



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

www.cymru.gov.uk

Evaluation of Jobcentre Plus Advisory Services in Integrated Children's Centres in Communities First Areas

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 33/2012

In 2008, the UK government announced pilots in England to test the effectiveness of local, collaborative work in tackling child poverty. This included the Work-Focused Services in Children's Centres pilot, which sought to engage parents in labour market activity. Jobcentre Plus (JCP) approached the Welsh Government (WG) to identify how the model could be adapted to fit Welsh policy. It was then piloted between 2010 and 2012. The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned to evaluate the Welsh pilot, based on its experience of evaluating the English initiative.

Findings:

- The pilot was welcomed locally and benefited from support provided by Communities First (CF). Parent Employment Advisers (PEAs) rapidly became part of local networks. They added value by providing detailed and specialist advice on employment and benefits issues to local services and parents.
- Evidence showed that pilot targets and aspirations were met. A sustainability assessment led by Jobcentre Plus (JCP) indicated that most parents who found work as a result of the pilot had not returned to claim out-of-work benefits six months later.
- The approach is consistent with the ambitions of Tackling Poverty Action Plan, in respect of multi-agency approaches to poverty relief. In light of the successes, there is strong justification to recommend that the approach is implemented more widely.

The research was carried out to enable WG, JCP and CF to understand the effects of their pilot to deliver employment services in CF areas, within integrated children's centres (ICC). It was based on qualitative research with national and local stakeholders, and a desktop review of pilot documentation and management information.

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Summary

The pilot embedded JCP Advisers (known as PEAs) into ICCs in Community First areas. It was co-funded by JCP and CF. The evaluation took place towards the end of the pilot. Researchers visited two areas, and interviewed local staff and stakeholders and held parent focus groups. In two areas, local staff and stakeholders were interviewed by telephone. Documentary evidence was reviewed and discussions were held with national stakeholders. The report comprises findings about the progress and achievements of the pilot.

Selecting pilot areas and staffing

The ICCs were selected, following consultation between WG and JCP, for their location in deprived communities *and* effective partnership work with CF. This minimised the burden on staff, who did not have to bid to be part of the pilot, as had happened in England. However, it meant that some key partners felt they could have been more involved in the set-up of the model. Most PEAs had experience of outreach work and/or non-customer-facing roles, which was

highly beneficial. Knowledge of JCP procedures was critical. The skills and attributes that were instrumental included a proactive approach, a willingness to integrate into the community, and flexibility in how the role was perceived. The PEA role was a lynchpin of the pilot. In some areas, the person in the PEA role changed during delivery. This could be challenging as new relationships, trust and rapport had to be forged with key agencies and parents. Positively, new staff could bring new skills and attitudes to the pilot.

Early challenges

Early challenges related to the degree that key agencies felt involved in decision-making, although all were supportive of the pilot. Making available private space for the PEAs' meetings with parents also proved challenging, and in one area was unresolved. Local difficulties were encountered in the provision of IT and broadband, although they were resolved. A greater challenge surrounded a lack of clarity about the PEA role, particularly time needed to input information to JCP systems. This was resolved as

local staff better understood the importance of documenting actions.

Importance of Communities First

CF staff were crucial in facilitating PEAs' access to networks of local services, but critically to the engagement of hard-to-reach (HTR) parents. CF Partnerships are trusted in local communities because they are non-statutory organisations. CF took an active role in delivery and marketing the pilot. CF also provided a triage service, directing parents to appropriate support for wider barriers (eg debt management, low confidence) to ready them for employment support. The English pilots lacked these local connectors. Their evaluation suggested that areas most successful in reaching HTR parents were those where relationships between the adviser, ICC and community outreach organisations were stronger. In Wales, CF networks speeded progress since PEAs could build on existing strong relationships.

What delivery entailed

PEAs spent a couple of days each week on outreach and networking. With their remaining time they

delivered work-focused interviews (WFIs), drop-in sessions and completed paperwork. PEAs noted that community work required a different approach from the standard JCP model: drop-in appointments were introduced in light of demand, and some WFIs were delivered as group sessions, an approach which was innovative and effective. PEAs got involved in local committees (eg CF partnership boards), which meant that they became part of local support networks which could promote referrals to the service. They could also network informally with parents, reducing anxiety about employment services ahead of access. Lastly, it emphasised their role in the community rather than as a member of JCP. The value of this should not be underestimated: it allowed PEAs to build supportive and trusting relationships with families, encourage parents to access employment support, and tackle negative perceptions of JCP. The main demand came from parents, not all on jobseeker regimes. Some parents received employment support allowance (ESA); some were not claiming and were

potential second earners who, if working, could increase family resources. Word-of-mouth referral was critical to engage HTR parents – particularly those who lacked basic literacy skills and struggled with written communication – as were outreach activities and the support of CF staff. Where parents were not engaging, some inertia was apparent. This related to a lack of confidence, particularly among parents with multiple barriers and unemployment of lengthy duration. Better off calculations (BOCs), WFIs and drop-in sessions were popular services. The continuity of support was appreciated by parents who built a rapport and trust with PEAs. The pilot's services were felt by one ICC manager to complete their offer: it was the final piece in a suite of services covering training, debt and childcare advice along with resources – libraries and toy libraries. In this respect, the pilot set-up is consistent with aspirations noted in the Child Poverty Strategy (2011) and the Tackling Poverty Action Plan (2012).

A role for targets

In contrast to the English model,

the Welsh pilot had targets. These provided a guide about expected outputs and for monitoring progress. Targets were achievable, which was important. It allowed PEAs to spend time with most HTR parents, rather than only focusing effort on parents who were easy to support into work or training. Staff reported that targets had been exceeded, which gave PEAs a sense of achievement. Some issues raised about the targets included whether they sufficiently linked to pilot objectives; were discrete outputs; and led to the recording of outputs that would have not happened without the pilot. These factors should be considered in future schemes.

Partnership working

Partnership working was a strong feature of the pilot and local relationships were strengthened. PEAs were welcomed into local networks and became an effective part of them. There were numerous examples of handovers between the pilot and different support services. Informal marketing approaches were effective in engaging parents. These required a proactive approach from PEAs;

being outgoing and confident to get involved in informal discussions were crucial attributes. Staff felt there could have been more marketing materials to raise the pilot's profile with local services and provide 'branding' at local events.

Benefits and impacts

Parents reported increased confidence stemming from a relationship of trust with PEAs. They much preferred to receive employment support in the child-friendly environments of ICCs and CF. A small number of parents may have withdrawn from ICCs because of the JCP presence. Staff believed this related to fraudulent benefit claims. While it is unknown whether this small group would re-engage with the ICCs, the evidence suggested that support from CF could help. PEAs helped to reinvigorate some employment services offered by CF, and bring a closer focus on employability in training. While some parents (leisure learners) were not convinced of the benefits, there was ongoing effort to find the right balance between employment- and leisure-related learning, as it is

important in tackling poverty that employability skills and attributes are developed. PEAs identified and plugged gaps in local provision, particularly in pre-entry level basic skills training. This is a critical outcome and contributes to the Tackling Poverty Action Plan. Their work in the community made it easier for PEAs to identify HTR families and increased JCP's knowledge of these families and their barriers.

Critical success factors

Critical to success were PEAs who were friendly, approachable, and knowledgeable about benefits and JCP processes, proactive, flexible and creative. CF partnerships and ICCs were instrumental in facilitating access to local networks and HTR families. The combination of the three agencies working together was highly effective. The strength of relationships meant that challenges were overcome. The evidence suggested that the pilot exceeded its numeric targets and achieved its aims. A sustainability assessment indicated that most parents who moved into work following PEA support had not returned to claim out-of-work

benefit six months later. The combination of service elements – tailoring and personalising support, and helping parents to develop a greater sense of self-efficacy – were instrumental.

Recommendations

The pilot gained considerable support and was valued. If the approach is rolled out, the evaluation recommends:

- **Early, and ongoing, communications to ensure all key agents feel involved.** Co-location and multi-agency working are key principles in relation to Child Poverty; ensuring that partners feel actively involved ensures effective collaboration.
- **Design-in local flexibility** since this strongly contributes to effective joint working.
- **Set achievable targets** to provide a guide to expectations and allow PEAs time to work intensively with HTR parents.
- Offer **in-work support to parents** to help them remain in work and to promote greater financial security for families, contributing to the relief of poverty.
- **Selection criteria for PEAs should include skills and**

attributes associated with outreach/ community work and knowledge about JCP procedures.

- **Consider resources from the outset:** private space for meetings with parents, IT and some marketing materials.
- Build in **opportunities for communication between office- and community-based JCP staff**, enabling more JCP staff to visit the ICCs to increase the learning that JCP can gain.
- **Encourage PEAs to get involved in the community** (eg, to sit on ICC or CF boards) to resolve any cultural dissonance between organisations and create a shared sense of purpose.
- Scope local **training provision**, map this to the needs of the local community and seek to plug gaps through new commissioning (if possible). This will help local areas respond to the principles of the Tackling Poverty Action Plan.

Authors: Beth Foley, Helen Stevens and Becci Newton

ISBN 978-0-7504-7970-7