
NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE CHILDREN'S FUND SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNING POINTS FROM NECF REPORTS ON PARTICIPATION, PREVENTION AND MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

This briefing paper draws together the learning points from the forthcoming reports from NECF. This summary cannot capture all the learning within each of the reports, instead it highlights some points of interest to the different groups engaged with the Children's Fund. The summary identifies emerging learning for those developing policy and practice, further briefings based on each of the reports will be produced, alongside the substantive report on each theme.

Introduction: The Children's Fund

The Children's Fund was established as part of a broad agenda for promoting multi-agency working in preventative services for children and young people at risk of social exclusion. The Children's Fund was introduced across England in three waves from November 2000 to April 2003. The programme aims to address the consequences of social exclusion for children and young people aged between 5 and 13 years. The overarching aim of the programme is to support the development of local partnership working in improving preventative services to enhance children's life chances. The programme is administered by multi-agency partnerships concerned with the welfare of children and young people. There are now 149 multi-agency partnerships each working within a local authority area across England. These partnerships include representatives of the statutory sector, the voluntary sector and local community and faith groups.

The Children's Fund has three guiding principles of prevention, partnership and children and young people's participation. The programme aims to work with, and respond to, local need and context. As a result, the Children's Fund reflects a broad range of structures and services. Children and young people are encouraged to be actively involved in the development and work of the Children's Fund partnerships. Whilst this general expectation is clear, partnerships are encouraged to develop locally appropriate ways of involving children and young people.

The Evaluation

The National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF) was commissioned in December 2002, and will run until the spring of 2006. The evaluation is exploring in detail the effectiveness of the different models of collaboration that have emerged in local partnerships, and the impact of the Children's Fund on outcomes for children. Using the work of Children's Fund partnerships, it is evaluating what works in prevention and partnership working and why. NECF consists of three strands of work. They are as follows.

1. The assessment of impact of the Children's Fund on the prevention of the social exclusion of children and young people.
2. An examination of the processes and structures aimed at the delivery of preventative services and their relationship to the prevention of social exclusion.
3. A system of knowledge management which ensures a responsive two-way flow of information between NECF and its stakeholders.

The evaluation is based at the Children, Families and Communities Research Centre at the University of Birmingham. The first strand of work is sub-contracted to the Bedford Group at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Key Learning Points for National Policy Makers

1. Time

The capacity of practitioners to build collaborative activity, engage children and young people and develop new preventive approaches is influenced both by the historical context in which they are working and the time allowed to establish new ways of working. There was some evidence that the initial round of service commissioning was not entirely satisfactory because people felt they had to move more quickly than they felt was in the best interests of service development. They had not always been able to work out what was needed from a multi-agency perspective and felt rushed into getting things up and running. Compromises over the numbers and forms of participation from children and families were evident. But there was also evidence of learning from mistakes and early experiences. The implications of this is that it is important to recognise that mistakes may be made early on, the key issue is the capacity to learn from these and to have in place robust arrangements for reviewing activity and identifying learning points.

2. From Intervention to Prevention

The extra money from the Children's Fund has not been enough to resolve the 'refocusing debate', i.e. the tensions between present demands for high level intervention and the shift towards more preventative approaches. This has significant implications for the profile of prevention in any

new collaborative arrangements. The Children's Fund was a ring fenced preventative programme - this afforded some protection which may be harder to achieve when it comes to an end.

3. Change and Uncertainty

Changes in rules imposed from the centre and the uncertainty resulting from the absence of guaranteed funding levels for the life of the initiative have had a de-stabilising effect and have been identified as barriers to effective planning and learning. This has also eroded the capacity building work undertaken with the smaller non statutory stakeholders.

Key Learning Points for Those Engaged in Developing and Delivering Children's Fund Initiatives

1. Different Voices, Extended Understandings

The Children's Fund in common with other multi-agency partnership initiatives deliberately brings together people who have different perspectives and experiences. This can be hard because of the diversity of those voices/perspectives, but is both valuable and necessary to understanding the multi-dimensionality of the issues being addressed (e.g. what does prevention mean and how do we develop responses to deal with this). The challenge is not to achieve agreement around limited notions, to settle on a compromise, but to develop extended understandings capable of underpinning a more complete response to the needs of children. For example, our findings indicate the importance of models of prevention based on a multi-dimensional understanding of resilience. Where such understandings exist services are more able to come together to wrap around the child. Some partnerships have seen children and young people's participation in service planning and delivery as a means of building resilience.

It is important that these extended understandings are developed at strategic level in order that an appropriate steer can be given to those engaged in service delivery. But this is not all one way - strategic players can learn from practical experiences of working in new ways at the front line and the extended understanding that flow from this. This requires that there are processes in place for front line staff to share

their learning with those developing and planning services. This also requires engagement with differences and the capacity to deal with conflict and work through it - politeness is not helpful if it masks real differences which can enlarge understanding and suggest new ways forward. At the front line collaboration between practitioners to support the pathways of children and young people was based on explicitness about the particular and different contributions of each service - there were no signs that multi-agency working led to the development of a generic all purpose practitioner.

Different purposes/rationales for children and young people's participation imply different strategies and methods and there was evidence of tension arising from a failure to clarify which purposes were sought in different contexts. Children and young people appear to prioritise a model focussing on building their capacity, confidence and empowerment, whereas the most common understanding of participation amongst strategic players was consultation to improve service planning and delivery. But other models focussing on citizenship and rights were also evident within the partnerships, and there was evidence of children and young people working jointly with providers to design and deliver new services. Some providers appear to fear children's empowerment. Once again, clarity over the nature and purpose of different approaches in different contexts, rather than selecting one 'best' or 'correct' approach is necessary if an overall strategy is to be developed

There is concern that the extended understandings enabled through Children's Fund collaborations are vulnerable, that single service, service led models of commissioning will re-emerge as mainstreaming gathers momentum, and that without clarity of purpose children and young people's involvement in Children's Trusts will not develop.

2. Partnerships as Learning Systems

A variety of learning systems and processes have been put in place, including both formal and informal systems, accessing internal and external resources, and utilising both evidence and experiential knowledge. People identified the

importance of vertical learning - Boards capable of learning from what is happening at the front line, including what emerges from children and young people's involvement in service development and delivery, and developing the capacity to take that elsewhere into the organisations they come from. This is not always evident in practice.

Practical learning is important and systems need to be in place to enable this - for example, if practitioners are to find out about other practitioners who can give support to specific children and young people, information systems which enable people to find out about these other resources are necessary. Learning needs to extend beyond Children's Fund partnerships and create broader systemic change for lessons to stick. One example of learning that has gone on to inform mainstream activity is the way in which the involvement of children and young people in recruiting staff in mainstream services has been adopted in some places.

One value of initiatives like Children's Fund is that it can create 'boundary zones' - spaces between services and at different levels in the system, in which people can learn to work differently.

3. Formal and informal processes

Service providers identified the benefits of formal rules (e.g. Service Level Agreements) to reinforce commitments to prevention and multi-agency working. Strong guidance from the centre is important. But formal rules are not enough and on-going dialogue and support with service providers at all levels is necessary to sustain such commitments. Over-regulation can undermine trust and there is a need for flexibility to ensure services can respond effectively to real life circumstances (e.g. not excluding siblings from services because they are the wrong age). Trust between workers from different agencies can develop in the spaces where they can try out new ways of working. Trust is vital to the development of effective multi-agency working.

4. Old or New Networks

There was evidence that workers were building on existing strengths and networks and using Children's Fund money to augment these. But new formal structures can enable trust to build up and

new networks to be established as a basis from which service providers can create responsive child led packages. These new networks require support - this can come from visiting others trying to work in similar ways as well as from more formal training. The profile of voluntary organisations, often absent from key policy making and planning, within the Children's Fund is seen to have had a positive impact in facilitating the development of children and young people's participation.

5. Partnership Boards

Children's Fund partnerships have put considerable effort into building horizontal collaboration, but had learnt that there will often be a trade off between a prioritisation of representation at Board level and providing a strategic steer. In some cases people have decided that the Board is not the best place for broad representation, including input from children and families, and have sought to ensure strong collaboration in sub-groups e.g. commissioning panels (although there are examples of CYP involvement at Board level and of this impacting on the way in which such meetings are conducted). The role and nature of partnership boards may need to change over time - particularly as the emphasis on mainstreaming grows.

Key Learning Points for Both Policy Makers and Children's Fund Stakeholders

1. What is the Children's Fund?

There is a perception that the Children's Fund is a pot of money rather than a catalyst for change. There was concern that this would lead to a focus on mainstreaming individual services rather than on creating a collaborative network of services, and utilising the Children's Fund as a way of creating spaces where new types of work can be developed and others can learn from this. But expectations of the catalytic effect of Children's Fund need to be reasonable. Levers for reconfiguring services need to be higher up in the system. The learning opportunities presented by the Children's Fund - in terms of collaboration, prevention and participation must be taken seriously if the initiative is to have a lasting impact.

2. Risks and Rewards

Responsive collaborative practice seen as high risk and thus not a priority by practitioners working in mainstream agencies. We know from other work that individuals assess the 'collaborative fit' between new ways of working and the impact this is likely to have on their careers. One implication of this is that encouraging collaborative practice requires rewarding this appropriately.

3. Outcomes and Indicators

People want to know if they are making a difference, but are not clear how to assess this, nor which type of outcomes are going to persuade policy makers of the value of what they are doing. A focus on prevention makes this particularly difficult - it is hard to demonstrate evidence of the non-occurrence of negative outcomes. The concept of 'trajectory' may be a more useful concept than outcome in the case of preventive initiatives with children and young people.

4. Horizontal and Vertical Learning Across Government at all Levels

Many of the learning points emerging from this evaluation reflect learning coming from the national evaluation of Health Action Zones, as well as other research into partnerships, user and community involvement. For example, the de-stabilising effect of rule changes and funding uncertainty; the changes in strategies and in the nature of the leadership required as initiatives like this mature; the danger that relying too heavily on existing networks without creating new ones will lead to inertia; the perception of such initiatives as a source of funding rather than as change agents; and the importance of systems to enable 'bottom-up' learning as Board level is not necessarily the best place to focus user involvement, are all lessons that were highlighted in the HAZ evaluation. One implication of this is the need for improved learning across government departments instigating complex, multi-agency programmes, and for opportunities for those implementing programmes at local level to learn from previous experience. The need for joined up learning across evaluations commissioned by Government is also clearly evident.

NECF: Next Steps

During the second year of the work of NECF the focus will be on the case study activity. The evaluation team has already completed work with six partnerships, a further 12 partnerships will become case study sites in the next 12 months. Alongside this the thematic work of NECF will be considering services to Black and Ethnic Minority Children, Disabled Children, Children at Risk of Offending, Travelling Children and Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children. NECF will continue to produce papers summarising the literature and research relevant to different aspects of the work of the Children's Fund and targeted at different audiences. Preliminary analysis of the impact data will begin in autumn 2004. Early reports of the analysis of the impact data and the thematic work will be produced in 2005.

Additional Information

Copies of this Research Brief (RBX11-04) are available free of charge from DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ (tel: 0845 60 222 60).

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