National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme Final Synthesis Report published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) on 17th October 2016

Summary

This briefing summarises the final synthesis report of the National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme. It sets out the background to the Troubled Families Programme, outlines the content of the report and considers the key findings in more detail and why the findings have occurred.

The full report is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-evaluation-of-the-first-troubled-families-programme together with additional reports on:

- Process evaluation;
- Families experiences and outcomes;
- Family Survey technical report;
- National impact study report;
- Final report on the family monitoring data.

In addition DCLG published two further reports:

- The first Troubled Families Programme 2012 to 2015: an overview;
- Local authority data on the cost and potential fiscal benefits of the Troubled Families Programme.

These reports are available through links available from the web address above.

Introduction

This briefing focuses on the National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme Final Synthesis Report. This report pulls together the detailed evaluation information gathered as part of the overall evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme. The evaluation attracted considerable comment because of its headline finding that the programme had had little or no impact. Typical of some of the comment is the article from the Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/17/governments-448m-troubled-families-scheme-has-had-little-impact-thinktank).
This was a flagship programme for the Government with substantial investment and political comment that many thousands of families had been “turned round” through the work of the programme. The briefing provides an outline of the evaluation report and its findings which are more nuanced than the headlines from the report of no impact. It explores what the findings were and summarises what the report has to say on why these findings have occurred.

**Background to the Troubled Families Programme**

Phase one of the programme was launched in April 2012 through the Troubled Families Unit with funding of £448m. The aim was to turn around the lives of an estimated 120,000 troubled families with multiple and complex needs. The programme built on previous work such as the Family Intervention Programmes and responded to the need to address issues raised by the 2011 riots. The programme aimed to help local authorities and their partners move from reactive to earlier intervention services through targeted interventions with the identified “troubled families”.

Key elements of the programme were:

- Locally designed family intervention programmes;
- A troubled families coordinator in each local authority;
- Payment by results financial model.

The programme was targeted by DCLG on households where:

1. There was involvement in crime and or anti-social behaviour;
2. Children not in school;
3. Adult on out of work benefits;
4. Causing high costs to the public purse.

The 120,000 estimate was based on a Cabinet office analysis of the Families and Children Study which found that 120,000 families in England were estimated to meet five of the following seven criteria:

- No parent in the family was in work;
- The family lived in poor-quality or overcrowded housing;
- No parent had any qualifications;
- The mother had mental health problems;
- At least one parent had a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity;
- The family had a low income (below 60% of the median); and
- The family could not afford a number of items of food and clothing.

Given the difference in the criteria between the programme and the Cabinet office study estimates this meant there was no quantitative estimate of the number of families nationally which satisfy the DCLG criteria as described above.
Local authorities were to include families that met all of the DCLG criteria 1 to 3 and 2 out of 3 and the high cost criteria. Local authorities could develop their own criteria for what was a good proxy for high cost. Their share of the 120,000 figure was calculated with reference to population figures, the Index of Multiple Deprivation and the child wellbeing index. This meant that there was no necessary correspondence between the number of families satisfying the criteria for inclusion in the programme and the quotas or targets, either at a local or national level.

In June 2013 the programme was expanded to 400,000 families with an additional £200m funding for 2015/16. The evaluation is primarily of the work in phase one of the programme.

**The Evaluation Process**

The evaluation aimed to:

- Understand how the programme made a difference to the lives of families in terms of outcomes and experience;
- Learn how the programme has changed local delivery approaches;
- Estimate the impact of the programme on the intended outcomes;
- Measure success in terms of monetary savings.

The evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme had the following elements:

1. An examination of the process of delivering the programme through twenty local authority case studies. This looked at how they designed, managed and delivered the programme.
2. An impact evaluation:
   a. Quantitative looking at outcome data for families in the programme and a comparator group of families not in the programme using national administrative data e.g. employment, school attendance etc;
   b. Large scale face to face survey of families in the programme and a matched comparison group not in the programme.
3. Economic evaluation including costs of delivery and evidence of outcomes estimated as part of the impact evaluation.

**What the Evaluation Found**

The evaluation report has chapters on:

- Programme set up and implementation, including the range of local delivery models and the key features of family intervention;
- The needs and characteristics of the families supported by the programme. It includes information on the response to the Payment by Results Financial Framework and how families were assessed and prioritised;
- Evidence for impacts and outcomes and the detail of the impact findings for each of the principal outcome measures;
The final chapter presents conclusions and this is the main focus for the rest of this briefing.

Overview of Findings

Given the negative reporting of the findings of this evaluation it is worth starting with the following positive comment: “...it is clear the Phase One Programme provided an important catalyst for developing and investing in family intervention, at a time when fiscal constraints were being keenly felt.”

The report says “The main overall achievements of the phase one programme are summarised as:

- The national ‘spotlight’ at a policy level, coupled with the additional Government funding, helped to raise the profile of family intervention, and assisted Troubled Families Coordinators in achieving strategic buy-in at a local level;
- The process evaluation found widespread evidence of local services and systems transformation, at a time when most local authority budgets were undergoing retraction. The timing of the programme meant that family intervention provided a test bed for new models of service development and commissioning in many local areas;
- The programme played a key role in boosting local capacity for family intervention, and expanding the workforce – especially within those areas moving from a low baseline position. This was despite some redeployment of existing staff;
- The auditing requirements of the programme were instrumental in raising the quality and capacity of local data management systems. The programme helped to set a multi-agency agenda for the identification and tracking of families in some areas;
- There were signs that the Development Agreement between DCLG and DWP had accelerated the employability dimensions of the programme; going some way towards embedding this expertise within local teams, and paving the way for better joint working with Jobcentre Plus at a local level;
- The evaluation found some beacons of good practice, demonstrating the hallmarks of FIPs – workers observed a real step change in practice, regarding the time and space for assertive key working, and benefited from strong models of supervision;
- The impact evaluation identified statistically significant impacts on families’ satisfaction with the service; their confidence, and optimism about being able to cope in the future, compared with a matched comparison group of families;
- The programme achieved statistically significant impacts on families’ self-reported financial capability, although not on their overall (self-reported) levels of debt. “

These are worthwhile achievements particularly at a time when local authority budgets were under such intense pressure and resources for early intervention were increasingly difficult to secure.
The evaluation identified the following areas where the phase one programme appears not to have been successful. The report describes these as follows:

- The evaluation encountered wide variations in local practice. Although some of these reflected inevitable differences according to local authority size, structure, and demographics, there was nonetheless a stark contrast in how local teams recruited and trained their workers; set caseload sizes, and exited their families. There was a perceived need for more standardised training, quality assurance, and CPD;
- Whilst the evaluation found a good deal of consensus regarding the role and value of the ‘key worker’, there was more limited evidence for the efficacy of the interventions offered to families. In particular, the therapeutic dimensions of the programme (mental health, DA/DV and parenting) were not always clearly defined;
- There appeared to have been relatively little progress in addressing the health issues for families that were documented within the Family Intervention Projects, although this issue had been acknowledged at a policy level and was factored in to the expanded programme;
- It is questionable whether deep and sustained improvements were achieved to partnership working at a local level, beyond individual examples of good practice. The evaluation encountered variable levels of engagement by partner organisations (especially so health and adult social care). Improvements in multi-agency planning and data sharing at a strategic level to ensure the implementation of the PbR framework had not always translated into benefits at an operational level;
- There was mixed evidence regarding the extent to which scaling-up had been achieved without sacrificing some level of quality of family intervention practice. This has potential implications for the expanded programme, given that it involves local authorities attempting to mainstream their approach. Moreover, the requirement to work with greater numbers of families on reduced funding poses a risk of ‘diluting’ the intervention;
- The PbR financial framework and targets were contentious in many local areas and were thought to have resulted in certain perverse incentives. “

Comment:
These are interesting points for local programmes to reflect on and will not surprise anyone who has worked on the Troubled Families Programme or other early intervention programmes.

Discussion and Explanation of the Impact Results

The report goes on to discuss the impact results and seeks to explain those results. That the evaluation could find no impact on key outcomes attributable to the programme is of concern. The chapter with the detail of the results of this part of the evaluation shows very clearly this absence of impact of the programme. The report does note that statistically significant impacts were found on some attitudinal and behavioural measures such as families more likely to report managing well financially, being confident that their worst problems were behind them and feeling positive about the future.
The explanation of the results considers the following issues:

1. Methodological issues including issues of data quality, not being able to obtain robust estimates on all outcome measures, variations in outcomes between local authorities and some local authorities that had started the roll out of ‘whole family’ working on a larger scale which may have affected results in the comparison group;
2. Timing of the data collection and analysis. The report suggests that “The findings from the impact and process evaluation concur that the analysis may have been undertaken too early to capture the full range of potential effects of the programme on families.” For example there was evidence that local services would need more than 12 months to work with more intensive cases before those families could leave the programme;
3. Understanding the difference between the impact findings and the Payment by Results (PbR) Outcomes. The PbR data shows the overall targeted of improving the lives of 120,000 families was almost achieved. The difference is not contradictory as the evaluation is measuring how many net positive outcomes there are over and above positive outcomes that would have occurred in the absence of the programme whereas the PbR measures positive outcomes of families on the programme without necessarily there needing to be any connection between the positive outcome and the programme input. Different things are being measured;
4. Selection and targeting issues. While there were considerable variations in the approach to selection across local authorities the evaluation does not think it likely these would have skewed results at a national level. On targeting the evidence is that the programme did engage with families with multiple and complex needs. There was evidence that the families worked with may have had more serious difficulties than the comparison group which may have influenced the impact outcomes;
5. Programme implementation issues. The report discusses whether the lack of standardisation of how family intervention was implemented locally might have influenced the outcome results. However no relationship was found between intensity of service and impacts either for the ‘intensive’ or for the ‘less intensive’ groups.

In concluding the report draws out lessons learned and recommendations.

These are:

1. Caution on relying on PbR data to inform assessments about the added value of policy intervention. PbR should be structured so that it incentivises those responsible for delivery to improve outcomes relative to no intervention being in place rather than simply claiming results based payments for outcomes that would have occurred anyway;
2. Better aligning outcomes data for impact analysis with the data capture by local authorities as part of the grant requirements of the programme. Local authorities often found that the PbR measures did not capture the families they were most concerned about;
3. There may be impacts further downstream. There were signs of impact in the survey work with families in terms of their increased levels of confidence and optimism;
4. There would be merit in undertaking further impact evaluation after the programme has been running for 24 to 36 months.
Concluding Comment

This was a large and complex evaluation of a major Government programme. The headline findings about the absence of impact do not do justice either to the Troubled Families Programme and the work of Local authorities and partners in its implementation or some of the more subtle messages about what has been achieved. The softer impacts on families such as their views of themselves and their situation improving are worth giving weight to.

The report could help local programmes reflect on the progress they have made and how they can improve their measures of progress and evaluation of outcomes locally.

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