



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of the SEND pathfinder programme**

## **Impact Research Brief**

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## Background

The initial 18 months of the SEND pathfinder programme sought to explore how to reform the statutory SEN assessment and statement framework, as a means of:

- Better supporting life outcomes for children and young people
- Giving parents confidence by giving them more control
- Transferring power to professionals on the front line and to local communities<sup>1</sup>.

Twenty pathfinder sites<sup>2</sup>, comprising of thirty-one local areas were commissioned to run initially from October 2011 to March 2013. Each pathfinder area was grant-funded to deliver local activities and was made up from the relevant local authorities, NHS agencies and a range of partners from the Voluntary and Community Sectors, parent-carer groups, colleges and schools.

This report is the second of two volumes containing evaluation findings from the first 18 months of the SEND pathfinder programme. The two volumes cover:

- ***The Impact Evaluation***, which provides an assessment of the experiences, outcomes achieved and distance travelled by the initial cohort of participating families; an analysis of the extent to which working practices have changed for the staff/individuals that have worked directly with participating families to deliver the process; and an indicative assessment of the costs of the reforms. These issues are contained in this volume.
- ***The Process and Implementation Evaluation***, which describes the progress made by the pathfinder areas; the approaches adopted to deliver the pathfinder; what has worked well and less well; and emerging lessons. This report was published in June 2013<sup>3</sup>.

## Key findings

Overall the results show that the new approach can work. They present a series of **statistically robust improvements around many elements of the process**. Families are noticing a difference and reporting: greater understanding of the process; feeling more involved and listened to; improved joint working across services; having better information; and being more satisfied with the service that they are receiving. They appear to prefer the new process to the old SEN Statementing approach, finding it broader-based and more long term in focus. Also positive was that pathfinder families are

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (July 2011) Pathfinder Specification and Application Pack

<sup>2</sup> The Bromley and Bexley consortium, Calderdale, the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly consortium, Devon, Gateshead, Greenwich, the Hartlepool and Darlington consortium, Hertfordshire, Lewisham, Manchester, the Northamptonshire and Leicester City consortium, North Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, the Oldham and Rochdale consortium, the SE7 consortium (Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Hampshire, Kent, Medway, Surrey and West Sussex), Solihull, Southampton, Trafford, Wigan and Wiltshire.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

less likely than comparison group families to report that they do not have enough choice or enough information about the choices available to them.

In general, we mostly found that between 8 to 17 percent more pathfinder families 'strongly agreed' with positive statements about the new process than comparison families (although there are some outcomes for which the percentage difference was higher and some for which it was lower). **While positive, the overall level of change appears modest at this relatively early stage**<sup>4</sup>. The amount of change may reflect both that a good number of families were content with the old process and that pathfinders continue to refine their approaches. In parallel, it is apparent that on many of the process indicators the level of dissatisfaction has declined to roughly half of what it was before. The next phase of the evaluation will test if the improvements seen to date become more widespread.

**While the overall feedback on the process was positive, as yet the survey found no consistent evidence to illustrate an improvement in outcomes had occurred.** The extent to which service receipt and outcomes change over time will be tested in more detail through the next phase of the evaluation.

Overall, the findings and implications from the Impact report very closely mirror those of the earlier Process report. They provide broad support for the direction of travel, with statistically robust improvements in many parts of the process. They also highlight a number of lessons for pathfinders and non-pathfinders as they move closer to full implementation:

- The positive impacts appear to be linked to a range of factors but especially the involvement of a 'key worker' or 'group of individuals' who have delivered the new process and therefore provided the families with support. The approach, knowledge and skills of this group going forward will be crucial
- There remain issues around the information available to families, emphasising the importance of getting the local offer right
- While parents feel much more involved, this has not transferred to the same extent to young people. This may need to be addressed as part of the workforce development associated with key working
- While joint working is improving, the flows of information between services could be better, to save families having to explain their needs on multiple occasions.

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<sup>4</sup> As of the end of March 2013

## Methods

The impact of the pathfinder programme on outcomes has been measured by comparing self-reports of those outcomes for 237 pathfinder families with self-reports from a matched comparison group of 226 families. The data was collected from parents via a telephone survey.

The 237 pathfinder families covered children of a wide range of ages, educational settings, and service receipt.

In addition, a series of 46 qualitative family-based case studies were undertaken with families that had participated in the pathfinder in a sub-set of eight pathfinder areas. The case studies sought to build on the themes explored in the parent carer survey and therefore act as a supplement to provide a more detailed explanation of the results of the survey.

The costs associated with developing and implementing the pathfinder approach across the 31 pathfinder areas were collected via a combination of data from monitoring returns and the staff work and satisfaction survey.

## Families' experience of the process

Pathfinder families were significantly more likely than comparison families (albeit at a 90 per cent confidence level) to strongly agree that they understood the assessment and support planning processes (38 per cent pathfinder families; 27 per cent comparison). They were also more likely to say that their views had been taken into account (88 per cent versus 73 per cent). Families' understanding of the process and the extent to which it had been child/family-centred appears to have been strongly influenced by the skills and knowledge of the 'key worker' or 'group of individuals' that had provided them with support, emphasising the importance of resourcing this process sufficiently, with well-trained staff.

Parents were not quite so positive when it came to how far their children's views had been taken into account, suggesting an area where further workforce development may be required.

Pathfinder parents reported getting a significantly more straightforward and 'joined up' service than those in the comparison group. However, the survey findings also highlighted there was further room for improvement in this area, perhaps reflecting cases where some services had not engaged as fully as expected. The effects of improved joint working included more timely access to services and less burden on parents to make this happen.

Overall, pathfinder families reported being more satisfied with the assessment process; 35 per cent of pathfinder families were 'very satisfied' with the assessment and planning process versus 27 per cent of the comparison families.

## **Delivery of services**

The pathfinder successfully reduced the proportion of parents saying they had 'not enough choice' in services; 45 per cent of pathfinder parents reporting 'not enough choice' compared to 61 per cent of comparison group parents. It was also encouraging that significantly fewer pathfinder families reported having too little information about services (41 per cent compared to 57 per cent of comparison group families), although 41 per cent still reported not having enough information, emphasising the importance of the local offer.

Pathfinder families were more satisfied with the services that they received, with the difference appearing to reflect improvements in education services.

Our sub-group analysis showed no discernible differences in reported impacts across a range of groups, suggesting that the pathfinder Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC Plan) is achieving similar results across the full range of families with whom it is being used.

## **Change in families' perceptions of the processes**

Pathfinder families reported noticing a difference in the process. Half (54 per cent) felt that the quality of the support services they were now receiving was better than it was before. Only a third (36 per cent) of comparison group families felt the same. They also reported that the processes they had been through were more straightforward (40 per cent versus 14 per cent); and that services were working more closely together (39 per cent versus 23 per cent).

Families who preferred the EHC Plan felt they were broader documents than the SEN Statement and attempted to set out a more rounded and holistic package of care and goals. They also reported being more involved in the process of developing the EHC Plan than they had been with the SEN Statement.

That said, on each of the measures above, between a third and a half of pathfinder parents said that what they had experienced under the EHC Plan was the same as before. This reflects both that many families were often satisfied with the service they had received previously and that the pathfinders are continuing to refine and develop their approaches. As changes are made, so more families may notice a difference / become more satisfied in the future.

## **Outcomes experienced**

To date, we have found no consistent statistical evidence of the pathfinder approach having had an impact on wider child and parent outcomes. This could be because the impacts are fairly small and our sample sizes are too small to detect them. The survey

may have taken place too early for impacts to have occurred, or it may be that changes to process will not significantly impact on outcomes.

There were examples of impact through the qualitative work. However, these were not substantiated through the survey. The examples included: where the plan had facilitated a transition from one school to another; when children were given new, or increased, support from specialist professionals which could improve their development and educational performance; and where families were achieving an improved quality of life as a result of increased respite care.

Whether or not a participant could identify an outcome appeared to be influenced by: whether the plan had led to any changes in their service or support provision; how recently the plan had been finalised; and the timing of services/support outlined in the plan (some changes were not due to begin until later).

## **Staff work and satisfaction**

The majority of the 137 key workers that took part in the survey were drawn from education-related services. Most reported having had only 'light involvement' with the pathfinder, which was defined as 25 per cent or less of their cases being pathfinder related.

Reported net change across the five categories of job-related statements – organisational support, decision influence, cross working, physical demand and psychological demand – tended to be small (between -3.1 per cent and 3.1 per cent) suggesting little change. In all but one case (cross working), the net difference was slightly negative, perhaps reflecting that key workers had been asked to help trial a new process and therefore were operating outside of the remit within which they were used to working.

Despite the general feeling of increased job-related pressures, it was encouraging to find that choice and control for families, collaborative working with adult social care and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), and access to appropriate support from wider services were all reported to have improved in aggregate.

Key workers were largely supportive of the new approaches as they were likely to bring about a more family-centred and multi-agency way of working. However, substantial work on workforce development and cultural change were still reported to be required.

## **Indicative costs of reform**

The median estimated total cost per area was £333,018 over the first 18 months of the pathfinder, including both financial and in-kind expenditure. However this varied substantially by area, from a minimum of £205,138 in one area to a maximum of £559,149 in another.

The pathfinder approach used with the initial cohort of families appeared to involve, on average, 42 hours compared to 30 hours for non-pathfinder families (completing the comparative SEN Statementing process), although there was a wide variation across and within areas. However, we recognise that it is in its very early days and processes are likely to change significantly over the coming months. Therefore, it is possible this initial estimate will differ markedly from the eventual outcome. To address this, additional research will be undertaken in the extended evaluation to further explore the issue.

## **Conclusions and implications**

The pathfinders have undertaken a considerable amount of work to establish new approaches and take the first families through the new system. The results to date provide some encouragement that the new approach can improve families' satisfaction with the process. The key issues for pathfinders moving forward are: should this impact be spread more widely, across a greater number of families; can changes in process lead to changes in outcomes; and can the approach be scaled up to be cost effective for the whole target population? The extended evaluation, which runs to March 2015, will seek to answer these questions.





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