

Evaluation of ESF/DWP families with multiple problems/troubled families initiative

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Overview

This short report considers approaches to evaluating the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Families with Multiple Problems/Troubled Families programme. The current government is delivering a wide range of services and support to families in need. The DWP Families with Multiple Problems/Troubled Families programme is one of a number of schemes available to families facing a range of problems. It is a key component of the Government's wider Troubled Families strategy.

Through making use of the data collected by both Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and DWP, and through linking them, it is concluded that a quasi-experimental impact evaluation of the programme, using a matched comparison group design, may be possible. Given the complexity of the programme, its heterogeneity by area and the significant risk that a valid comparison group cannot be identified, a theory-based approach to impact evaluation is suggested as an alternative. It is concluded that a theory-based approach can provide useful evidence of the effects of the programme, but does not offer evidence of impact as compelling as that from experimental designs.

The most important recommendation from this work, regardless of which approach is chosen (quasi-experimental or theory based), is that DCLG and DWP data systems should be designed or altered so that data from both systems can be linked at the level of the individual family member. Moreover, that taken together, it needs to be possible to identify all troubled families (TFs) targeted for support, the identities of the adult individuals within them, the programmes families/individuals are referred to, and the programmes to which referred adult individuals attach. At the time of writing, the DCLG Troubled

Families Team felt that while the proposal to collect data on all adult individuals would be ideal for the purposes of evaluation, this would be too onerous for practitioners and Troubled Families Coordinators. The DCLG team is scoping the possibility of working with a limited number of local authorities to collect data on individuals within families.

Introduction

The DWP commissioned NatCen Social Research to explore potential approaches to evaluating its Families with Multiple Problems/Troubled Families programme. This brief report presents the outcome of this work.

The study comprised a review of programme documents – in the main bids submitted by providers to deliver services through the programme¹ and a series of informal telephone interviews with a range of stakeholders within the Department.

This study aimed to:

- identify the key questions the evaluation should address;
- understand the nature of the services and support that were intended to be delivered through the programme;
- examine how providers proposed to identify and recruit participants;
- explore how providers aimed to track the progress of participants;

¹ Providers were appointed through a competitive tender process to deliver services and support through the Families with Multiple Problems/Troubled Families programme on a prime/sub-contractor model, similar to that adopted by the Work Programme.

- describe the types of data held by the various parties sponsoring and delivering the programme;
- identify any issues for the evaluation; and
- put forward ideas for impact evaluation.

This short study was conducted during a period when the programme had just commenced operation and faced significant challenges. In line with the remit of this study, however, the evaluation ideas discussed in this note assume the programme has reached a steady state, early teething problems have been addressed and the programme is operating more or less as intended.

The intervention

The DWP Families with Multiple Problems/Troubled Families programme is one of a number of schemes available to families facing multiple problems, and is a key component of the government's wider Troubled Families strategy. It is delivered on a regional basis through private/not-for-profit providers on a prime provider/subcontractor basis. Prime providers will be paid by results. Providers put forward progress measures for which they will claim payment during the tender process; these were later refined in discussions with the Department.

The central feature of the programme offer is a key worker, who will devise a package of measures tailored to the needs of individuals and to families in relation to work. A key worker approach appears to be a consistent feature of the programme across providers. A focus on tackling worklessness will be achieved through encouraging job entry or movement toward work. A crucial task is diagnosing barriers to work at both the individual and family levels, and tackling these through developing appropriate action plans.

The provider bid documents reviewed as part of this study were submitted prior to the development of the DCLG's Troubled Families programme, and the introduction of the Troubled Families Coordinator (TFC). The TFC plays a central role in DCLG's Troubled Families programme. DCLG documents suggest that all TFs within a local authority will be enumerated

by the TFC. A proportion of these families will be referred to DWP provision by the TFCs. TFCs are to make judgements as to which TFs are 'stable' and are more work ready, and refer these families to the DWP programme. In discussions with stakeholders, the potential for sequential treatment was mentioned by several interviewees; whereby a family first received support through the DCLG programme, and after 'stabilisation', would move on to the DWP programme.

Evaluation questions

Stakeholders identified a range of both process and impact evaluation questions that the evaluation will need to address. Process questions of interest included:

- How does the process of referring TFs to the DWP programme, via local authority TFCs, work in practice?
- What types of families are being referred to the DWP programme?
- What effect has the types of families participating had on providers and their supply chains?
- How has the composition of the caseload varied between local authorities?
- Do providers maintain a focus on the family unit? Or are services delivered primarily at the level of the individual?
- What constitutes good practice in provision across providers?
- Can examples of good practice be identified?
- Can examples of good practice inform the delivery of services and support elsewhere among providers?

Areas of interest/questions to be addressed through an impact study, include:

- Does the programme reduce the length of time participants spend on benefits?
- Does the programme improve employability?
- Does it raise the probability of employment?

- Are programme participants more likely to take part in training?
- Are programme participants more likely to engage in job search?
- Does the programme lead participants to reduce their general dependence on the state?

Data holdings

The report considers the relevant data held by both DWP and DCLG. During this feasibility study, the system being used by DWP for ESF audit purposes was in the process of being revised. The key change involved the switch to the new payment and referral system – Payment and referral system (PRaP) – from the Contract Funding System (CFS). The key points to note are that a DWP/ESF data source will:

- be based on data from PRaP, Labour Market System (LMS) and the benefits system;
- identify individuals – it will not be possible to identify which individuals are living together as a family; and
- be updated and available on a monthly basis.

At present the DCLG Troubled Families programme is in development. Some initial discussions were held with DCLG analysts in order to get a sense of what relevant data might be available for the evaluation of the DWP programme.

The key link between the DWP and DCLG programmes is the TFC. The TFCs will have a record of all TFs within their area and a record of which families have been referred to the DWP programme. DCLG analysts also mentioned the possibility that TFCs would be asked to collect additional data on each family they enumerate. However, the DCLG Troubled Families Team also felt that while full enumeration of individuals, not just families, would be ideal, it would in practice be too burdensome for practitioners and Troubled Families Coordinators. As a result, the DCLG team is in the process of scoping the possibility of working with a limited number of local authorities who may be asked to collect individual as well as family level data.

Evaluation design options

Two possible approaches to evaluating the DWP Families with Multiple Problems/Troubled Families programme are discussed. The first option involves both impact and process components, though the focus of discussion is impact evaluation. The second option/approach is centred on a theory-based design.

Although programme theory and process evaluation are often closely linked, some advocates of theory-based methods maintain such approaches can be used to assess programme effectiveness and represent not just an articulation of programme intent. Therefore, a theory-based approach offers a potential alternative to impact evaluation based on control/comparison groups. While claiming that ‘causal attribution’ or ‘contribution’ is possible using these approaches, advocates of theory-based methodologies, in the main, acknowledge that they do not provide evidence of causal effects as compelling as that from experimental designs.

A quasi-experimental approach

In reviewing the potential available data and taking and the need to identify counterfactual outcomes, it appears that a potential source for comparisons are those families on the TFC’s list who are referred to, or identified as, potentially benefiting from the DWP programme but who fail to attach to the programme – that is fail to take part. This strategy exploits the fact that participation in the programme is voluntary and that some portion of the target group will fail to take part. However, there are a number of conditions, both practical and analytical, that will need to hold in order for this approach to be valid.

A theory-based approach

Given the potential heterogeneity of treatments and variety in families targeted, the complexity of the programme and the potential challenges in identifying a comparison group, a theory-based approach to understanding the impact of the programme is also considered.

Developing a 'theory of change' can involve making predictions about what a programme will achieve. On the basis of the theory, hypotheses are developed which represent these predictions. Data are then collected such that these hypotheses can be tested empirically.

In relation to community interventions, Connell and Kubisch (1998) suggest that in the following conditions a theory-based approach might provide evidence of effectiveness or impact, where:

- a theory can articulate a plausible causal pathway linking activities with final outcomes;
- activities were implemented as anticipated and at expected specified thresholds/intensities;
- magnitudes of changes and sequencing of short-, medium- and long-term outcomes following activities meet expectations;
- no contextual changes occurred that might act as alternative explanations for the changes in outcomes observed.

In short, attribution of impact is based on the specificity of predictions from the theory and whether any evidence can be found that outcomes have changed in ways consistent with it.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 96 9. Research Report 816. November 2012).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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