

Work-Focused Services in Children's Centres: Final Report

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The 'Work-Focused Services in Children's Centres' Pilot was one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008. It operated in ten local authority (LA) areas in England, providing work-focused services through a dedicated Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser, as well as activities and provisions designed to support local parents into the labour market. A comprehensive evaluation strategy was put in place for the pilot, making use of in-house data sources and externally-commissioned research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES).

This final report builds on the findings from the two previous evaluation reports. The evaluation involved: two waves of case study interviews with pilot staff and some children's centre users; two waves of in-depth qualitative interviews with children's centre users; two waves of a survey of children's centre users; and a comparison study that involved non-pilot LAs. The report also uses Management Information (MI) and additional clerical data collected from the pilot areas.

Key findings

- Overall, the pilot areas have successfully integrated Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers into the children's centres. The flexibility of this role has been key to its success with customers and pilot staff alike. Some advisers did, however, find it difficult to manage the tension of balancing work-focused activities with less structured, ad-hoc engagement and outreach activities.
- All pilot sites have delivered the five core elements of pilot provision and demand for the pilot has been high. The pilot has made significant progress in preparing parents for work, in getting parents to think about work and in linking them into wider support and provision which they might need in the interim period.

- Outreach has been one of the most successful elements of the pilot. Through a variety of outreach methods the pilot has successfully engaged a mix of traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers.
- More joined up services meant that parents had better access to services on one site, and this meant that they were often dealt with more quickly. Referrals between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres services also meant that parents' issues were not addressed in isolation from each other, but were tackled more holistically.
- Partnership working has been strong, and has grown over time, between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres. Partnership working with other local providers tended to be more limited in some areas.
- A major factor in determining pilot success is also whether children's centre managers understand the role that employment can play in providing a route out of poverty, and their role in helping to address it.

Background

The work-focused services in the children's centres pilot was one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008. The aim of these pilots was to test and explore new approaches at a local level and to build up the evidence base on what works in tackling child poverty. The work-focused services pilot operated in three children's centres in each of ten LA areas (30 children's centres in total), running from January 2009 to March 2011, and provided work-focused services through a dedicated Personal Adviser co-located in each children's centre, as well as activities and provision designed to support local parents into the labour market. The aim of the pilot was to test whether children's centres can offer an effective means of engaging parents in labour

market activity, moving them closer to work and ultimately into employment.

Pilot activities and delivery

All pilot sites have delivered the five core elements of pilot provision: Jobcentre Plus provision, packages of support and bespoke services, partnership working, integrating the Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser into the children's centres, and identifying and engaging customers. Some activities were prioritised over others depending on local demographics and customer demand, the children's centre's footfall, the availability of other local provision and the need profile of the local community.

Demand for the pilot has been high, with the vast majority of children's centre users in the pilot and comparison sites stating in the survey that they would prefer to access Jobcentre Plus services in the children's centre, as opposed to the Jobcentre Plus office.

The role of the Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser

Overall, the pilot areas have successfully integrated Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers into the children's centres. Customers report that advisers are accessible, empathetic and understanding, friendly and approachable, trustworthy, knowledgeable and helpful, and have more time to dedicate to them in comparison to their experiences at the Jobcentre Plus office. The flexibility of this role has been key to its success with customers and pilot staff alike.

Continuing challenges for the role of Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers were twofold. Firstly, some advisers found it difficult to manage the tension within the role itself: that of balancing work-focused activities with less structured, ad-hoc engagement and outreach activities. Secondly, a very small number of advisers found themselves having to work to targets set by Jobcentre Plus line managers, even though the pilot is not linked to targets. Neither issue proved detrimental to the role, but they did highlight the importance of having management structures in place that would facilitate integrated service delivery.

Partnership working

Partnership working has been strong between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres, while partnership working with other local providers

tended to be more limited in some areas. This was partly because of the delays in pilot start-up and the time it took to establish effective working relationships. Partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres has grown much stronger over time, and this has been evident in four key ways:

- a greater understanding of each other's organisation and working practices;
- a greater number of referrals between the two organisations;
- the joining-up of partner networks and expertise;
- the full integration of Jobcentre Plus advisers into the children's centres.

There are also greater linkages between Jobcentre Plus and key Sure Start partners working on-site, as well as with the LA in some areas.

Engagement

Outreach has been one of the most successful elements of the pilot. Through a variety of outreach methods, the pilot has successfully engaged a mix of traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers. Pilot MI shows that around 60 per cent of pilot starts were known to be lone parents in receipt of benefit and around 30 per cent were non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers. The latter figure is particularly encouraging as many of this group will be potential second earners – a group targeted by the pilot because of the prevalence of child poverty among households where only one parent is known to be in work.

Key learning and critical success factors

This report draws out several key learning points for the successful delivery of work-focused services in children's centres:

- Children's centres can be ideal venues for hosting work-focused services targeted at poor households.
- Flexibility is critical to the success of the Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser role in allowing for a more personalised and tailored service which meets the needs of the target group.
- Recruiting the 'right' Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser, with the right mix of relevant skills is key to facilitating engagement and partnership working.

- It takes time to embed work-focused services in a multi-agency setting. The experience of the pilot demonstrates that it takes at least nine months for an initiative like this to bed-in, and at least one year to establish effective working relationships with key partners.
- ‘Hands-on’ commitment by key partners facilitates integrated service delivery.
- Management and performance structures need to facilitate integrated working. Jobcentre Plus and children’s centre managers have to support integrated working, both in practical terms, but also in terms of sharing the pilot’s aims. Performance structures need to be flexible enough to account for the fact that integrated working takes time to establish, job outcomes are likely to be a longer-term prospect for many of the hardest-to-reach, and that important areas of work such as partnership working do not lend themselves easily to quantitative measurement.

Many of these critical success factors are not just limited to outreach work in children’s centres, but could be applied in wider settings.

Pilot outcomes and perceived impacts

Increased take-up of Jobcentre Plus services in children’s centres

At the baseline survey of children’s centre users, only three per cent of parents reported currently using Jobcentre Plus services at the children’s centre. Two years later, in the wave two survey, this figure had jumped to 14 per cent.

Stronger partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and children’s centres

This was evidenced by positive feedback from pilot staff in most areas, a number of referrals between the two organisations, and attitudinal changes towards Jobcentre Plus among children’s centres staff.

Parents are closer to work

Attitudinal outcomes achieved include increased levels of confidence, aspirations, better awareness of work-focused opportunities and options, and attitudinal changes towards Jobcentre Plus and work.

The pilot has made significant progress in preparing parents for work, in getting parents to think about work and in linking them into wider support and provision which they might need in the interim period.

Integrated service delivery and better outcomes for parents

More joined up services meant that parents had better access to services on one site, and this meant that they were often dealt with more quickly. Referrals between Jobcentre Plus and children’s centres services also meant that parents’ issues were not addressed in isolation from each other, but were tackled more holistically.

Additional skills, knowledge and customers for Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus has gained new skills and knowledge via their Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers. These included not just professional and personal skills, but also important local knowledge about support and provision in the wider community which they might not have known about from their work in the Jobcentre Plus office.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **Children’s centres are potentially ideal venues for work-focused services to reach families through joined-up services.**

In many areas, they have successfully cut through silos in public services delivery to become hubs where several services can be accessed on-site through more joined-up service delivery. They also offer good reach into the target communities of lone parents, potential second earners and low-income households, many of whom are not in touch with Jobcentre Plus services. There is more than sufficient demand for the service, demonstrated in a doubling of take-up of work-focused services in the pilot centres over time.

2. **Jobcentre Plus are well positioned to deliver work-focused services in children’s centres**

The evidence indicates that Jobcentre Plus is ideally placed to deliver work-focused support in children’s centres, particularly due to the ‘added value’ of having Jobcentre Plus as one of the lead delivery agencies is its advisers’ specialist knowledge of benefits, better-off calculations and tax credits.

In some areas, they have also brought with them contacts and links with Jobcentre Plus provision, as well as knowledge of local job vacancies.

3. There is a clear case for strengthening the Jobcentre Plus core offer in children's centres to encompass dedicated outreach provision.

In the space of two years, integrated service delivery has had a number of key achievements. It has,:

- engaged a significant proportion of non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers;
- doubled the take-up of Jobcentre Plus services in the pilot children's centres, and actively referred parents onto other relevant services where necessary;
- engaged many parents who have faced complex and multiple barriers to work and delivered intensive, personalised and tailored support to remove some of the toughest barriers to employment;
- delivered work-focused activity in an integrated way, alongside children's centre services and services from other key children's centre partner organisations.

4. Children's centre staff and managers need to have child poverty at the forefront of their thinking and understand that employment can provide a route out of it.

Evidence from the pilot shows that it is simply not enough to co-locate Jobcentre Plus services in children's centres. A major factor in determining pilot success is also whether children's centre managers

understand the role that employment can play in providing a route out of poverty, and more generally, their 'frontline' role in helping to address it. Most of the managers in this pilot were aware of this, but where they were not, pilot implementation and delivery was slower, more difficult, and at times, strained.

5. Lessons from the pilot evaluation should be used to inform future local delivery and approaches to tackling child poverty.

The experiences from this pilot demonstrate a clear potential to reduce child poverty through:

- effective engagement of the target groups and positive employment-related outcomes;
- increased take-up of Jobcentre Plus services in children's centres;
- effective co-location of Jobcentre Plus services in children's centres and more integrated service delivery as a result;
- positive attitudinal and aspirational changes among pilot participants.

Positive attitudinal changes among children's centre staff towards Jobcentre Plus services and a better understanding among many Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers of the culture and priorities of children's centres.

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

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