

Radical Efficiency in Early Years Settings: Families Taking Control in Reading

Some background information

Over the last three years Reading's Directorate of Education and Children's Services has improved performance and achieved cost savings of 12 per cent. The Transforming Early Years team aims to continue to improve standards of service delivery with a focus on the most vulnerable families and at the same time realise a further 15 per cent reduction in costs over the next three years.

There have been some significant improvements in outcomes in Reading in the recent past including the reduction of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), teenage pregnancy and rises in GCSE performance. However there is a widening gap in outcomes between the most and least deprived young people in Reading.

The team is building on their positive partnership with the Children's Trust Board in Reading, where there are strong systems for consultation with families. The work focuses on one Children's Centre in the South Reading area of Whitley. Despite improvement in key performance indicators and £6 million a year spent on services for children and young people with perceived emotional and behavioural difficulties, some parts of the community in Whitley are characterised by a sense of powerlessness and social isolation.

Reconceptualising the challenge

The Reading team is looking to shift the balance of power from professionals to families as a route to further improving outcomes and efficiency. This means focusing on radical solutions that will tackle the real needs of families as an alternative to traditional service responses

Costly services and the way professionals work often reinforces some families' belief that they are not able to make a positive difference to their own children's outcomes.

"We had a huge shock when we interviewed 32 families (92 children) and none of them had ever paid for childcare. Many parents are doing part-time jobs but they all use sisters and aunts etc. We just hadn't realised that the white working class culture is such that they don't put their children into paid childcare."

Early in the Transforming Early Years work it became clear that the 'external locus of control' was the biggest issue for the families in greatest need of support. This was reinforced by findings of Reading's **ethnographic research** which provided alarming details of families' poor

Ethnographic Research

Working with and listening to parents and children in the community offers a fresh perspective and new insights on old problems.

social capital and showed clearly that they weren't getting the services they wanted or needed.

The team realised that ineffective or inconsistent services lead to lack of engagement and that biased or flawed professional attitudes can contribute to families' feelings of powerlessness. They began to understand that their perceptions of families being 'hard to reach' and of poor parenting were resulting in families' real needs being unidentified. There was real desire in the team to grasp the opportunity to change things and to think about how they could provide what families want rather than what professionals tell them they need.

New solutions

The Reading team's aim is to offer radically different early years services that reduce the need for longer-term and 'higher-end' intervention. This means changing the systems and processes around service delivery to ensure that the families who need the most support are offered solutions that meet their needs. The team is determined that services must be designed and delivered very differently by using volunteer involvement to support a more family-centric service.

To make these aims a reality, the team has developed linked ideas of a **Community Café** and **Expert Parent Club** as a route to de-stigmatising access to co-located services.

In time they would like to see a local community building offering a range of services and a café in one location. It would be radically different from the current Children's Centre - run by volunteers and a place where families feel comfortable to be, play, and eat during the day and evening, without fear of judgement. This is the long-term goal.

“What we have been delivering has not made a big enough difference. That's very hard to own up to. We have to think about solutions not services. At the moment the service dominates the solution. So we are asking 'what does the service look like that then reaches the right people and doesn't stigmatise?’”

In the short term, the Expert Parent Club will increase families' social capital and self-esteem, awareness of and take-up of services and will enable parents to offer high-quality support to their peers.

Together these interventions will provide training and volunteering opportunities for parents, whilst enabling professionals to learn more about the needs of families and spot at-risk children early.

These will be evidence-informed, in particular by Feinstein's work on predictive screening, and will enable families to develop skills in five key areas that have been shown to improve resilience.

Progress made towards implementation

Building capacity for peer support

Four new roles, complete with job descriptions and associated training and accreditation have been designed with and for parents.

Meeters and greeters, buddies and mentors have begun their training. The parents volunteering for these roles were those who took part in the design process for developing the new service, so there was a ready and

Different...

This new approach assumes that control over problems and their solutions will rest with parents and community members.

Professionals will seek to provide an environment that will enable families to flourish, rather than come in and 'fix' things. The new service will be more organic; led by parents, constantly changing, and improving, flexing and responding directly to the community's real needs.

As it grows the new service has the potential to subvert the current Children's Centre model in which professionals try to bring parents into the Centre to receive support. Instead, peer-to-peer supporters at the Centre will work with trained volunteers who will call in professional support when it is required.

waiting pool of parents who knew what to expect and who were willing to try the new training and roles on for size.

A fourth role, currently known as 'saint' is seen as a progression opportunity for parents in the other peer support roles who are able and willing to take on some deeper learning in evidence-based parenting. Saints will start appearing in Reading late in 2012.

Whereas meeters and greeters and buddies are based in the Children's Centre, mentors and later saints need to be able to visit families in their homes. Careful attention is paid to safeguarding and there will be special training for parents in these outreach roles. All the parents taking part have a CRB check.

Communication and marketing

The coincidence in time of the work to transform early years services with the announcement of deep cuts to services generally in the locality has presented some challenges.

Despite a decision to stay 'low key' about the changes that the new service would bring about, some conversations were right and necessary and voluntary organisations facing cuts to grants and staff worrying about job losses have both raised questions during consultations.

Still, communications with parents have been incredibly positive and motivating for the project team and the level of interest from the community has taken them by surprise. Participation in the service design process has already had an impact for families taking part.

Starting small...

One children's centre in South Reading is currently piloting the new peer support roles on behalf of all 13 children's centres in Reading and it is anticipated that they will all introduce the new ways of working over the next two years. To achieve this, some wider system changes are underway to make it more likely that Reading will be successful in introducing the new service at scale:

- Restructuring the council to reduce the disconnect between adult and children's services.
- Working with registrars to register births in children's centres.
- Joining up health and midwifery to better screen for vulnerable families.
- Joining up with probation and the police to identify high-risk families.
- Embedding skills and employment support with Jobcentre Plus.

Success measures

The true impact of the new service – improving outcomes for children – may not be evident for some time, and the team is keen to find ways to monitor their progress towards this goal in a shorter timescale and using readily measurable indicators.

So they have developed some metrics that they hope will help them to demonstrate changes in the community that are likely to result in better outcomes for children. For example, they aim to:

- Support 80 per cent of their volunteers to achieve accreditation at level 1 or 2.
- Support 50 per cent of their volunteers to go into education, employment or training.
- Almost double the number of fathers attending the Children's Centre from 7 per cent to 12 per cent.

Better...

The new opportunities will reach those families most in need who at the moment are not taking up professionally-run services.

By providing training and supervision the volunteer programme will build parents' capacity to support one another, by being a welcoming presence, buddying and in some cases offering more intensive support. Receiving support will thus become less stigmatising; more relational increasing social capital in the community.

A blueprint for savings

We have to remodel children's centres and the way we deliver services. We have no choice – there's 15 to 20 per cent less in the budget. Transforming Early Years has given us a blueprint to do this; to remodel the centres and find the efficiencies that we need.

The Reading project in numbers

In 2009-10 the number of families actively supported by the Children's Centre was 180. In 2011-12 this will increase to 367, more than doubling the number of families accessing the new service.

The new service will engage around 60 volunteers in the four roles donating a total of 17,280 hours each year between them, an average of just over six hours per week each.

Assessing efficiency

The Bradford team gathered a range of data in order that a cost analysis of their new service could be undertaken. The headlines from this analysis show that:

	Existing service	Redesigned service, year 2	Difference	Difference (%)
The redesigned service will cost less:	£100,504	£73,400	-£27,104	-27%
And yet reach more families:	180	367	187	104%
Together, this results in a reduction of unit cost:	£558	£257	-£301	-54%

Where next?

"Staff do a good job now but we want it to be a more equal partnership, so that they will say it is more exciting to work with families, more rewarding, to see the strengths and protective factors of families being utilised and built upon."

A new role for parents

- In three years, all thirteen Children's Centres in the Borough will be community-owned, with parents managing them and far fewer professionals working in them.
- Expert parents in the Centres will 'pull in' professional support when it is needed.
- Parents will run courses with a valid evidence base and staff will have a greater role in supporting, training and advising volunteers. Staff will also engage in designing, delivering and evaluating services, and have a greater leadership and co-ordination role in relation to individuals and services.

A fresh start for local families

- There will be new customers, both a greater number and a greater range of families using the Children's Centre.
- Families will value peer support and will perceive services, such as parenting programmes, as universally available and relevant to them.
- There will be improved outcomes for children including transition to school and at Foundation Stage.

Next steps for the team

The team in the pilot centre is very committed and has huge capacity to change and a willingness to learn, and beyond this group there is a lot of interest in the work.

The team is currently negotiating the relocation of birth registrations to a pilot Centre and screening via the midwifery service is due to start in April. Drawing on support from Community Development Officers, The Children's Action team and the pilot Centre, the team will be prototyping

Lower Cost...

Many parents will be supported by peers relying far less on expensive professional roles, some of which will be decommissioned or redeployed.

Increased use of the new service by families will reduce the unit cost of provision.

Early intervention and improved outcomes will reduce the need for high-cost interventions such as speech and language therapy, childhood obesity and looked after children.

elements of their new service in January and February.

Children's Centres have been used to operating with a high degree of autonomy so there is work to be done to mobilise collective commitment to the Transforming Early Years ideas. In addition, some of the centres sit within schools where head teachers have negative professional perspectives about parents.

Taking change to scale

This work fits into a much bigger debate about the Big Society and community capacity building. Scalability and speed is the issue. We have the support of the CEO but how to get the cultural change; to win the hearts and minds of people in our own organisation?