

NLCEP Evaluation Summary

Background

The North London Children's Efficiency Programme (NLCEP) seeks to provide a residential unit for children in or on the edge of care and their families. As part of the innovation, the five north London boroughs of Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey and Islington collaborated with the aim of developing a model of care and intervention that allows young people entering care to remain in the local area rather than being placed far away from home, as is often the case for young people in London. A rationale for the partnership is cost-saving through pooling of resources, as well as providing existing add-on services (e.g., CAMHS and education) from each borough.

Aims and objectives

Ipsos MORI was commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the project in order to provide evidence of the partnership's functioning. The aim of the evaluation was to document the partnership's development, scrutinise processes, structures and communications, and provide feedback helping local authorities identifying pathways for better collaboration. The evaluation was designed to capture the full and ongoing process of the partnership set-up and collaboration, identifying selection criteria, common referral processes and selecting a third party residential facility provider in delivering the assessment facility.

Evaluation

The method employed was a qualitative approach exploring ten key themes proven essential in partnership working by observing monthly project board meetings as well conducting interviews with project board members from each of the five boroughs at three time points between September 2015 and April 2016. The evaluation plan was further designed to inform a future evaluation of the residential unit once it is open.

Findings

Up until April 2016, the evaluation team has observed the partnership's development of a specification for the residential unit, including ongoing collaboration to identify the type of residential unit required as well as the selection criteria. The key findings included:

1. *Commitment to partnership as expressed by attending monthly project board meetings:* Although there was a high level of commitment by three boroughs, the other two struggled, due to management and staff changes, to sustain a regular presence. This is not to say that there was little commitment at director level, however, the inconsistency in project board members resulted in significant delays in the completion of certain tasks.
2. *Consensus that the partnership was founded on the same set of values:* To many, this was one of the biggest advantages of this partnership. Project board members were conscious of putting partnership needs ahead of individual borough needs. This held even when project board members had opposing views regarding certain decisions.

3. *Clarity of purpose and objectives of the partnership:* Throughout the evaluation period, the partners collaborated in reviewing existing services and designing an approach based on the gaps in existing services and needs of local looked after children (LAC) populations. Mutual respect and good communication was evident, with board members sharing relevant information in order to support the planning and management of the project.
4. *Prior and ongoing collaboration between boroughs regarding services for LAC:* Knowledge, systems and resources were already and continuously shared between boroughs. This facilitated much of the positive communication and shared values.
5. *Uncertainty regarding board members' understanding of roles and responsibilities:* Inconsistency in attendance made it difficult to hold members accountable. As a result, many tasks were completed by the project lead or one particular board member. It was suggested that greater clarification about expectations from each borough from the start would have helped to ensure that all tasks were shared equally. Some members felt that other individuals would have been better suited to attend meetings to make better use of staff resources.
6. *Flexibility built into the partnership's structure:* For some members, flexibility gave the partnership the opportunity to think through the best methods to achieve intended outcomes of the unit, weighing up all options. For others, having too much flexibility was seen as unhelpful, as this resulted in members not valuing attendance and contribution highly enough.
7. *Role of project lead:* One of the greatest facilitators was the high level of commitment and the contribution made by the project lead in ensuring the project was progressing as planned; however, the lack of administrative support for the project lead was an impediment.

Recommendations

A number of barriers to the progress of the project were observed which provide learning for other partnership collaborations. The main barrier to the progress of the project was attendance and practical contributions to the advancement of the project.

It would be recommended that:

- The partnership be more rigorous in identifying individuals at the beginning of the project and then formally recording any changes, rather than allowing project team members to 'pass the baton' in an informal way by suggesting substitutes during the project lifecycle;
- Minutes be circulated after each meeting and that team members are expected to have read them before the next meeting; only spending a minimal amount of time on discussing these;
- Once a debate on a particular area has been concluded and a decision reached this should not be revisited, without stifling the innovative aspect of the collaboration;
- Conversations not be skewed towards the views of those regularly attending, as should be agreed in Terms of Reference at the project commencement;
- A specification document be produced as early as possible within the partnership working, confirming decisions that have been made at an early stage;
- A project-based rather than wider partnership level risk register be produced, circulated and regularly reviewed.

Further, an evaluation of the residential unit once it is open would be recommended.

The DFE's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme funded this project and its independent evaluation. Co-ordination of the evaluation was undertaken by the Rees Centre from the University of Oxford (www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk.) A full copy of this report can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications