
OUTREACH TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES - A SCOPING STUDY

Capacity

Introduction

Sure Start Children's Centres and schools offering access to extended activities have a remit to undertake outreach services to engage and support disadvantaged families. This study looked at the ways in which outreach is being delivered by children's centres and schools offering access to extended services; the aims of those leading and managing the work and the skills utilised; the benefits identified by parents; and the arrangements, at local level, to secure a multi-agency approach to outreach.

The study was conducted by Capacity, on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, between August and December 2008. Neither the study nor its findings constitute an evaluation of the settings which took part. Rather, the study attempted to capture a broad spectrum of approaches to outreach, the outcomes which are thought to be achieved and the associated attitudes, beliefs and values which underpin this work. The findings are based on one-to-one interviews with fifty five children's centres and extended services staff, twenty two local authority managers and two hundred and forty two parents; conducted on site in a total of fifteen local authority areas. In addition, the opinions of a further eighty one national and local representatives of statutory and other services with an interest in outreach were captured through focus group discussions.

Key Findings

- Outreach is used as a means of reaching out to and supporting families, making them aware of activities which can help them and providing some of these activities in the home.
- Children's centres and schools successfully engage families who are among those who are considered to be *hard-to-reach*, including families affected by poverty, poor living environments, health problems and other features of social exclusion.
- Those leading and managing the work are committed to supporting families across a wide range of issues, helping parents to deal with problems which may be complex and resistant to solution.
- Parents value the support they receive and are able to describe the benefits for their children and for themselves. A number believe that the experience of family outreach has set their lives on an entirely new track.
- Among professionals, there is a consensus that effective outreach requires particular skills and experience as well as commitment and that it works best where it is supported by good multi-agency partnerships and in particular, by data-sharing. There is also agreement that effective outreach needs to be underpinned by clear aims and measurable outcomes, but the ways in which outcomes are conceptualised vary from setting to setting.

¹ The study does not cover the delivery of health services in the home such as the Healthy Child Programme, general practice, community children's nursing and other domiciliary health services.

- There is general support for the idea of a framework of qualifications relating to outreach. In certain circumstances and with appropriate training and support, parent volunteers make very good outreach workers.
- Children's centres and schools offering extended services have a key role in addressing child poverty. With additional support and guidance, this role could be enhanced.

Background

The Children's Plan, published in 2007, states that:

*Effective home-visiting outreach and other outreach services can make a real difference to families who cannot or choose not to access services, providing important information and access to services such as childcare and family support.*²

The Plan makes specific funding commitments to strengthen outreach family support, including resources to fund two additional outreach workers for each children's centre serving the most disadvantaged communities; funding to support the expansion of parent advisers in schools; and funding for specialist parent advisers in each local authority. Other promised commitments in this area include the development of core principles to underpin effective outreach to children and families, associated training materials, courses and - where needed - funding for courses.

This scoping study forms one strand of a three-year project, led by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), to take forward work on core principles and standards and support for outreach.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of the study were to gather information which would identify and document best practice in outreach and home-visiting services; capture the ways in which outreach is being delivered across a range of Sure Start Children's Centres and schools offering access to extended services; and identify the characteristics of and skills associated with successful outreach. Key questions were:

- Is outreach successful in engaging those who are most disadvantaged?
- What is best practice?
- What are the relevant skills, qualifications and experience for good outreach and what support needs exist?

Methodology

Qualitative case studies were developed with fifteen Sure Start Children's Centres and six schools providing access to extended services. These utilised face-to-face interviews with staff and parents and with local authority officers. The views of other service providers and stakeholders were obtained through national and local focus groups. A literature review formed a further element of the study.

Children's centres and schools offering extended services were identified through a network of contacts as likely exemplars. Parents were selected by settings as representative of users, former users and other parents identified as non-users. Settings were drawn from across all the government regions and served a mix of more and less disadvantaged areas.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings suggest that, overall, the children's centres visited are reaching and supporting families who are in need and who are in what have been termed priority categories. Many have long-term health problems and also have children with chronic health problems or disabilities. Some of those parents are coping with a number of adversities, live in, or have escaped from, violent relationships or are in families where drugs and alcohol are an issue, or lack a permanent home. For many of those families, these difficulties are compounded by poverty.

In a similar way, schools engage disadvantaged families and while family support staff make this engagement more effective, head teachers are closely involved in leading the work.

Centres and schools offering extended services are working with a broad range of partner services and agencies; health and social services are key partners, but the extent of embedding of multi-agency working is variable.

Settings vary in their capacity to evidence their reach to disadvantaged families and document this mainly through case histories; limited use is made of benchmarking tools such as local demographic profiles or population flows. Schools

² Department for Children, Schools and Families. (2007). The Children's Plan

have even less developed systems for recording or analysing data of this kind.

The support provided by settings provides some element of progression; but systems for expressing outcomes or robust links with the Every Child Matters Framework or wider poverty reduction are less well-developed.

Many local authorities are moving towards locality or cluster structures, aligned with health and other services. These are seen as providing a more effective foundation for joint planning and working and as a possible precursor to integration and budget-sharing. Authorities are developing strategic policies for family outreach from children's centres, moving away from the more localised planning and delivery mechanisms which characterised Sure Start. This may include standardised outreach job descriptions, central recruitment and deployment of staff, needs analysis and data management. Some children's centres expressed anxiety that centralised strategies, while increasing cohesion, could erode local responsiveness and the capacity for innovation. Most local authorities and their partners would welcome a tiered framework of qualifications for outreach and guidance relating to standards in outreach work.

A majority of parents interviewed are on low incomes and are economically inactive. A very large majority are mothers, with a significant proportion bringing up children alone. Many have long-term health problems or have children who have additional needs. The frequency of visits and the period of time during which parents are supported is very variable. In some of the centres visited, families receive support from universal health services mainly from health visitors; this will be increased where families need additional preventive interventions, as set out in Healthy Child Programme and they will also receive support from family support outreach workers.³

Parents believe that they have benefited from family support and those benefits relate not only to their children's development and welfare, but to their own well-being, self-confidence and engagement with children's centres and other services. For a significant minority, family support has had a positive bearing on their

involvement in training and steps towards employment.

The types of support which parents believe they most need are someone to talk to, advice and information and practical help. Non-users are aware of the potential of support from children's centres but their first preference would be for a family member.

Although called children's centres, in reality much, if not most, of their work is with parents who are adults. Some of this work might be considered as education, other elements as counselling or, alternatively, advocacy. There may be a need for more support for the workforce for some or all of those areas and there may be scope to further strengthen links, at a local level, between children's centres and colleges and other training providers and with third sector and advocacy and community development bodies. This might be equally applicable to schools offering extended services.

Staff in all settings were clear about the centrality of poverty elimination as a policy goal, but further guidance and support for this, including training, might be helpful. The range of child poverty pilots announced in the 2008 Budget may provide the stimulus and evidence for this, as may the Poverty and Disadvantage strand of work recently initiated by the Children's Workforce Development Council.

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RR116) can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.