their directory and publicity continued to be rolled out, with early indicators showing an increase in referrals to services.

**Challenges**

- One LA reported that progress in referrals had been impacted by the delay in the development and implementation of other elements of the LFO, which meant that established partnerships and awareness of services needed to support the new referral pathways could not be established as early as planned.
- Another LA experienced low referrals in the evaluation phase, which it attributed to 2 key factors: a) practitioners' confidence in being able to hold conversations about parental support on the front line and b) parents not being ready or willing to accept a referral for support. However, it was also suggested that practitioners were 'holding' possible cases that could be referred, using some of the conversation techniques and resources provided at the training.

- Another reason attributed to the lack of referrals was the lack of time that couples had to spend with practitioners, which was suggested to mean that the practitioners may not have been getting to a point where they could talk with parents about their relationships, and subsequently offer services to them if appropriate.

- One LA reported that it was challenging to decide on the level of detail their 'toolkit' of resources should provide as there would be different levels of practitioners accessing it. The LA reported however that they were going to use staff engagement and regularly update the 'toolkit' using feedback to help overcome this.

**Lessons Learned**

Various LAs outlined that the pathways system and signposting to other services would be improved in future phases of the LFO. Planned improvements included increasing training, publicity, creating a resource/toolkit and further embedding the system changes over time.

One LA noted the importance of broadening the number of agencies making referrals, and ensuring that referrals did not come from a single agency. They noted that a single agency may not cover the full breadth of people in need of relationship support and would lead to a lack of consistency across LA services.

Another LA listed some of the changes they were planning on implementing as a result of learning from the LFO. These included:

- targeting services working with BME and LGBT groups to share information on services available
- requiring service workers to follow up missed sessions with new referrals
- developing workshops to increase staff awareness and understanding about the benefits of relationship interventions

## 8.4.2 System Change: Assessment Changes and Embedding Conversations

**Aims and approaches**

Other systems changes reported by LAs were modifications to family assessment practices to introduce a focus on the couple or parental relationship. The aims of these modifications were to improve the suitability and swiftness of referrals, and to standardise the agencies to which families were referred, ensuring consistency within the system. Embedding conversations with practitioners worked in conjunction with the changes in the assessment processes, and were a key part of this. Embedding conversations had been undertaken through staff training (see 'staff interventions' section) and awareness-raising, to help embed the change and promote conversations about relationships as a key part of the assessment process.

Several LAs had made alterations to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), or other assessment processes, in relation to referrals of families. Alterations were focussing around prompting practitioners to ask questions about relationships, digitalising them for more efficient use and referral, and generally bringing these conversations forward in the process of engaging with couples and families. There had also been moves across many LAs to ensure the assessments took place as early as possible to ensure swift and appropriate intervention, in some cases renaming the CAF to an Early Assessment Framework. This included changes such as scaling families on various measured aspects, at the point of referral.

One LA had implemented a Family Assessment Tool and designed it with the input of various bodies and practitioners who would be using it, to increase the likelihood of its success operationally. Another LA had redesigned the assessment process to try and bring in the whole family, including children, and ensure that both parents were engaged in the process from the beginning as much as possible. This LA had also designed a 'Level of Need' document to help prioritise resource and, when necessary, ensure intervention with a couple was swifter.

3 LAs incorporated the assessment process as part of staff training to help embed conversations about relationships into frontline support. One LA aimed to provide relationship support more readily by building the skills and confidence of practitioners to discuss relationship issues with families[21]. Another LA reported that feedback from the training would help further introduce the assessment process to practitioners in an effective way.

Various other LAs had sought to embed standardised assessments, such as through the roll-out of toolkits for practitioners, which included prompting questions about relationship and the potential for support.

**Reported outcomes**

The measuring of outcomes for assessment changes and embedded conversations was limited, as it was too early for audits and the impacts of these changes to be reliably evaluated. However, one LA noted that as a result of the training it had used to raise awareness of changes to its assessment frameworks, it had seen increased use by practitioners. Another LA had found that due to increased awareness of its toolkit, staff were more routinely considering couples' relationships as part of their assessments, with their interim results finding that relationship distress was increasingly being identified at the assessment stage.

**Challenges**

- One LA found the new mechanisms were not always being used as effectively as they could be, with inter-parental conflict not being specifically highlighted within assessments/review documentation. The LA stated that as a result they were reviewing their 'Early Help assessment' and identifying how they could ensure identification of need was properly captured and monitored.
- One LA also noted that their referral process may need to be further adapted to ensure parents completed the new assessment form adequately.

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[21] See 'staff interventions' section for further details.

### 8.4.3 System Change: Collaboration and Partnership Working

**Aims and approaches**

Another system change discussed in LAs' interim evaluation reports was increasing collaboration and partnership working across agencies involved with relationship and family support. The aims of these changes were to develop a more effective referral system and to ensure that there was appropriate signposting for couples through close multi-agency collaboration.

One LA reported that links were developed between a GP practice and a local Church's early years group, whose representatives also attended the 'Brief Encounters' training. This was done in order to run a Young Parents Group that would offer advice on a range of health matters, including healthy inter-parental relationships. Another LA reported that 2 key workers were being linked to a Pupil Referral Unit piloting couples co-parenting with school staff and families. They also worked to develop co-parent intervention work with key prison staff to support prisoners and their families.

Another LA had proposed peer support groups for practitioners, delivered by Relate. As a result of a review of their Early Help Services, they had developed a Community Family Hub Model incorporating both their Sure Start offer and their local response to the Troubled Families agenda, demonstrating further collaboration.

One LA established a directory to support collaboration and partnership. The directory aimed to raise awareness amongst practitioners of relationship services available and increase referrals to these services. In addition they established a "Working it out for the kids" dual-use resource – suitable for both practitioners and families – which included service listings and a wide range of on-line information and e-learning options.

**Reported outcomes**

Although there was little in terms of the evaluation of the system changes for collaboration with agencies, the interim outcomes of forming and distributing a

directory was discussed by one LA. They found the wider benefit of the exercise had been to establish new relationships with providers, with an increased mutual understanding between services of what was available. They described this to be a significantly positive outcome.

## 8.4.4 **Other System Changes**

Alongside the key system changes discussed previously, LAs also undertook a variety of other, small-scale system changes to help both with the implementation and evaluation of the first phase of the LFO.

**Feedback processes**

LAs developed a variety of approaches to gather feedback on their approaches to enable them to make refinements over time.

One LA made 2 system changes to assist with the continuing assessment and collation of feedback on the implementation of the LFO:

- Establishing a steering group made up of Council officers. Monthly meetings took place with the responsibility of assessing the progress and performance against the work plan, identifying risks and challenges and agreeing solutions that would support the development and embedding of a local family offer.
- Running focus groups to explore what each service could do to support the inter-parental relationship and what would help practitioners to do this. Learning from this fed into the development of a practical tool to support practitioners in promoting better communication between parents.

Several LAs made system changes with staff, such as the implementation of group supervision and systemic reflections by those involved in the LFO, to gather feedback and improve implementation.

Another LA used a skills audit for its staff to try and discern which areas needed further improvement. The report highlighted, for example, a lack of confidence

around the ability to ask questions on relationships. This, alongside evidence on other skills and needs collated from the audit, were planned to be addressed in future delivery phases.

**Staff changes**

One LA established a relationship navigator role. This was created to:

- Be the point of contact for professionals and practitioners;
- Be able to signpost clients to services available
- Assist with collaboration and joining up services.

At the time of the interim reports, a second LA was planning to establish this role.

# Annex B: Example of qualitative research topic guide

**Local Family Offer: Topic Guide for Local Authority staff**

Estimated interview time: approx. 1 hour

**Aim of the interview:**

To understand the implementation of the Local Family Offer, from the perspective of Local Authority staff.

1. **Interviewee's job role and involvement in the Local Family Offer (10 mins)**
   - Overview of job role and main responsibilities. How does the Local Family Offer fit in with these?
   - Name of directorate/team (that interviewee works in)
   - What stage has the Local Family Offer reached so far?
   - Are any other colleagues involved in the Local Family Offer (at same Local Authority)? How are they involved? What are their job roles?

2. **Views on events and communications (10 mins)**
   - Did you attend the 'kick off event' (1st workshop) in October? <u>If not</u>, were there any barriers to attending? How could these be overcome?
   - Did you attend the 'theory of change' event (2nd workshop) in December? <u>If not</u>, were there any barriers to attending? How could these be overcome?
   - Views on the 'launch event' and 'theory of change workshop'
   - Any views on the communications received from DWP? Any views on the communications received from Innovation Unit?

3. **Views on coaching support (10 mins)**
   - Run through coaching support received
   - What qualities of the coaching support did you find helpful? How could the coaching be improved?]
   - Any ideas for improving stakeholder engagement? Is it better for the coach to work directly with 1 person at each Local Authority or is it better for the coach to work with a wider group of Local Authority staff/stakeholders?

4. **Views on wider roll-out of the Local Family Offer (5 mins)**
   - Views on overall value added (by the Local Family Offer)
   - Views on feasibility of rolling out to other Local Authorities
   - Any recommendations to encourage Local Authorities to take up the Offer in the future?
   - Views on whether it would be useful for Local Authorities to work towards 'targets' on relationship support outcomes? If so, what could these targets be?
   - Suggestions on how Local Authorities could be further supported by DWP to expand their family/relationship support provision

5. **Opportunity assessment (5 mins)**
   - What were the key outcomes of the opportunity assessment?
   - Support provided by coaches at the opportunity assessment stage, and views on this support
   - Views on content of the opportunity assessment
   - Any other suggestions for improvement (in relation to the opportunity assessment)

6. **Strategy development (5 mins)**
   - What has been the focus of the strategy development and why?
   - Support offered by coaches with strategy development, and views on this support.
   - Views on the content of the strategy

- Has the Local Authority introduced any new/expanded relationship support provision yet? If <u>yes</u>, any examples? If <u>yes</u>, any feedback about how this has gone?

- The Local Family Offer was structured in terms of stages (i.e. opportunity assessment, strategy development, grant application). What are your views on this structure?

- Any other suggestions for improvement (in relation to strategy development stage)

**7. Parents as Partners training (5 minutes)**

- Views on whether the Local Authority should deliver the 'Parents as Partners' programme?

- Have you received any communications from the 'Parents as Partners' training providers (TCCR)? <u>If yes,</u> what are your views on this communication?

- Have any front-line practitioners taken up the free 'Parents as Partners' training? <u>If no</u>, any reasons why?

    <u>If yes:</u>

- Any feedback on the training?

- Plans to deliver the 'Parents as Partners' programme locally? Any barriers to delivery?

- Whether trained practitioners have gone on to upskill other colleagues?

**8. Application for grant funding (5 mins)**

- Was an application for grant funding made? <u>If not</u>, were there any barriers to applying? How could these be overcome?

    <u>If yes:</u>

- How will grant funding be used (new provision or expanded existing provision)?

- Views on application process (timescales and application forms)

- Views on information/support provided by DWP and/or coaches

- Any other suggestions for improvement (in relation to grant funding stage)

9. **Key learning - challenges and best practice (5 mins)**

- Any other challenges and key lessons learned (while participating in the Local Family Offer pilot)?

- To what extent are Local Authorities sufficiently learning from each other and sharing best practice? How are they doing this?

- To what extent has the pilot "raised the profile of relationship support" within your Local Authority?

- Can you tell me about your plans to evaluate the new provision(s)? What will the evaluation measure?

- To what extent do you think that the new provisions(s) will impact on families? How specifically do you think this will impact on families?

# Annex C: List of LAs that participated in the pilot

| |
|---|
| Blackpool * |
| Blackburn with Darwen * |
| Chester West and Chester (withdrew) * |
| Croydon * |
| Dorset * |
| Essex * |
| Gateshead * |
| Hertfordshire * |
| Luton |
| Lambeth |
| Manchester * |
| Newcastle * |
| Suffolk (withdrew) |
| Westminster * |
| Worcestershire (withdrew) * |

* EIF Pioneering Places