



Evaluation of Rochdale Families Project

Summary of Key Findings and Messages

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Key Messages

1. The Rochdale Families Project achieved positive and significant impacts and outcomes for many family members and agencies

These included the prevention of children being taken into care, reduced police incidents, the prevention of escalating enforcement action and enhanced engagement with education and other services. These outcomes were identified by families, project workers and stakeholders from other agencies and the economic savings arising will offset a large proportion of the project's direct costs. The project had significant hidden impacts in terms of crisis management and progressing soft outcomes such as improved self-esteem, parenting, family dynamics and enhanced domestic environments and financial circumstances.

2. It is possible to identify key success factors and to replicate these factors in future service provision and support to vulnerable families

These factors included the capacity to build engagement and trust with families, including the use of solution-focussed approaches; to robustly assess families and accurately establish their needs; to work with whole families intensively over a sustained period of time; to utilise the perceived independence of the project and personalised budgets; to facilitate families' engagement with other forms of support; and to combine crisis management and direct practical and emotional support with addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability.

3. Many family members will require on-going support, based, holistic, whole family approaches and sustained and proactive multi-agency commitment

Many family members will continue to need further support as significant progress will not always be transformative in the sense of enabling families to become fully self-reliant. This highlights the need for a wide range of agencies to contribute to the support provided to these families and to explore the potential for enhancing the involvement of community members and third sector organisations, for example through the Family Development Project and community champions initiative in Rochdale.

4. The approach and outcomes of the Rochdale Families Project confirms national research evidence and is aligned with the policy direction of the new government

About the Rochdale Families Project

The Rochdale Families Project (RFP) was funded by New Heart for Heywood NDC to complement the support provided by Rochdale Borough Council and other agencies to vulnerable families in Heywood. The RFP was based on a key worker outreach model and was targeted at families designated as 'amber': those at risk of escalating to Child Protection status or becoming subject to involvement in the criminal justice system, further enforcement action and exclusion from education. It was envisaged that the RFP would support up to 28 families. The RFP aimed to enable workers to support families intensively, innovatively and flexibly over a sustained period, including using personalised budgets. The RFP had 10 staff members and supported 18 families, with a calculated direct grant cost per family of £12,544.

Existing Research Evidence and Policy Context

The existing research evidence on intensive family intervention projects suggests that they have generally been effective and have generated economic savings. Key success factors identified included the independence of the projects; the combination of support and enforcement action; multi-agency working; a whole family and holistic approach and the quality and commitment of project workers. The new government has retained a focus on addressing the needs of vulnerable families, based upon early intervention; multi-agency working; promoting the role of family members and expanding the role of non-state service providers. The government had established a new single Early Intervention Grant.

Families' Circumstances and Needs

Each of the families experienced very difficult circumstances and had significant and complex needs. This indicated that referral processes were effective in identifying and targeting support to the appropriate families. However, this also meant that, in reality, many of the families' problems were severe and this often only became apparent after RFP workers had engaged with the families and robustly assessed their needs. The families displayed a range of presenting issues, including anti-social behaviour; weak engagement with education and other services; poor parenting and family dynamics; poor domestic environments and substance misuse. However, these were manifestations of two underlying and inter-generational causes: psychological and mental health difficulties (including the impacts of bereavement, domestic violence and relationship breakdown) and poverty (including debt, rent arrears, lack of access to employment or benefit entitlement and inappropriate housing conditions).

Processes and Partnership Working

The referral and assessment processes were effective in targeting families with significant needs. Referrals were received from a range of agencies, most notably schools. The RFP was able to work in partnership with other agencies, to facilitate families' engagement with other services and in some cases to reduce duplication. However, there were issues about caseloads, sustaining regular communication with some agencies and difficulties in

accessing further specialist support services. There was scope for more enhanced and proactive working with all partner agencies, including the police and registered social landlords.

Impacts and Outcomes

The RFP achieved measurable and transformative outcomes, including prevention of children being taken into care; enhanced engagement with education (attendance, behaviour and attendance) and other services (such as health); reduced police incidents and reduced substance misuse. The RFP also achieved a number of less visible impacts, such as crisis management, stabilising family situations, improved self-esteem and mental health; enhanced parenting, family and social relationships and improved housing and financial circumstances. Agencies including education and social services identified the specific additionality of the RFP providing this support and achieving these impacts.

Key Learning Points

What Works

- The perceived independence of the RFP, as differentiated from statutory services.
- The capacity to work intensively with all family members over a sustained period of time to build up trust, demonstrate commitment and build families' sustainability.
- The ability to robustly assess the needs, dynamics and underlying causes of family vulnerability (linked to continuity of engagement, trust, outreach and home visits).
- A non-judgemental and supportive approach, including solution-focussed methods, allied to assertive and honest dialogue and a demonstrable commitment to families.
- Personalised budgets and practical support to address immediate issues, stabilise families and demonstrate the capacity to help; combined with emotional support and access to specialist services, such as counselling, to address underlying causes.
- Flexibility, innovation and commitment by mainstream agencies to meet the actual and specific needs of the families, as identified by RFP workers.

Barriers

- The entrenched and extensive nature of family problems (often not fully captured in official assessments) and histories of non- engagement and distrust of services.
- The fluidity and fragility of family circumstances and periods of crisis and regression.
- The limitations of the intensity of support and contact, linked to workload models.
- Continuing difficulties in accessing mainstream and specialist support services (including waiting lists, inflexible models of working and threshold criteria).

Recommendations

In presenting these recommendations, we are fully aware of the financial situation facing agencies in Rochdale and the extent and complexity of the problems facing vulnerable families. It is recommended that:

- The key learning points arising from the evaluation, including the additionality and potential economic savings achieved by the RFP, should be disseminated widely to a range of key stakeholders,
- Consideration should be given to how a range of agencies could meaningfully contribute to the future provision of intensive support to vulnerable families. This should include providing financial and/or in-kind resources; developing a pool of workers who can successfully engage with families, assess their needs and link them to co-ordinated multi-agency services; and committing to a more flexible provision of 'mainstream' services to vulnerable families (for example undertaking home visits and reviewing threshold criteria).
- The potential to utilise resources within communities, such as peers, volunteers and local organisations should be explored. The innovative use of counsellors by the RFP, and the Family Development Project and community champion initiatives, provide existing examples in Rochdale that may be built upon.
- Rochdale Borough Council and its partners should continue the expansion of solution-focussed training.
- Rochdale Borough Council and its partners should ensure that they are well placed to access resources from the government's new Early Intervention Grant.
- If resources allow, Rochdale Borough Council and its partners should seek to utilise the in-house evaluation framework developed by the research team to assess the impact and outcomes of future forms of support provided to vulnerable families.

About the Research

The evaluation was commissioned by New Heart for Heywood NDC and Rochdale Borough Council and was conducted by a team of researchers from Sheffield Hallam University between February 2010 and February 2011. The research included literature reviews of existing evidence; longitudinal tracking of 14 case study families; interviews with RFP families, workers, and counsellors; interviews with other key stakeholders; and analysis of quantitative and financial data provided by RFP, Greater Manchester Police and Rochdale Boroughwide Housing.

Further Information

For further information about the research, please contact John Flint: j.f.flint@shu.ac.uk. Eleven research reports produced during the evaluation are available for free download from the evaluation website at: <http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/>.