

Work-focused services in children's centres pilot: Interim report

by Rachel Marangozov and Helen Stevens

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 677

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Rachel Marangozov and Helen Stevens

A report of research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Abbreviations

CAF	Common Assessment Framework
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
IES	Institute for Employment Studies
LA	Local authority
MI	Management Information
TfC	Together for Children
UK	United Kingdom
WFIs	Work Focused Interviews

Summary

Introduction

This report presents interim findings from the evaluation of the 'work-focused services in children's centres' pilot. This involved qualitative research with Sure Start children's centre users (June and July 2009); in-depth interviews with pilot staff and partner organisations; and discussion groups with children's centre users in ten case study locations (October to December 2009). The qualitative research with children's centre users involved both pilot customers and those not accessing the pilot. The case-study stage of the evaluation follows on from the baseline phase of the evaluation, the findings from which were published in 2009.

The work-focused services in children's centres pilot

At the end of 2007, the Government set up the Child Poverty Unit to bring together key officials in the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and HM Treasury. The work of the unit focuses on taking forward the Government's strategy to eradicate child poverty in the long term. Work has included developing a range of pilots to test and explore new approaches to tackling child poverty at local level. The work-focused services in children's centres pilot is one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008, which aim to build up the evidence base of what works in tackling child poverty.

The aim of the pilot is 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. While the pilot is not linked to the achievement of specific employment outcomes or targets, the aim is to increase engagement with a variety of services and activities which have this as their eventual goal.

The ten local authorities chosen to participate in the pilot are:

- Blackpool;
- Ealing;

- Kingston-upon-Hull;
- Lambeth;
- Nottingham City;
- Redcar and Cleveland;
- Sandwell;
- Somerset;
- Southampton;
- Westminster.

Pilot delivery and the role of the Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser

Pilot delivery has been largely successful over the course of the first 12 months (from start-up to the time of conducting our interim research). Communication arrangements and governance structures for the pilot appear to be working well, with many pilot staff reporting that the mechanisms put in place had largely proved useful in keeping partner organisations informed about pilot progress; in increasing awareness among pilot partner organisations about each other's services; and in flagging up operational problems at an early stage.

Most of the Personal Advisers have demonstrated a strong commitment to the task of balancing work-focused activity with 'softer' activities to engage children's centre users and integrate themselves into the children's centre environment. Most Personal Advisers have worked hard to make themselves approachable, trustworthy, helpful and responsive to customers' needs. Importantly, they have demonstrated flexibility in adapting to the ad hoc demands of the role, often dealing with customers' complex and multiple needs by offering intensive, personalised support. This reflects a deliberate attempt on the part of the Jobcentre Plus and other pilot partner organisations to recruit Personal Advisers to the pilot that possess the right mix of the above skills and competencies.

Challenges to pilot delivery have centred around the practicalities of implementation. Pilot start-up has been delayed by Criminal Records Bureau checks for Personal Advisers, and technical problems in implementing Jobcentre Plus IT in the children's centres. A lack of working space in the children's centre for the Personal Advisers has also constrained pilot delivery, particularly with regard to engaging children's centre users within a private space and closer, on-site working with children's centre staff and partner organisations. A further challenge to pilot delivery has been a lack of capacity among Jobcentre Plus line managers to devote time to the pilot. This has been caused by additional pressures placed on the Jobcentre Plus by the recession and resultant changes in personnel in local offices. However, it has been significantly compounded by the location of the pilots (outside of the

Jobcentre Plus offices), which has meant that Jobcentre Plus line managers were often too removed from the day-to-day experience of the pilot. As a result, some Personal Advisers felt they had no consistent contact from whom to seek advice and support.

In addition to these practical challenges, Personal Advisers continue to grapple with two key aspects of their job role: how to respond to the unstructured and ad hoc demands of the job, and how to manage more target-orientated expectations of their role among their line managers, many of whom have continued to measure pilot progress according to more rigid Jobcentre Plus targets (in spite of pilot guidance which removed the target structure). To overcome these challenges, many Personal Advisers have needed to demonstrate flexibility, resilience and strong interpersonal skills. The help, support and advice of children's centre managers and Jobcentre Plus line managers has also been key to addressing these issues.

Overall, Personal Advisers have settled into their roles well, considering both their new environment and new ways of working. This is borne out by the responses from pilot customers, most of whom report that pilot provision is accessible and convenient and that Personal Advisers are sympathetic, understanding, trustworthy and helpful.

Partnership working

Effective partnership working between the children's centres and the Jobcentre Plus is characterised by the following features:

- flexibility on both sides (among children's centre and Jobcentre Plus staff) to make the pilot work;
- regular communications between the Personal Adviser and the children's centre manager;
- referrals between children's centre staff and partner organisations, and the Personal Adviser;
- joining up partner networks and contacts;
- prior understanding of each other's organisational cultures;
- physical space to accommodate the Personal Adviser;
- shared expectations of the Personal Adviser role and pilot outcomes.

Wider partnership working has been most successful at engaging partner organisations working within the children's centres, or those in regular contact with the children's centre sites, such as health visitors, social care workers or staff running training courses. However, the range of partner organisations involved in the pilots to date is limited in some areas. Pilot staff offered two reasons for this. The first was that it took time to build up effective working relationships with partner organisations and their staff, and it was too early in the pilot to

expect this level of cooperation. The second was that delays in pilot start-up and implementation limited opportunities for partnership working to get underway.

Engagement and outreach

Most case studies have been actively engaging children's centre users through a variety of methods, including referrals from partner organisations, outreach in the children's centres, outreach in the community and advertising. Word-of-mouth and referrals from partner organisations, such as health workers, charitable support groups and social services, are emerging as two particularly successful routes of engagement.

Factors which have, according to pilot customers, facilitated their engagement with the pilot are the informal nature of engagement, the easier physical access to the children's centre (as opposed to the Jobcentre Plus office), the more comfortable environment offered by the children's centre, the continuity of Personal Adviser and the privacy offered by many of the children's centre sites.

Factors which have, according to pilot customers and pilot staff, constrained ongoing outreach and engagement are low levels of children's centre users in some areas, a lack of physical working space in the children's centre for the Personal Adviser to engage with children's centre users, cases of potential fraud, transient local communities and language barriers for non-English speaking customers.

Observed pilot outcomes

From our qualitative findings, it is clear that the pilot has achieved two key outcomes to date. First, most case study areas have delivered personalised, flexible and often intensive support for customers in order to meet their needs and respond to their circumstances. Second, these areas have improved access to, and awareness of, work-focused services among children's centre users by successfully engaging with those users. Pilot customers have benefited from both these achievements, with many reporting:

- increased levels of confidence;
- increased awareness of opportunities and options around employment, training and childcare; and
- access to job preparation skills and support.

There is evidence that the pilot has engaged both traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers. However, many pilot staff and partner organisations acknowledge that more work needs to be done to engage the hardest-to-reach communities that are not in contact with either children's centre or Jobcentre Plus services. An ongoing challenge to the pilot is how to engage those customers whose progress towards employment is constrained by primary childcare responsibilities in the short to medium term.

Qualitative evidence from pilot customers, staff and partner organisations indicates that while the pilot has achieved a number of successful training outcomes among customers attending short courses, hard employment outcomes were a longer-term aspiration for the pilot. The evidence points to several good reasons for this. Firstly, most pilot customers had childcare responsibilities to consider alongside any employment or training options. This tended to constrain in the immediate to short term the conditions under which employment or training might be feasible for parents with young children (that is, the need for flexible working hours, local work, and for affordable childcare costs). While there is some evidence of Personal Advisers working hard within these constraints (such as offering advice and guidance about childcare options), this was often a very challenging task. Secondly, a number of customers were some distance from the labour market, meaning that it would take longer for them to realistically enter work – possibly at some point beyond the lifetime of the pilot. Finally, the pilot had been running for only 10 to 11 months at the time of conducting the case study research, and it would be unrealistic to expect high volumes of employment outcomes at such an early stage.

For children's centre staff, there is evidence of improved awareness of work-focused services and of the wider Government agenda on tackling child poverty. For Jobcentre Plus staff, there is evidence to show improved links with children's centre networks and partner organisations. Both findings indicate that the pilots are starting to address customers' needs in a more holistic way, as work-focused services begin to embed themselves within the children's centres and within their network of partner organisations.

Future areas of focus for the evaluation

The baseline evaluation report in 2009 identified three key issues that needed to be explored in future research. The first was the central role and skills of the Personal Adviser in contributing to the overall success of the pilot, particularly with regard to atypical aspects of the Personal Adviser role. The second was the importance of support from children's centre staff in contributing to the success of the Personal Adviser role. Finally, the report highlighted how important it will be for the pilot to prepare customers for longer-term employment options while also promoting the availability of good quality childcare. This was important because many of those who were surveyed in our baseline survey of children's centre users did not consider employment to be a priority in the short to medium term, alongside their childcare responsibilities.

Overall, the interim findings detailed in this report validate all of the above issues as legitimate areas for continuing focus. However, there are two important additional considerations going forward.

First, given that many pilot areas have not yet achieved the breadth of partnership working that they might have hoped, it will be necessary to make a future note

as to how much progress is made on this front. Given that the pilot has now had time to bed-in and overcome many of the start-up and implementation issues that were problematic at the start, further progress on this should be viable.

Second, and most critically, it will be important to see how well Jobcentre Plus staff have adjusted their own working practices and behaviours to facilitate pilot delivery – in particular, the target-orientated expectations of the pilot held by Jobcentre Plus line managers, which continue to exert a negative pressure on the work of the Personal Advisers. To a lesser extent, these working practices and behaviours have also manifested themselves in the ways in which Personal Advisers have had to grapple with the largely unstructured and ad hoc nature of the role, and of customers' demands. Addressing these difficulties is likely to depend on both the skills and attributes of the Personal Adviser, and the support and guidance of the children's centre managers/Heads and Jobcentre Plus line managers.

1 Introduction

This report presents interim findings from the evaluation of the ‘work-focused services in children’s centres’ pilot. This involved qualitative research with children’s centre users (June and July 2009); in-depth interviews with pilot staff and partner organisations; and discussion groups with children’s centre users in ten case study locations (October to December 2009). The qualitative research with children’s centre users involved both pilot customers and those not accessing the pilot.

The case study stage of the evaluation follows on from the baseline phase of the evaluation, the findings from which were published in 2009.

The importance of Jobcentre Plus involvement in children’s centres has been highlighted in the past through the Harker (2006) and Freud (2007) reports, the review of the child poverty strategy, and recent Welfare Reform Green Papers.¹ Previous research by Dench *et al.* (2008) has shown that, although a considerable amount of Jobcentre Plus activity takes place within children’s centres, it tends to be relatively limited in scope, ranging from simply providing leaflets and information, to vacancy boards and telephone or computer contact points, and one-off events, such as job fairs.² This sits in contrast to more recent evidence showing a high level of interest among children’s centre users for advice and support around adult training and education.³

The greatest impact on customers’ engagement and take-up of employment-related services has been observed in the minority of centres where there has been a Jobcentre Plus Adviser available, whether via outreach activities or through

¹ Harker, L. (2006). *Delivering on Child Poverty: what would it take?* Department for Work and Pensions (DWP); Freud, D. (2007). *Reducing Dependency, increasing opportunity: options for the future of welfare to work*. DWP.

² Dench, S., Aston, J., James, L. and Foster, R. (2008). *Jobcentre Plus and Children’s Centres*. DWP Research Report No. 485.

³ Marangozov, R. (2009). *Work-focused services in children’s centres pilot: evaluation baseline report*. DWP Research Report No. 602; Thornton, A. and Dalziel, D. (2009). *Sure Start Children’s Centres Survey of Parents*. Department for Children, Schools and Families Research Report No. 083.

funded sources such as Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. Providing such a resource is costly however, and Dench *et al.* (2008) argued that there was scope for a 'minimum offer' consisting of leaflets and vacancy boards, and an 'enhanced offer' in those areas which appear to offer most potential for beneficial impact on parental employment rates and reductions in child poverty, which might include a linked Adviser.

1.1 About the work-focused services in children's centres pilot

At the end of 2007, the Government set up the Child Poverty Unit to bring together key officials in the DWP, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and HM Treasury. The work of the unit focuses on taking forward the Government's strategy to eradicate child poverty in the long term. Work has included developing a range of pilots to test and explore new approaches to tackling child poverty at local level. The work-focused services in children's centres pilot is one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008, which aim to build up the evidence base of what works in tackling child poverty.

1.1.1 Pilot aims, provision and target groups

The aim of the pilot is 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. Previous research has highlighted the potential for a more comprehensive model of work-focused support to be provided in children's centres.⁴ While the pilot is not linked to the achievement of specific employment outcomes or targets, the aim is to increase engagement with a variety of services and activities which have this as their eventual goal.

This pilot provides for a dedicated Personal Adviser in each of three children's centres in ten local authority (LA) areas. The long-term vision is for the Adviser to be seen as part of the children's centre staff. Each pilot will offer a common core set of services, consistent across the ten LA areas. This will be supplemented by services or delivery mechanisms designed to support local parents into the labour market, as well as by pilot-specific discretionary funding to enhance existing Jobcentre Plus provision that is already in place. Core services include: outreach to those not using the centre and to those using the centre but not using Jobcentre Plus services; providing lone parent adviser services such as New Deal for Lone Parents; and offering services to those outside the traditional Jobcentre Plus contact group, such as potential second earners. An important part of the role is awareness raising, via seminars, events and training for children's centre users and centre staff, and the development of partnership working arrangements.

⁴ Dench, S., Aston, J., James, L. and Foster, R. (2008). *Jobcentre Plus and Children's Centres*. DWP Research Report No. 485.

The ten LAs selected to participate in the pilot are:

- Blackpool;
- Ealing;
- Kingston-upon-Hull;
- Lambeth;
- Nottingham City;
- Redcar and Cleveland;
- Sandwell;
- Somerset;
- Southampton;
- Westminster.

1.1.2 Overview of our evaluation

The evaluation runs from December 2008 to June 2011. Key objectives of the evaluation are to assess:

- impact on take-up of work-focused services within children's centres, both by those already accessing centre services and those who access them for the first time as a result of the pilot;
- engagement with groups of children's centre users not normally accessing such services, such as partners of people who are on benefits or in low-paid work;
- any observed impact on customers' attitudes to Jobcentre Plus services, and to work and training, which may affect future take-up of opportunities;
- any observed impact on the understanding and communication of key messages about employment and child poverty by children's centre staff – to what extent are these now 'owned' by all stakeholders?;
- development of partnership working between Personal Advisers and children's centre staff, and the extent to which the Personal Adviser role and services have become integrated into the children's centre core service offer.

There are three key outputs as part of our evaluation. The first is a baseline report, which contains findings from the initial user survey and from the initial (familiarisation) phase of the implementation study. The second is the interim report, detailing interim progress of the pilot from in-depth qualitative work and case study research. The third is the final report, which will pull together the findings from the different strands of the evaluation, including the Management Information data, the impact study and the implementation and comparison group studies to draw its conclusions and policy recommendations.

1.2 Year 1 baseline findings

The baseline report set the scene for the pilot and evaluation, drawing on the first round of a survey of children's centre users (a baseline survey), familiarisation visits to each of the pilot children's centres and a review of each of the LA bids.

1.2.1 The pilot local authorities and children's centres

It was evident from the baseline report findings that the pilot LAs and children's centres were, and still are, well positioned to deliver to their target communities. This is borne out by the demographic and labour market profiles of the pilot LAs and children's centres. For example, all of the pilot LAs were ranked within the top 75 most deprived LA districts in England, and in most of the reach areas of the children's centres, a high proportion of children aged under five were in workless households – as high as 30 to 40 per cent in many wards.

1.2.2 Pilot approaches and early implementation experiences

The baseline findings, from the survey of children's centre users, indicated that some children's centre users with children under five may present greater challenges for the pilot, as they do not necessarily see work as a priority in the short to medium term, alongside their primary childcare responsibilities. This suggests the importance of the pilot in getting these children's centre users to think about, or prepare for their longer-term employment options, along with promoting the benefits and availability of good quality childcare, so that they can consider work as an option once their children start school, or earlier. This will be an important criterion within the evaluation for assessing progress on the pilots.

The baseline findings also indicated that a great deal of the success of the pilot hinged upon the role and the skills of the Personal Adviser and the support they receive from children's centre staff. This is particularly the case in the task of engaging children's centre users, promoting work-focused services and facilitating multi-agency working.

1.2.3 Other key baseline findings

The baseline user survey showed that there was more than sufficient demand for both work-focused services and for having this service located on site, at the children's centre. Importantly, this demand was particularly strong among those children's centre users who were out of work and claiming benefit entitlements.

1.3 Year 1 interim research

This interim report is intended to provide more detailed findings on the progress of the pilot from year 1 of the evaluation. It is based on qualitative research with children's centre users; in-depth interviews with pilot staff and partner organisations; and discussion groups with children's centre users – all of which took place across ten case study sites 11 to 12 months after the pilot went 'live'.

1.3.1 Selection of case study sites

The selection of the ten case studies was intended to give the evaluation team a sufficiently diverse spread of case study sites from which to conduct the longitudinal depth interviews with centre staff, centre users and key partner organisations in years one and two.

We produced a list of what we thought were the most important criteria for selection based on our familiarisation visits in year one, the background information we have on the children's centres and LAs, and the original pilot bids. These criteria included:

- centres with varying levels of (pre-pilot) Jobcentre Plus resource;
- more established children's centres and newer builds;
- consolidated children's centre sites and those spread across more than one location;
- urban and rural contexts, as well as pockets of deprivation;
- centres that appeared to have different approaches in how they planned to use their Jobcentre Plus personal advisor in year one (integrated approaches versus other less integrated approaches).

1.3.2 Wave 1 qualitative research with children's centre users (summer 2009)

The qualitative research with children's centre users was carried out in June and July 2009. We carried out the first wave of longitudinal depth interviews with 61 children's centre users across the ten case study sites (the second wave in summer 2010 will re-visit the same children's centre users to assess impact of the pilot over time).

Interviews explored the following issues:

- current and previous labour market attachment;
- family characteristics.

Participants received £20 as a thank you for taking part in the interviews and were advised that this was a gift which did not affect any benefits they might be receiving.

1.3.3 Wave 1 case study research (autumn/winter 2009)

The first wave of case study research was carried out between October and December 2009, with the aim of exploring the experiences and perceptions of the pilot from both within and outside the children's centres and sharing good practice to guide future delivery of the pilot. The case studies explored the following issues:

- to what extent services were being delivered in accordance with the core model, and how the flexible elements of funding were being deployed;
- staff experiences and perceptions of working together on delivering work-focused services;
- the response of other organisations, such as Primary Care Trusts and LAs, to the pilot;
- how key messages about poverty and employment were being communicated to staff and to pilot customers;
- customers' perceptions of how the pilot has impacted on their attitudes and employment-seeking behaviours;
- stakeholder perceptions of changes in customers' attitudes and outcomes to date, and factors underpinning this.

We interviewed 64 stakeholders across the ten case study sites, including pilot staff, pilot partner organisations, Together for Children staff, LAs, and other childcare and employment support service providers. We carried out one discussion group with children's centre users in each of the case study sites (avoiding those who had already been engaged in the longitudinal depth interviews), and paid £20 to each parent as a thank you for their participation.

1.4 Overview of this report

This report draws primarily from the findings from the year one interim evaluation research, which consisted of both the in-depth qualitative interviews with children's centre users who had (and had not) engaged with the pilot, and the case study research. Evidence from both these components is dispersed throughout the report and, where relevant, we also make reference to findings from the baseline report.

Quotes from the in-depth qualitative interviews and discussion groups with children's centre users are simply referenced as 'children's centre user' in this report. Quotes from the case study research are simply referenced with the interviewee's job title – such as: 'Personal Adviser' – in the case of the interviews with pilot staff and partner organisations.

We do not attribute the name of the LA district or the specific case study site to the quotes cited in this report. This is to ensure that all information cited in this report remains anonymous and is not directly or indirectly attributable to particular individuals or case study sites.

2 Pilot delivery

The first half of this chapter will review the five core elements of delivery identified in the baseline report. It will use evidence from the case studies and qualitative research with children's centre users to detail the main activities of pilot delivery, and the balance that has been achieved between these. It will also briefly address the demand for these activities and practical challenges of delivery.

The remainder of the chapter will focus on the role of the Personal Adviser in the children's centre. It will look at the support and services offered to children's centre users by the Personal Adviser; the impact and experiences of the Personal Advisers to date; and will identify critical success factors for the Personal Adviser role.

2.1 Pilot activities

This pilot provides for a dedicated Personal Adviser in each of three children's centres in ten local authority (LA) areas, as well as pilot-specific discretionary funding to enhance the Jobcentre Plus provision. The long-term vision is for the Adviser to be co-located and fully integrated into the children's centre. It was intended that each pilot area would offer a core set of services, consistent across the ten LA areas. These would then be supplemented by services or delivery mechanisms designed to support local parents into the labour market.

2.1.1 Core activities

A review of the LA bids for the baseline evaluation report identified five core elements of delivery common to the approaches of the pilot LAs. An overview of these elements is provided in this section, along with findings from the case studies which detail constituent activities.

Work-focused services (Jobcentre Plus provision)

Work-focused services (Jobcentre Plus provision) were being delivered in all case study children's centres. Activities included Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs), delivering New Deal for Lone Parents, training, information advice and guidance, careers advice, job search, job matching, job preparation, better-off calculations and benefit queries. The most significant difference in the provision of

work-focused services was the amount of time dedicated to a mandatory compared to voluntary caseload of clients. In most of the case study areas Personal Advisers dedicated one day or a couple of mornings a week to conducting mandatory WFIs. However, in a few areas the Advisers did not conduct any mandatory WFIs, and in one area nearly 40 per cent of the Adviser's time was spent on these interviews.

Packages of support and bespoke services

As intended, work-focused services were accompanied by 'softer' pilot activities in nearly all case study areas to offer the degree of flexibility important to the nature of the pilot. There are examples of Advisers working closely with customers to identify needs and offer ongoing support, specialist help and/or bespoke services for those who may be furthest from the labour market. There were frequent instances of Advisers providing customers with specific and detailed help finding and accessing relevant training and education courses and family support services. This included basic skills and confidence building classes, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, domestic violence counselling and debt advice. Many Advisers also identified volunteering opportunities for customers, often within the children's centre.

Another indication that pilot areas were tailoring support to meet the needs of their target groups was through the use of the discretionary pilot funding made available through the pilot. The case studies showed that these discretionary pilot funds were being used to flexibly plug gaps in provision or meet specific needs that were not being met by mainstream services. For example, discretionary pilot funds have been used to cover the costs of buying in childcare to run alongside work-focused services – when local provision was not available – to cover additional expenses for attending courses and interviews, to source training or fund volunteering projects and to run area-wide engagement events. One pilot area had used the discretionary pilot funds to employ an additional worker to assist the Personal Adviser. This additional help was reported to be most usefully deployed on community outreach, and meeting ad hoc demands, so allowing the Advisers more time with customers. It was clear from the comments made in our case study interviews that in several areas there was an element of confusion surrounding the discretionary pilot funds available and how they could be, and have been, used. The case studies found evidence that in some areas, pilot staff were drawing on existing sources of funding wherever possible to ensure the sustainability of provision, beyond the life of the pilot.

Partnership working

There is evidence from across the case study sites of Jobcentre Plus Advisers working in partnership with the children's centre, the LA, third sector organisations, training and education providers and other agencies in the children's centre network to refer customers to relevant provision and to raise awareness of work-focused services. Partner organisations included agencies such as Connexions, the Citizens Advice Bureau, health visitors from the Primary Care Trust, debt management charities

and local housing offices. There are examples of Advisers working hard to identify gaps in skills and training provision, arranging for such gaps to be filled, and networking with partner organisations to establish possible routes of referrals. The factors impacting on the extent and nature of partnership working are detailed in Chapter 3.

Integrating the Personal Adviser into the children's centres

Activities to encourage integration have typically been informal and involved the attendance of the Personal Advisers in day-to-day children's centre sessions and staff meetings. This was aimed at increasing the visibility of the Personal Adviser and maximising opportunities to engage with children's centre staff. The extent of involvement of Personal Advisers in children's centre sessions has varied and, as a result, so has the level of integration achieved. In areas where greater integration has been achieved, Personal Advisers have had a natural ability to engage with staff and parents informally, and in unstructured situations not typical of their traditional Jobcentre Plus job role. Children's centre staff and Jobcentre Plus line managers have also played a supporting role in facilitating integration of the Personal Adviser into the new environment. This is discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

Identifying and engaging customers

Pilot guidance highlights the need for flexibility on the part of the Personal Adviser in balancing the more traditional work-focused aspects of the role with outreach and engagement activities. The importance attached to flexibility in the Adviser role highlighted the pilot's new approach to embedding work-focused services in a multi-agency setting and in this way, marked something of a departure from the traditional Jobcentre Plus Adviser role.

The types of engagement activities varied, but across the case study areas it commonly took the form of the Adviser first making him/herself visible and approachable and exploiting opportunities to informally engage children's centre users and introduce themselves. This was achieved through activities such as floor walking, attendance at children's centre activities, assisting at children's centre events and casually engaging children's centre users in conversation. One Adviser neatly refers to this as the 'loitering' approach. More details on engagement and outreach strategies are detailed in Chapter 4.

2.1.2 The provision of core activities across the case study sites

While all the above elements were evident in all the case study areas, there are a number of factors which determined which activities were prioritised over others. In some cases, particular activities, such as language training classes were driven by local demographics and customer demand. For example, in case studies which had an ethnically diverse community, demand for ESOL classes was often high. In a couple of cases, there was a low number of people accessing the children's centre. As a result, some Personal Advisers took on more outreach work in the

community to engage customers, rather than using the children's centre as a main base for outreach work. The availability of local service provision also affected the extent to which some pilot activity was prioritised over others. For example, in one area it was reported that a shortage of local childminders was preventing many customers from attending training courses at the children's centre. As a result, the centre in question used some of its discretionary funding to source additional childcare for these customers.

Among the case studies, it was also possible to identify varying degrees of 'hand-holding' or support for customers. This appeared to depend upon a mixture of the individual's requirements and their distance from the labour market, the individual qualities of the Personal Adviser, the time available to the Adviser, the pressures and influences on the Adviser from Jobcentre Plus, the particular approach and style favoured by Jobcentre Plus line managers, and the availability of local provision.

Much of this evidence positively indicates how many case study areas were adapting specific aspects of pilot delivery to fit local circumstances and need.

2.1.3 Balancing work-focused and outreach activities

As previously mentioned pilot guidance emphasised the importance of achieving a balance between delivering typical Jobcentre Plus work-focused services and delivering outreach and engagement. Overall the LAs and Jobcentre Plus have demonstrated a strong commitment to this approach and a good understanding of why this approach is necessary to reach the most vulnerable families. In most areas we found that Personal Advisers appear to be working hard to divide their time effectively in this manner, but it was widely reported to be an ongoing challenge to manage this balance.

From the case study research, it is possible to identify five key factors that were influential in determining how Personal Advisers divided their time between work-focused and outreach activities. These are detailed below.

Personal Adviser's own diary management

Pilot guidance states that the way Personal Advisers organise their time on a daily basis should be left up to the discretion of the individual Adviser and their line manager, in recognition of the need for flexibility in the role. It is clear from our case study evidence that this has largely been the case. The extent of line manager involvement has varied between areas depending on how engaged they have been with the pilot, but typically Advisers have been free to manage their own diaries as they see fit, with Jobcentre Plus line managers only intervening when an issue regarding time management is brought to their attention.

Many Advisers told us they have found keeping a formal diary impractical in a role which demands such flexibility. Advisers report having a range of specific activities they must undertake each week, but being flexible to fit these around more immediate needs of customers and any ad hoc demands.

Customer demand and increasing awareness of the pilot

Customer demand appeared to be a strong driver of Personal Adviser activity. In some areas where engagement has been particularly successful, Personal Advisers tended to report that the degree of freedom they have had to organise their own diary has decreased as their case loads have increased, and that they have needed to be progressively more flexible and responsive in their delivery. In areas where customer demand for the Personal Adviser is strongest, activities seem to be almost entirely driven by the needs of the customers.

As awareness of the pilot increased, this had an impact on the split of activities undertaken by the Personal Adviser. Broadly speaking, in the early days, most Personal Advisers tried to spend a lot of time on engagement activities in the children's centre to maintain an informal presence and so raise awareness, gain trust and integrate into the staff team. However, as the pilot progressed and awareness and uptake of the services increased in many areas, Personal Advisers tended to dedicate more time to delivering work-focused services and bespoke packages of support to customers. Nevertheless, it was still felt important to maintain this informal presence in order to demonstrate availability and approachability, even if the level of involvement in certain activities had to be reduced. For example, if Personal Advisers found they were too busy to attend entire children's centre sessions, they tended to simply attend at the beginning and end of key sessions instead.

The influence of children's centre managers

Children's centre managers have had little formal influence in how the Personal Advisers spend their time, generally only making suggestions to Personal Advisers if they felt certain activities would benefit customers. However, in a minority of cases, where the children's centre manager was more involved in the day-to-day running of the pilot, they were able to make suggestions to the Personal Adviser as to how they could usefully expand their work. This included providing names and contact details for potential partner organisations, outreach sites or information about the labour market characteristics of children's centre users. Where this had occurred, the Personal Advisers noted how helpful such local intelligence had been.

Decision to conduct WFIs

Another key factor in determining the split of Personal Adviser activities has been the Jobcentre Plus decision in each area as to whether or not Personal Advisers will work with a caseload of New Deal clients (NDLP or New Deal for Partners). Amongst the minority of case studies that opted for this caseload approach, the Personal Advisers on the pilot formally reserved a certain amount of diary time for these appointments and any subsequent fail to attend interviews back at the Jobcentre Plus office. As a result, these Personal Advisers have tended to have less time available for other activities, such as outreach and engagement. The specific

amount of time reserved for these interviews varies and is left to the Personal Adviser's discretion to allow a degree of flexibility in juggling WFIs alongside outreach work.

Most case study areas that had not utilised this approach (or at least had not yet utilised this approach), had not done so because, despite the potential for engagement, they believed that the opportunities presented by this pilot to offer a new and flexible service would be of most benefit to those willing to engage voluntarily. As a result, Personal Advisers in these areas had more time available for outreach and engagement activities. Indeed, one case study area had stopped conducting WFIs because the children's centre manager and Personal Adviser felt that they impeded the integration of the Adviser into the centre.

Working to targets

Another factor which influenced the balance between work-focused services and outreach and engagement activities is whether the Personal Advisers and line managers felt they were working towards a specific set of targets. The pilot itself is not explicitly linked to the achievement of employment outcomes or targets and guidance states Personal Advisers are exempt from the standard Adviser Achievement Tool, which ensures that all Jobcentre Plus Advisers contribute to Jobcentre Plus aims. However, in a few areas Jobcentre Plus line managers or pilot leads had taken the decision to set Advisers their own individual pilot outcome targets and/or asked Personal Advisers to report how their time is spent. Conflicting opinions exist across areas and job roles as to the appropriateness of setting Advisers targets. In many areas Jobcentre Plus staff saw targets as a useful motivational goal and benchmark against which to measure pilot progress, and they believed that pilot activities should be directed in some way towards specific outcomes. However concerns were expressed by others that targets promoted an emphasis on quantity, thus detracting from the quality of provision provided. It was very clear in some instances that the pressure Advisers felt the targets placed them under did affect the amount of time they were able to dedicate to outreach and engagement activities.

'I think it would be different because then we would feel a bit more relaxed and then we might think, "well, today I am going to go to this group and I'm going to spend two hours there or an hour" or whatever. So you don't have this thing of like, "somebody's watching over me, you've got this many people on your caseload, what did you do with them?" Obviously that's part of the job we're doing and that's what we're expected to do. But then I think you will feel more relaxed and you'll have that flexibility to work... We'll not think, "oh God, I've spent an hour-and-a-half with this person, I could have done three interviews in that time? How am I going to explain myself?"'

(Personal Adviser)

A minority of Personal Advisers reported that they felt 'caught in the middle' between pressures from their line managers to meet targets and the expectations of the children's centre managers to engage in outreach activities. A more detailed discussion of this is provided in Section 3.1.1.

2.1.4 Demand for activities

The baseline survey of children's centre users in year one of our evaluation revealed that there were high levels of demand for work-focused services being provided in children's centres. Our interim research found that, while children's centre users engaged with the pilot for a variety of reasons, many of them were seeking general careers advice and guidance, help with benefit-related queries, or a better idea of their current and future options regarding employment.

There was also a high level of demand for the short-term courses laid on in the children's centres, such as childcare, first aid, IT, basic skills, and National Vocational Qualifications, for example, in health and social care and customer care. While pilot staff reported that these courses did not usually lead to employment outcomes (one Personal Adviser even made a reference to 'serial course-takers'), many did recognise that for those customers who were some distance from the labour market, these courses offered the opportunity for social interaction with other parents, greater exposure to the children's centre services, and an opportunity to develop confidence and interpersonal skills.

This pattern of demand largely reflects the fact that many customers with children under five did not see work as a priority in the short to medium term, alongside their primary childcare responsibilities. As a result, their demand for work-focused services was mostly with a view to starting work, education or training once their youngest child had started school. This aside, there was a significant minority of customers who were looking to start work in the immediate to short term. Amongst these customers, there was more demand for help with job search and job preparation.

2.1.5 Practicalities of delivery

The case study findings reveal a number of practical challenges around pilot delivery, and particularly around start-up and implementation, location and facilities, and governance arrangements and line management of the Personal Advisers.

Start-up and implementation

There were some issues which arose during the start-up and implementation of the pilots and these were reported to stall delivery in many areas. These included delays in the recruitment of Personal Advisers, as well as in ensuring they had been cleared to work with children and vulnerable young people by the Criminal Records Bureau. Nearly all pilots have also suffered from IT problems which have been a source of frustration and a demand on time for Personal Advisers. In some instances it has also impacted the level of service Advisers have been able to offer.

'If a parent comes in and I can't log into my system, what am I going to do with them? So you end up re-booking them so you're more into your diary time. It's like you're always playing catch-up.'

(Personal Adviser)

These delays were reported to have stalled the delivery of key pilot activities in many areas in the first year of the pilot, particularly with regard to partnership working (detailed in Chapter 3).

Pilot location and facilities

Most of the Personal Advisers in the case study locations were working full time from one central children's centre building. However, several children's centres consisted of a central 'hub' site and several outreach sites, and in these instances Jobcentre Plus Advisers split their time between the key sites as they saw fit, chiefly depending on footfall in each site. Within their children's centre, most Jobcentre Plus Advisers had some sort of office and/or interviewing space in which to work, however the extent to which individual children's centre facilities were equipped to cater for the Advisers in terms of facilities and available space was variable and most areas faced some degree of challenge in this respect. For example, in one area, the working space of the Personal Adviser doubled as a reception space for the children's centre users making it impractical to hold confidential discussions. In these cases, there was little that could be done to accommodate the Personal Adviser as it was physically impossible for the children's centre to create more space when the centre was already running at full capacity.

However, the impact of such issues was mitigated in some cases by the willingness on the part of the Personal Adviser and the children's centre to be flexible in their approach to finding solutions. This is detailed more in Section 3.1.

Where the issue of space was not so easily resolved, this impacted on delivery of the pilot in a number of ways. Firstly, shared space with other members of staff raised concerns around a lack of privacy and the impact this would have on the levels of engagement with customers. Secondly, if Advisers had to give up their working space to accommodate other children's centre demands on the room, then this was effectively lost time, because Advisers needed to access their workstations to do the majority of their work. Conversely, if interview rooms were not available at certain times, Personal Advisers were less able to be flexible with appointments. More generally some office/interview rooms were not considered to be conducive to promoting customer engagement, with some too small for purpose or not child-friendly.

The geographical location of pilot areas was also influencing delivery, particularly in rural areas, where the availability of transport links and local childcare provision was often a problem. An Adviser in one rural area reported that she had to spend a lot of time organising the logistics of buying in childcare and arranging transport to run alongside certain group events and training sessions.

Communication arrangements, governance and line management

Our research found that, overall, communication arrangements and governance structures for the pilot appeared to be working well. Pilot staff reported that these mechanisms had largely proved useful in keeping partner organisations informed about pilot progress; in increasing awareness among pilot partner organisations about each other's services (therefore avoiding duplication of provision); and in flagging up operational issues that needed addressing.

However, a common problem was the issue of capacity among Jobcentre Plus line managers. Pilot guidance reports that it is crucial the Adviser and their line manager maintain frequent and regular contact. It allows the mechanics of this to be determined locally, but suggests Advisers may benefit from attendance at weekly Jobcentre Plus communication and team meetings. It also states that Adviser managers need to be aware of the day-to-day activities in the children's centres to better understand and support the Adviser's progress with integration. It therefore recommends the Adviser line manager liaises regularly/works closely with children's centre managers.

In reality, the case studies found that Jobcentre Plus line managers frequently had limited capacity to devote time to the pilot, with reports that line managers, were functioning as a source of contact for personnel/human resources requirements and communications. This is largely a consequence of the additional pressures placed on Jobcentre Plus by the recession, and resultant changes in personnel arrangements in some local offices. As a result, some Personal Advisers and centre managers felt they had no consistent contact from whom to seek advice. In certain instances this meant that issues were left unresolved.

As a result, some pilot staff questioned the purpose of the Jobcentre Plus line management role, which they thought had become too removed from the day-to-day experience of the pilot – particularly in the physical sense of not being on site. For some Personal Advisers, this distance between themselves and Jobcentre Plus line managers was a source of frustration.

'I've said come and spend a day here with us; come and be here so you know exactly what goes on. [My line manager] talks about performance and stuff like that, but I've said, "look, you sit me back in the Jobcentre, it's completely different there". If you're out here its not the same.'

(Personal Adviser)

At the time of the case studies many areas were aware that the line management situation was not ideal. A few were beginning to take steps to address the problems, particularly by improving the communication between the line manager and the children's centre manager. On a more day-to-day basis, it also seemed important for Personal Advisers to keep in regular contact with their children's centre manager, and both parties benefited when centre managers took on some form of informal supervisory role.

2.2 The impact and experiences of the Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers

This second half of the chapter will detail the impact of the Personal Adviser role by drawing on customers' experiences of the Personal Advisers, and how they thought this differed from what they had received, or thought they might receive, in a Jobcentre Plus office. The chapter will also look at the experiences of the Personal Advisers to date, in terms of how they are coping with their new roles, any challenges they have faced, and how these have been addressed. The chapter will then conclude by summarising the key points and assessing how successful, overall, pilot delivery has been to date.

2.2.1 Impact of the Personal Adviser

This pilot created a new modified objective for Personal Advisers to work to:

'To embed Jobcentre Plus work-focused services within the children's centre, working in partnership with children's centre staff, establishing and building rapport and trust with parents, providers, employers, and the local community. [To] provide core Jobcentre Plus services, encouraging people who would not otherwise do so to access them, and act as a role model in leading, managing relationships with Jobcentre Plus and children's centre colleagues and developing self.'

The emphasis placed upon outreach and partnership working in this modified objective highlights the pilot's new approach to embedding work-focused services in a multi-agency setting and to establishing relationships and trust with parents. Arguably it marks a departure from the traditional Adviser role in the Jobcentre, which is subject to more rigid targets.

The in-depth research with children's centre users show the impact of the Personal Adviser to have been a largely positive one to date. From the in-depth customer interviews and case study research, several key factors emerge as critical to the success of this new approach.

Personal Advisers are more accessible and convenient

Children's centre users welcomed the opportunity to access work-focused services in their local children's centre, typically finding the venues more accessible and convenient than their local Jobcentre Plus office. Children's centres were also regarded as informal, welcoming and trusted environments, in which customers were familiar with the set-up and staff.

'I know that there are services here, I would start here because that's an easy thing to do, you know, it's on our doorstep.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

Many of these views were expressed in contrast to some customers' experiences at a Jobcentre Plus office, which was described as less accessible for customers

with buggies and pushchairs, less convenient in terms of being an environment in which you could easily attend to children, and less appropriate for children (many parents perceived Jobcentre Plus offices to be intimidating, both in terms of how they felt treated and in terms of the sort of people they encountered there).

'I think it's great because it means you don't have to go stand in the job centre with all the drug-using, drunks and things like that.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

'They have a security man at the door and as soon as you walk through the door, he's like, "what do you want?"'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

Personal Advisers are sympathetic and understanding

Customers also reported that in most cases, the Personal Adviser had been sympathetic, sensitive and prepared to listen to and understand their needs. This, they felt, was a necessary prerequisite to how the Personal Adviser had then gone on to offer support, advice and encouragement. This personalised support was key for many customers, and particularly those who faced multiple barriers to work or training, or constraining personal circumstances.

'She just came and sat with us this morning and had a chat. She's friendly. It's as though she knows what you're going through. She seems normal. Sympathetic.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

Again, some of these positive views were expressed in contrast to some customers' less positive experiences at Jobcentre Plus offices. These customers often felt the Personal Advisers in the Jobcentre Plus offices did not understand or take account of their individual situation and childcare responsibilities and were just 'going through the motions' – for example, recommending or pressuring them into applying for unwanted and unsuitable positions.

'When you go, as a single parent, to see the Jobcentre Plus, if you start raising issues about the quality of your childcare and how it's hard to find childcare, the attitude you often get is, well, you're not trying hard enough, and you're just making excuses. And I know other single parents who have almost been pushed into taking shop jobs that they don't want, and been told, "beggars can't be choosers". Now you've got a child, you should take any job.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

'I was actually pregnant and I went to the Jobcentre and they wanted me to go and sit in a minibus on a busy road doing a traffic survey. I can't remember how many months pregnant I was but you wouldn't want to go and sit in a van when you're pregnant, wanting the loo and things all the time. They just suggest really silly things.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

Personal Advisers are able to build trust with customers

Customers mentioned being able to develop a relationship, trust and rapport with the Personal Adviser at the children's centre and it was evident that this was as much to do with the continuity of the Adviser role in the children's centre as was to do with the Adviser's personal skills.

'You've got someone to speak to, yes. And it's someone that really knows you. It's not a one-off thing where you go in and it's a different Adviser. It's someone you see again. And you know what you're going to get.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

'That's what happened to me at the Job Centre when I went. I didn't know who to speak to...so it's good to know someone. It's easier.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

Personal Advisers are helpful

Most customers reported how helpful the Personal Adviser had been in addressing their queries and problems. Customers appreciated the time Personal Advisers took to find the answers to specific queries or provide personal assistance with certain activities, such as answering benefit queries, job searching and completing application forms.

'It's nice to be able to just pick the phone up and say, "oh, hello, can you just work this out, this job has come up". I've come over with a few applications and she's gone through them to check if I needed to write something else and she's offered to help with my CV and everything.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

'Yes, she's really good. She goes on the Internet looking for jobs with me as well. She got me an interview as well, for a job. She's really helpful.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

2.2.2 Personal Adviser experiences to date

Overall, the experiences of the Personal Advisers have been broadly positive. They have settled into their new roles well, particularly considering they have had to quickly come to terms with both a new working environment and a new way of working. Most Advisers were also positive and enthusiastic about their work in the children's centre.

However, case study feedback did highlight four common challenges associated with the Personal Adviser role. These are detailed below.

Managing the unstructured and ad hoc nature of engagement

As detailed in Section 2.1.3, many Personal Advisers struggled in the initial stages of the pilot to adapt to the flexibility the role required, and the largely ad hoc demands made on their time. They had to balance work-focused and outreach activities, but often these activities overlapped and were almost impossible to diarise in an orderly way.

'I don't even take lunch because we work so flat out really. And clients just come in and see us any time, so I might take a ten minute break. In the Jobcentre I would take half an hour break, but you can't afford to do that because clients can come anytime and I don't like to keep them waiting.'

(Personal Adviser)

'You're putting so much work into it, you're putting lots more hours into it, there are a lot of times we stay late and we try and do our work and try and complete everything that we can, but there's still so much work outstanding.'

(Personal Adviser)

While most Personal Advisers accepted that flexibility was a necessary requirement of their job role, many reported that it was often difficult to engage the volumes of customers they might have hoped because of the ad hoc nature in which customers' demands cropped up. This made it almost impossible for some Advisers to block out particular times in their diary for outreach work because they just could not always predict when and what might crop up during that time.

'...that's when you have to say, "I really can't stop, I've got someone to see". You have to keep saying that because then they become too much, they go over that line but at the same time, you can't turn them away...It's a balance.'

(Personal Adviser)

In this sense, these Personal Advisers could be said to be victims of their own success – children's centre users felt so comfortable approaching them, they were at times inundated with requests which made it difficult to engage with other outreach activities. While Personal Advisers may have felt this was, at times, a hindrance to outreach work and to engaging with a wider range of potential customers, it is perhaps reassuring to see that this is, at the very least, evidence of how responsive many of the Advisers are trying to be to parents' needs and requests.

Managing particularly complex cases

A more personalised level of engagement that Personal Advisers often sought to achieve brought with it a potential problem in the early stages of pilot delivery. Some Advisers reported becoming too involved with customers, trying to assist with many things that did not necessarily come under their job description or that they were not equipped to handle. Many reported that they had to learn when it was appropriate to assist a customer and when they should refer the customer on to other support and provision.

'At first I thought it's just going to be a simple case of phone-in or doing this letter and then it will be dealt with. But then when I saw that no, they kept on. I'd do a letter for her, send it to housing, then they'll send another letter asking for more information...then I realised, I can't keep on doing this and that's when I referred her on to the housing officer. At first it was probably my fault. I should have just immediately found out who the housing officer was and referred her on. But now I know, and I know he's around every Tuesday.'

(Personal Adviser)

Understanding the data monitoring process

Almost unanimously Personal Advisers experienced confusion over the data monitoring process and reported that more clarity from the outset would have been helpful regarding the specifics of data collection requirements. This confusion (and the time spent clarifying the situation) was reported as having been time consuming and frustrating.

Managing job sharing and part-time work

Where Personal Advisers had job share or part-time working arrangements in place, they reported some tension between the nature of the work (which heavily depended upon an Adviser's ability to build up a personal and trusting relationship with customers, as well as to manage the unstructured aspects of the workload and the ad hoc demands of customers) and the reduced hours in which they had to carry out this work. While these tensions were not insurmountable, they did raise the question of whether the nature of such work, which often required the Personal Adviser to be physically present and visible at the children's centre, lent itself easily to job sharing and part-time working arrangements.

'I'll give an example, one of my parents, she's starting a work trial and she actually left a message on my phone on Friday and I don't work Thursday and Friday, so I only got her message this morning. She's actually starting today, but the employer has to sign a contract, health and safety and what the reason is, before the work trial can be started. So, all this morning I've been trying to sort that out. I've managed to sort that out but otherwise I would have had to say to her, you can't start, maybe start from tomorrow.'

(Personal Adviser)

'It's hard work, it really is and knowing I leave on Wednesday, I lose out because I'm not here Thursday and Friday so then there will be vacancies that are coming up that I think this person would have been perfect for this job, but I've missed the deadline, so I think that's really annoying and I know I could have done this for them.'

(Personal Adviser)

2.3 Chapter summary

All the pilot case studies have made good progress in delivering a range of activities consistent with the plans laid out in their bids. Although Personal Advisers have highlighted challenges associated with their new role, this does not seem to have substantially impacted the quality of their services as most customers are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences with the pilot and about the provision of work focused services in children's centres. From the evidence presented in this chapter, it is possible to conclude that successful pilot delivery to date has been characterised by the following:

- Personal Advisers who demonstrate flexibility, resilience and strong interpersonal skills in their approach to working;
- Personal Advisers working hard from the outset to integrate themselves into the children's centre and to engage and build trust with children's centre users;
- Personal Advisers providing a responsive and personalised service, tailored to the customers' needs and circumstances.

In this sense, Personal Advisers have been central to the success of pilot delivery to date. However, the following will be key to ensuring continued and further progress on pilot delivery:

- the ability of Personal Advisers to effectively manage the ad-hoc and unstructured demands of the role;
- the ability of Personal Advisers to balance the provision of intensive, one-to-one support with other competing demands on their time from within the pilot;
- a commitment by all pilot partner organisations to further develop partnership working, which has, to date been hindered by start-up delays and practical barriers to implementation;
- sufficient support for the Personal Advisers by Jobcentre Plus and children's centre managers in the task of successful pilot delivery. In particular, Jobcentre Plus managers will be important in providing closer and more regular line management support, and in recognising that some of their more target-orientated ways of measuring progress are inappropriate for a pilot of this nature.

3 Partnership working

This chapter details the extent and nature of partnership working within the pilot. Most of this detail concentrates on the partnership working between the children's centre and Jobcentre Plus as this was the partnership upon which successful pilot delivery hinged. The chapter identifies a number of critical success factors to successful partnership working in this regard. The chapter then details the partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and other providers and partner organisations.

3.1 Partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres

Within the original design of the pilot, partnership working was always seen as the key mechanism through which work-focused services were to become embedded within a multi-agency setting. Against this background, however, the partnership between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres was to play a particularly important role in determining how well pilot provision could be integrated into, and delivered within, the children's centre settings. In successfully doing so, it was intended that work-focused services in children's centres would:

- create opportunities for Jobcentre Plus to work more closely with community-based providers and other partner organisations;
- allow Jobcentre Plus to reach its customers in a new way and in a different environment;
- allow Jobcentre Plus to extend its services to customers who currently may not use them, such as potential second earners;
- provide an opportunity for customers to experience formal child care at first hand;
- broaden awareness within the children's centres of the importance of work-focused services in addressing child poverty.

3.1.1 Critical success factors for effective partnership working

Throughout our fieldwork, it was possible to identify a number of examples of effective and ineffective partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and the children's centres. By collectively analysing these examples, it is possible to identify emerging critical success factors that were common to all these cases. These success factors are detailed below.

Flexibility on both sides to make the pilot work

The baseline report evidenced notable concerns among children's centre managers and Personal Advisers alike around 'cultural' differences that might emerge between Advisers and children's centre staff, both of whom are used to working in different organisational environments and to different working practices and priorities.

In the case study research that followed, it became clear that these cultural differences had emerged in all the case study sites, to varying degrees, and reflected the different priorities and customer groups of both organisations. In many cases these differences centred around procedural or compliance issues – for example, the need to check that the pilot premises were Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant, or children's centre requirements for Jobcentre Plus Advisers to receive training on child safeguarding. In other cases, they centred around behavioural differences – differences that stemmed from a natural familiarity with a particular way of working or environment.

Few of these differences were problematic *per se*. As a few pilot staff had pointed out in the early days of the pilot, some of these differences were to be expected, particularly in a pilot which was seeking to fully integrate work-focused services into children's centres in a way that had not been attempted before. However, while the emerging differences were not necessarily problematic in themselves, they did require flexibility on the part of both organisations to overcome any problems or differences in order to successfully deliver the pilot. Specifically, it entailed a willingness on both sides to be open to each other's organisational cultures and ways of working – particularly between the Jobcentre Plus Adviser and the children's centre manager, or Head, who were most closely involved with managing the delivery of the pilot.

In cases where this was evident, staff recognised that, while there might be cultural differences in ways of working between Jobcentre Plus Advisers and children's centre staff, there was always likely to be a way to address these in a way that did not prove detrimental to either the pilot, or the customers. A good example is the way in which some pilot areas dealt with the lack of working space for the Personal Adviser. In one area, where the Personal Adviser found themselves unhelpfully split between more than one children's centre building (neither of which could dedicate space for them), the Personal Adviser decided to spend most of their time productively working out in the community, doing outreach work and delivering work-focused services in other local community venues. In

another instance, the children's centre created space for the Personal Adviser using a room which they hired out to other organisations. They then used the discretionary funding from the pilot to subsidise any lost income they would have otherwise received from the room hire.

It may seem obvious to state that flexibility on the part of staff is a necessary prerequisite to effective partnership working in any pilot. However, as many staff and customers pointed out in our evaluation, the environment and working cultures of Jobcentre Plus and Sure Start children's centres often felt like two different worlds. Merging these two worlds, therefore, is a critical risk to a pilot of this nature, and one which therefore depends more heavily than most on the flexibility of pilot staff to:

- adjust to or explain new ways of working to the other pilot staff;
- invest time in integrating the procedures of two different environments;
- provide ongoing support so that new working practices 'bed in'.

As one children's centre manager described it, much of the knowledge and training that is needed to work in a children's centre is 'second nature' to children's centre staff, but not to external professionals who do not work around families:

'When other practitioners come together, you've got a very necessary period of induction when you're having to learn about things that are, to us, fundamental. And this is ongoing. Why, for example, in this building it's incredibly important to go down and pick up your visitor at the desk and not have people hanging around. It's not simply about children, it's about the fact that the building's also used to support women who have experienced domestic violence, and we don't all know everything about the family links. We need to be sure that everyone feels safe. These could sound like very petty points, but in terms of keeping the building safe, they're really important ones.'

(Children's centre manager)

Some Jobcentre Plus Advisers and District Managers expressed similar sentiments when talking about the need to explain to children's centre staff Jobcentre Plus procedures around DDA compliant premises, or the importance of private space to discuss confidential issues.

Regular communications between the children's centre manager and the Personal Adviser

From this willingness to engage flexibly with the pilot followed a willingness to invest time and support to resolve or explain different ways of working, or communicate how this might have to be adjusted or improved to fit the new working environment. In case studies where effective partnership working was evident, this mostly took the form of regular communications between the children's centre manager and the Personal Adviser. This communication often took the form of informal chats, regular 'catch-up' sessions, frequent email, phone

or face-to-face communications, or in one instance, formal supervision. In some instances, this would be more ad hoc in that communications would only arise as a result of a problem, or a need for clarification, help or guidance. However, what was clearly valued in all cases was that, firstly there were communication channels in place and secondly, that both parties felt comfortable and able to utilise these.

In some cases, communication was cited as key to alleviating tensions between the Personal Adviser and the children's centre manager. Once one party understood why the other party had to work in a particular way, they were more willing to then accommodate this. However, to simply explain the rationale behind certain ways of working (or to find the time to do this), was not something that immediately occurred to some staff, who at times took for granted that this was organisation-specific and not common knowledge.

Clear lines of open communication were key to addressing any problems quickly and preventing their escalation into bigger issues. Conversely, in those case study areas where a breakdown of partnership working was evident, these lines of communication between the Personal Adviser and the children's centre manager/Head were clearly lacking. This was highlighted in two case study sites where a lack of effective communications between the children's centre staff and the Personal Adviser escalated into further problems and misunderstandings around ways of working in the children's centre.

'For some reason the centre manager didn't really take to the Adviser that went in there. They really didn't speak to each other – it happened both ways. So they each kind of just backed off and did their own thing.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

Referrals between the children's centre staff and partner organisations, and Personal Adviser

Another key way in which partnership working was evident was through referrals between the children's centre staff and partner organisations, and the Personal Adviser. In the children's centres where this was occurring frequently, Personal Advisers had obviously worked with the children's centre staff and manager to make their services known. In a few instances, this had extended to wider partner organisations in the community, who also delivered to families using the children's centres.

'Now I'm getting referrals from different members of different teams, not just from someone calling in, or from me going out and meeting them. I'm getting referrals from the community team, from family support...from the play team, the admin team downstairs...this lady up in health. So, it's coming from all angles.'

(Personal Adviser)

Referrals to the Personal Adviser depended not only on pilot staff and wider partner organisations being aware of the work-focused services pilot, and what services were available to customers. Pilot staff and partner organisations mentioned that trusting the Personal Adviser was a factor too, especially where the staff member concerned had built up a very personal and trusting relationship with their client, or where the client had multiple or complex needs. Staff reported that it was important to know that their referral would be acted upon by the Personal Adviser and that if it was, that the client's needs would be addressed effectively and sensitively. If not, some pilot staff and partner organisations felt that much of the work they might have done with the client could be undermined, or undone. Some also felt that their own credibility with the client would be brought into question.

This kind of trust was gained largely from personal contact with the Personal Adviser. Staff and partner organisations noted that they had also been reassured by observing the Personal Adviser engaging effectively with children's centre users or through positive feedback they had received from the parents themselves about their experiences with the Adviser. In a couple of cases, pilot staff indicated that this kind of reassurance had even helped them overcome their own negative perceptions of Jobcentre Plus staff.

Of course, in those children's centres where staff and partner organisations were aware and trusting of the Personal Adviser, the Personal Adviser was also more aware of the wider network of partner organisations and services to which they could refer. In this way, partnership working had manifested itself in a few children's centres through a two-way flow of referrals between the children's centre staff and partner organisations, and the Personal Adviser.

'I'm trying to think how many referrals I've made to [named Personal Adviser] now. I can't even give you a number.'

(Partner organisation)

'Some of the families I'm dealing with are ready to think about what they're going to do next. And it might be what they're well, "I've no GCSEs, I'd love to learn how to work a computers", and that's immediately where I start thinking about [named Personal Adviser]. And of course, [named Personal Adviser] is so approachable and wonderful with the families, it makes the whole transition easier.'

(Partner organisation)

Referrals from children's centre staff and partner organisations were often an important source of referrals because children's centre users had already built up a trusting relationship with these staff, and so were more willing to be referred on.

'And I think they know me very well, and if a recommendation comes from me about the Adviser, they're more likely to engage as well.'

(Partner organisation)

Joining up partner networks and contacts

Evidence of partnership working within the pilot was also evident in some case study areas through the joining up of partner networks. Pilot staff in some children's centres reported that the Personal Adviser had brought to the pilot their own knowledge, links and contacts with education and training providers in the area. At the same time, a few Personal Advisers reported that the pilot had allowed them to link into the children's centre's network of partner organisations and providers.

'The children's centres, before the pilot came in, already had a lot of links with the wider community. What's happened is the Jobcentre Plus Advisers have brought that wider experience of contracted and non-contracted providers in the area who we can tap into for support. I think the children's centres, with their existing services and support and the Jobcentre Plus Advisers with their knowledge of what was out there has brought it all together, which should really help them deliver outcomes for the pilot.'

(Children's centre manager)

All staff acknowledged the many ways in which this benefited the pilot and the customers. Firstly, it meant that the pilot could plug gaps in provision within the children's centre, particularly with regard to employment, education and training provision. Secondly, it meant that the pilot could complement the other range of services at the children's centre to address customers' needs in a more holistic way. Finally, many customers reported how useful it was to access multiple services in their local children's centres.

'This building is such an umbrella for different routes and services.'

(Children's centre user, discussion group)

Prior understanding of each other's organisational culture

The pilot children's centres were initially selected on a range of criteria, one of which was differing levels of prior engagement with Jobcentre Plus to test whether this made any difference to the pilot outcomes. Our selection of case studies also reflected this variation in prior levels of engagement with Jobcentre Plus.

However, it was clear in most of the case study areas that this criteria made little difference to partnership working. There existed little prior understanding among children's centre staff and the Personal Advisers of each other's organisational cultures and ways of working. While some case study sites had had previous contact with Jobcentre Plus, through having a named contact, or hosting visits by Personal Advisers, this was often on an ad hoc basis and for short periods of time. In other words, this previous experience was not comparable to having a Personal Adviser based at the children's centre full time.

This caused a number of challenges in three of the ten case studies in particular. At one site, which had had prior engagement with Jobcentre Plus in the form of a named contact and information days, the issue was in terms of familiarising the

Personal Adviser with the health, safety, safeguarding and other procedures of the children's centre and its activities. While this was not straining relationships between pilot staff, the children's centre manager did report that it was proving to be time-consuming alongside the day-to-day running of the centre.

In the other two case studies, both of which had had some (albeit occasional) prior engagement with Jobcentre Plus, this lack of understanding regarding different ways of working was proving a far more significant challenge to partnership working. On the one hand, some pilot staff from a non-Jobcentre Plus background struggled to understand what they perceived to be the rigid structures and working practices of Jobcentre Plus.

'Because we're open from eight in the morning to six at night, our current staffing has meant that everybody's been hands on deck trying to cover those shift patterns. But even asking [named Personal Adviser] to do one day out of a month, to start early or finish late, has been tricky because she doesn't want to do that. That's fair enough because it doesn't come under her remit as Jobcentre Plus, but what it does come under is the remit of the children's centre.'

(Children's centre manager)

On the other hand, Jobcentre Plus staff at times struggled to work in a different environment while still keeping within the Jobcentre Plus conditions of their employment of which they were familiar.

'There have been challenges along that process. A lot of it comes down to the different terms and conditions of being Jobcentre Plus staff.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

Physical space to accommodate the Personal Adviser

The implications of a lack of physical space for the Personal Adviser within the children's centre are discussed in length in Section 2.1.5.

What is worth mentioning here is that where space was an issue, pilot staff often reported that this limited the potential for partnership working to develop between the children's centre staff and the other partner organisations on the one hand, and the Personal Adviser on the other. This was because, in these instances, the Personal Adviser often had to rely more heavily on engaging parents outside of the children's centre site, and so had less contact with children's centre staff and partner organisations.

Shared expectations of the Personal Adviser role and pilot outcomes

The baseline report noted that most pilot staff understood and were committed to the broad aims of the pilot around reducing child poverty by providing work-focused services in children's centres. However, our interim evaluation research revealed that in half of our case study sites, there were differing views among pilot staff about how these broad aims should be met. Some Jobcentre Plus line

managers and District line managers placed more of an emphasis on the work-focused activities as opposed to outreach and engagement, the latter of which the Personal Advisers and children's centre staff saw as integral part to pilot delivery.

In these case study sites, this difference in emphasis was reported to be creating tensions between the Jobcentre Plus line managers on the one hand, and the Personal Advisers and children's centre managers on the other. This became more apparent as the autonomy of the Personal Adviser role grew, and it became clear that the Jobcentre Plus line managers expected much more of a focus to be on work-focused activities within the pilot, with less time dedicated to outreach and engagement.

In particular in two case study areas, these tensions were ongoing but were not causing significant problems. This was mainly because there were regular communications between the line manager and the Personal Adviser, but also because the line managers were willing to grant the Personal Adviser some autonomy in their role to decide what was best in meeting the needs of the customers and in working in their particular local context.

However, in two other case study areas, these tensions were more problematic for partnership working because it was evident that the line managers had not fully understood the purpose of the pilot, and the key role that outreach had to play in engaging customers and building trust. They were also less willing to grant the Advisers as much autonomy in deciding how they should spend their time on the pilot. For example, in one case, the Personal Adviser was working to job entry targets set by Jobcentre Plus, despite the fact that pilot guidance stated that Advisers were to be exempt from targets. As a result, the Personal Adviser felt pressurised to meet these targets, while also trying to engage with customers in an outreach setting – an activity which they then felt they had to justify to their Jobcentre Plus line manager.

'When I hand in my stats every week, I think it's low, even if I've had IT issues or other things going on. You're thinking, "Oh my God, what are they going to say when they see that? They're going to think I do nothing all week!" But you know you've done something all week...it's getting Jobcentre Plus to understand that. With this pilot, don't get me wrong, you need to be able to do your calculations and show what's going on, I understand that, but the mindset has to be different, because the children's centre works differently. It's more holistic, isn't it? If they just try to understand it.'

(Personal Adviser)

In one exceptional case study area, it was the Personal Adviser themselves (as well as their line manager) who seems to have interpreted the guidance more narrowly, seeing it only as a continuation of the traditional Personal Adviser role, but delivered in a new setting. At the time of conducting the case study visits, this had already led to a significant breakdown of partnership working between the children's centre and the Personal Adviser.

Many of these problems stemmed not only from the fact that some Jobcentre Plus staff had misunderstood the aims of the pilot, and the role in which outreach had to play in delivery. More often than not, these differing expectations around the role of the Personal Adviser and pilot outcomes arose from the fact that many Jobcentre Plus staff felt uncomfortable with a way of working (outreach, engagement, building trust with customers, etc.) that did not lend itself easily to measurement or targets. Jobcentre Plus staff expressed a sense of being out of their comfort zone in not being able to quantify or record progress on outreach and engagement activities in the same way that they might record job outcomes in the Jobcentre Plus office. As a result, many staff reverted to prioritising the work-focused aspects of pilot delivery.

In the case of Jobcentre Plus line managers, this was then transferred down to the Personal Adviser, who felt pushed to do more work-focused activity as opposed to outreach. This was unhelpful at a time when some Personal Advisers still felt as if they were adjusting to working outside of targets.

Even among those Jobcentre Plus line managers who did understand the importance of the outreach and engagement activities, there were some who still expressed concern as to how this was going to be measured in the pilot, and how some of the 'softer' outcomes would be taken into account. This was somewhat understandable given that many Jobcentre staff were familiar with target-driven processes and ways of working.

'I want more people to be getting into work, but I do understand that it will take time because you're dealing with people that have got multiple barriers in lots of cases...The difficulty is showing the quality of what we do. It's easier when you have to show quantity; it's harder when you have to show the quality of what you do.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

Despite these differences in how staff perceived the Personal Adviser role, they were not as detrimental to overall partnership working in the case study sites as one might have imagined. At the time of carrying out the case study research, most of these concerns had been, or were in the process of being, addressed by pilot staff.

Nevertheless, these differing expectations and the tensions arising out of these issues do highlight the need to ensure that Jobcentre Plus line managers all share a correct understanding of the Personal Adviser role in the pilot and of the fundamental importance of that outreach. If some Jobcentre staff felt uncomfortable not being able to measure progress on the more nebulous aspects of the Personal Adviser role (outreach and engagement), then further reassurance by their line managers in Jobcentre Plus would be beneficial in endorsing this new way of working.

In the best-case scenarios, Jobcentre Plus line managers had fully embraced this flexible way of working and were able to reassure the Personal Advisers about the requirements of the new role.

'I know I'm target-orientated but I try and work in the reverse way. I tell the Advisers, "What did you do yesterday?" And then I pick snippets out of what they've done and say, "That's excellent, you've done that; you've moved that person forward". Yet they don't think they have. But I say, "The fact that she's booked another interview with you, that's a step never done before". Because whilst we would think, "I'll make a couple of calls and it's all done", that's a big job for some people.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

3.2 Partnership working with other providers and partner organisations

Most of the partnerships that were in place were informal in nature, and non contractual. Many are based on the partnerships detailed in the local authority pilot bids, which themselves were pre-existing partnerships.

Overall, there is evidence emerging from across the pilot case studies of partnership working. This has been mainly evident through reports of regular referrals from some partner organisations to the Personal Adviser (and vice versa) – a process already detailed in Section 3.1.1. It has also been evident through the fact that some partner organisations have let the Personal Adviser attend their own events, activities and venues in order to promote the pilot.

Personal Advisers have been most successful at engaging with those partner organisations who regularly deliver their own services in the children's centre, such as health visitors from the Primary Care Trust, social care workers and charitable organisations working to support families with issues such as debt management or housing. They have also been successful at engaging with outreach and community workers, who also regularly visit the children's centre or use them as their base. As a result, these partner organisations have become aware of the pilot and familiar with the services on offer by the Personal Adviser. In particular, this kind of personal contact, facilitated by a shared site such as the children's centre, has enabled trusted working relationships to build up in some places. This, in turn, has led to increased referrals to and from partner organisations and Personal Advisers, allowing customers' needs to be addressed through multi-agency working, should it be required.

However, it was apparent that while there was evidence of partnership working, particularly among agencies that had been working with the children's centres prior to the pilot, more needed to be done in most areas to extend the range of partner organisations engaged in the pilot. Indeed, the list of partner organisations engaged in most case study areas seemed to only represent a small number of those potential partner organisations listed in the original pilot bids. Pilot staff and partner organisations reported two reasons for this. Firstly, many staff and partner organisations reported that it took time to establish effective working relationships between organisations. It was one thing to be aware of a named

contact in another organisation, but quite another to build up a relationship with them; to explain the services they could offer; and to build up enough trust that they felt comfortable referring their clients. Many pilot staff felt that it was too early for this to have happened, at the time of conducting our interim evaluation research. Secondly, many pilot staff reported that partnership working had not got underway as quickly as anticipated because of the problems around start-up and implementation. Some Personal Advisers felt that issues around physical working space, the problematic implementation of IT and the delays caused by Criminal Records Bureau checks and recruitment processes in many areas had significantly delayed work in this regard.

3.3 Chapter summary

Overall, the pilot has made good progress in building partnerships between Jobcentre Plus and the children's centres. This has been demonstrated by the following features:

- flexibility and commitment on both sides to make the pilot work;
- regular communications between the children's centre managers and the Personal Advisers;
- referrals between children's centre staff and partner organisations, and the Personal Advisers;
- joining up partner networks and contacts;
- some prior knowledge and understanding of each other's organisational culture;
- physical space within the children's centre to accommodate the Personal Adviser; and
- shared expectations of the Personal Adviser role and pilot outcomes.

Wider partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and other partner organisations in the children's centre network has been evidenced through referrals between these agencies and presence of the Personal Adviser at several partner events and venues in order to promote the pilot. This wider partnership working has been most successful at engaging partner organisations working within the children's centres, or those in regular contact with the children's centre sites, such as health visitors, social care workers or staff running training courses. However, the range of partner organisations involved in the pilots to date is limited in some areas. Pilot staff offered two reasons for this. The first was that it took time to build up effective working relationships with partner organisations and their staff, and it was too early in the pilot to expect this level of cooperation, after 10 to 11 months of the pilot going live. The second was that delays in pilot start-up and implementation limited opportunities for partnership working to get underway.

4 Engaging children's centres users

This chapter details how the pilot engaged with children's centre users and other target groups. It first describes the methods of engagement and which were emerging as most successful at the time of conducting the case study visits. It then goes on to identify challenges to engagement and outreach, and how some of the case study sites were addressing these. The chapter then sets out the responses of those engaged by the pilot to highlight some of the factors facilitating pilot engagement, before drawing on further evidence to highlight the type of customers who were (and were not) engaging with the pilot. Finally, the chapter summarises the key points and lessons emerging out of the pilot's engagement and outreach activities.

Outreach and engagement was a key initiative of this pilot. Overall, our interim research found that most pilot staff had worked hard to make this an integral part of pilot delivery.

4.1 Methods of engagement

This section identifies the ways in which the pilot engaged with children's centre users and other target groups. These methods of engagement varied between the case study sites, as the pilot areas gained experiential lessons about what did and did not work in their local contexts.

4.1.1 Outreach in the children's centre

Outreach in this pilot was never just about placing Jobcentre resource in children's centres. Pilot guidance makes it clear that the Personal Advisers should proactively make themselves visible, accessible and approachable to customers and staff within this setting. In all but one of the case study sites, this latter approach was evident in three key ways.

Firstly, as Section, 2.1.1 has already highlighted, Personal Advisers undertook a great deal of informal engagement with children's centre users to make themselves

known, to build trust and to increase their visibility and presence within the children's centre. The importance of these kinds of informal activities in engaging customers was stressed by many pilot staff as being key to building trust with customers, upon which a personal relationship could be formed and customers felt comfortable talking with the Advisers. Often, staff noted that 'incentives' such as food and drink helped boost attendance at these events, but that these were relatively simple things to arrange.

'We know the best way to engage with parents is through food, and about it being an informal place to come with no great strings attached. Then you come along and you get some breakfast or you come along and you get a bowl of soup and you sit and you socialise and you make friends. If you can engage parents at that level, then the next step is to take them to the next level. But it's getting them in on a very, very friendly, informal basis to start with and offering them something they like.'

(Children's centre manager)

Secondly, the Personal Advisers attended a lot of children's centre activities and sessions to have maximum opportunity to either engage with children's centre users one-to-one, or to engage with a critical mass of users all in one setting at the same time. This included attendance at drop-ins, nursery, crèche, mother and toddler groups, and sessions held with health professionals, such as baby clinics. Personal Advisers used their personal judgement as to which classes to attend. However, there were always a range of other activities that they could engage with, so this did not cause a major problem for them.

Thirdly, Personal Advisers helped set up and participated in a number of introductory sessions, pilot launch days, open days and other events that aimed to explicitly promote the work-focused services at the children's centre. These events seemed to have been particularly successful in the early stages of the pilot in raising awareness of the services and allowing children's centre users to engage with staff, ask questions and meet the Personal Adviser in a relaxed and comfortable environment.

'I did go to a couple of openings and the parents I saw, and talked to, on both those days, were positive about it. They recognised the fact that they like to come and talk to people here, without the formality, which again didn't come as a huge surprise. I've dealt with people for years inside a formal setting in Jobcentre, and I know people prefer not to come in if they don't have to. So, to be able to talk to somebody elsewhere, it's a bonus.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

A minority of Personal Advisers also used other children's centre network events as opportunities to introduce themselves and engage with potential customers informally.

Finally, many Personal Advisers spent time engaging with children's centre staff, either informally, on a personal level, or more formally to help explain the purpose

of the pilot and its role in helping to reduce child poverty. While not involving direct engagement with children's centre users, it was nevertheless an important part of conducting outreach in the children's centre because it facilitated partnership working between Jobcentre Plus and children's centres, and also opened up a potentially important source of referrals to the Personal Advisers.

'I think they understand that the reason why this pilot came into being was to tackle poverty in certain areas and that poverty comes about as a result of lack of employment, lack of education, lack of training. So, if you are putting the children first, you need to ensure that their parents have been sorted out, so that in the future, the kids will be sorted out as well. That's how I try to explain it.'

(Personal Adviser)

4.1.2 Outreach in the community

Outreach in the community also formed an important part of some Personal Adviser's activities. Most of the time, this included shadowing outreach and community workers and using this time as an opportunity to make themselves known to parents in the community. Alongside this, many Personal Advisers also dedicated time in their working week (mostly a couple of hours) to visiting other community venues to engage with potential customers and introduce themselves and their services. Examples include outreach visits to the local library, other children's centres in the local area, the local school and community centre. In some of these venues, the Personal Adviser would have a desk, but most of the time, they would walk the floor of these venues or attend events there.

4.1.3 Referrals from partner organisations

Referrals from partner organisations provided important opportunities for Personal Advisers to engage with customers in many case study sites. Personal Advisers reported that, because many of these partner organisations already had a trusting and personal relationship with their customers, these customers were often more willing and comfortable being referred onto work-focused services.

'There's a lot of networking going on between practitioners...partner practitioners, which is helping to take the message out to families that this is available.'

(Children's centre manager)

In this sense, we found that children's centre staff and community workers were often at the heart of this referral process as they had the most regular contact with potential customers. This was sometimes supplemented by extra support that a few case studies had bought in with the discretionary pilot funds.

'Community development workers are just actively promoting it and marketing it wherever they can. And of course, we've got the project worker now working alongside and she's also got an apprentice working with her as well, and it's really their job to do the community engagement work with a real focus on engaging people into the pilot.'

(Children's centre manager)

In the best cases, children's centre staff would offer advice, guidance and local intelligence to Personal Advisers in order to enhance their outreach and engagement activities. This often proved critical in exposing the Personal Adviser to non-traditional customer groups, that did not regularly access either a Jobcentre or a children's centre.

'The Adviser has been introducing herself to other groups of people, certainly, but I need to work on encouraging her to come over to the nursery and to feel part of that because we've got far more fathers there, for example.'

(Children's centre manager)

Referrals from partner organisations were also an important source of referrals to the Personal Adviser, but as described in Chapter 3, the extent to which this was happening depended very much on two factors: the quality of the partnership in place, and the partner's level of awareness regarding the pilot provision. In cases where both factors were present and the relationships were strong, partner organisations were emerging as an important route of referrals. However, where the partnerships were in the early stages of development (as they were in most cases), this method of engagement with customers was yet to prove fruitful.

In a minority of cases, referrals from the local Jobcentre Plus office was an important source of referrals. In these cases, Jobcentre would write to eligible customers and offer them the choice of whether they would like to have their Work-Focused Interview (WFI) at the Jobcentre or the pilot children's centre. In many cases, customers would opt to have it at their local children's centre. This not only put customers in contact with the pilot, but also with the children's centre, which they might not have used before. In some cases, it was felt that Jobcentre staff should be making more of this opportunity to refer onto the pilot.

'My understanding is that for the mandatory interviews, they write to the parents and say, "for your work-focused interview, would you like to come to the children's centre or go to the Jobcentre Plus?" They've got a choice and they're choosing to come here. So, I suppose that's a good ploy, isn't it really?'

(Children's centre manager)

4.1.4 Advertising

Promoting the pilot through advertisements was also another method of engagement utilised by many pilot areas. In most cases, this involved leaflets, flyers and posters being disseminated in the children's centre, local community venues,

libraries, local schools and general practitioner surgeries. In some cases, this was also advertised in local newspapers and community magazines and literature.

'We've got posters and flyers. We've got business cards now. We've got pens. What else have we got? We've got those freebies and things. We're putting some things into the local free paper and free magazines. They're just A5 size but they go through everyone's door.'

(Personal Adviser)

In most cases, these methods were successful in raising awareness, both inside and outside, of the children's centre about the pilot, the Personal Adviser and the services on offer. Most case study sites had started much of this activity quite early on in the pilot, which is likely to explain much of the success of this method. As discussed earlier in this section, open days and launch events were also successful in this regard.

'Recently we've had an open day so we've advertised that with some posters. We've put together some other posters and I've noticed that I've really had a lot of people calling me up to make enquiries about the posters because I distributed them in various places, so people have responded to that.'

(Personal Adviser)

4.1.5 Word-of-mouth

At the time of conducting the case study research, the pilot had had about ten months to bed in a little and get activity underway. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that word-of-mouth was being reported as an important means of engaging customers into the pilot.

'Work-focused services are now snowballing via word-of-mouth.'

(Children's centre manager)

'I think the beauty of something like this is that it doesn't happen straight away. But over time, people who wouldn't engage at all will come in via word-of-mouth.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

Much of this was through customers who had seen a poster or a flyer advertising the pilot, had been to an open day or launch event for the pilot, or who had been recommended to the Personal Adviser by one of the children's centre staff. Much of this, though, had originated from positive personal experiences people had had with the Personal Adviser. As one children's centre staff member put it:

'Once a parent has a good experience, the word-of-mouth spreads very, very quickly.'

(Children's centre manager)

Indeed, personal testimonials from other parents, friends or family were often the most powerful way of engaging other customers with the pilot.

'Mine basically was through my mum because my mum gets help with [named Personal Adviser]. She looks for jobs for her and that and so I went through that, really, and then that Tesco job came up and she helped with the interviewing techniques and everything else.'

(Children's centre user)

Most of this word-of-mouth activity was within trusted family and friendship circles. In more than one case study area, for example, partners mentioned that they had heard about the pilot through their wives (mostly) or husbands (less so) – partners who would not have otherwise accessed the pilot or the children's centre.

'People have got to trust what they're going to, and they'll only do that because somebody else has been through it. It's one of the strongest drivers in an area like this.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

'There's a handful of men, but not an awful lot, but a lot of the ladies who attend have got partners, so they're referring their husbands. Their husbands are coming and getting help. You might meet the ladies and they're like, "Oh, would you help my husband with this?" and they make appointments for their husbands and make their husbands come up.'

(Personal Adviser)

4.2 Ongoing challenges to engagement and outreach

During the course of our case study research, we identified a number of ongoing challenges that the pilots were experiencing with regard to engaging customers. These are detailed below.

4.2.1 Low levels of children's centre users

In some children's centres, low numbers of children's centre users in general emerged as a particular issue in terms of engaging sufficient numbers of customers to make the Personal Adviser's time worthwhile. This problem was particularly acute in rural areas where people often found it difficult to access children's centres due to the centre's location and a lack of adequate transport links.

However, more urban areas were not necessarily immune from this issue. Even in the busiest children's centres located in the most densely populated areas, low numbers of children's centre users emerged as an issue in holiday periods. In a couple of sites, low footfall was also a result of a lack of on-site childcare facilities, such as a nursery or crèche. The issue of how low numbers of children's centre users presented a barrier to client engagement has been outlined in Section 2.1.2 already, but it is worth noting here that some Personal Advisers did raise it as problematic in their ongoing work to engage more customers in the pilot.

4.2.2 Lack of physical space for the Personal Adviser

A lack of physical working space for the Personal Adviser was problematic in that it meant Personal Advisers did not have a private space in which to conduct confidential discussions, should they need to. This issue has also been outlined in Section 2.1.5, but it is interesting to note that this seemed to be more problematic for the Personal Advisers than it was for the customers. Personal Advisers noted that while they felt that the lack of a private room prevented them from engaging with customers to some degree (especially regarding confidential discussions), for many customers it was not an issue. However, Personal Advisers were conscious that, while some customers may have been comfortable discussing private details within earshot of other people, they would be breaching customer confidentiality to allow this to happen. At times, this prevented Personal Advisers getting into detailed conversations with customers because they did not want confidential details to be overheard in a shared space.

4.2.3 Issues of fraud

Four Personal Advisers in our case study areas mentioned that reporting instances of benefit fraud could potentially affect their personal and trusting relationships with customers. Their concerns were threefold: Firstly, while they recognised that it was their duty to report instances of fraud, they felt slightly unhappy about doing this because it sat uncomfortably alongside their efforts to build trust with parents. Secondly, they expressed concern about the possible repercussions of this from customers, with a couple of Personal Advisers drawing attention to the fact that the children's centres did not have security guards, like the Jobcentre Plus offices did. They were also anxious that other customers would find out and be put off engaging with them. Thirdly, some Advisers were worried about the repercussions from children's centre staff if they knew that the Personal Advisers were reporting instances of fraud.

While all the Personal Advisers were reporting these instances of benefit fraud, they all disclosed some unease about doing so and expressed a wish for more guidance and reassurance around this. Fortunately, the numbers of fraud cases were so few that this was not causing a major barrier to engaging with customers on a wider scale.

4.2.4 Transient communities and language barriers

In case study areas that were located among diverse communities, Personal Advisers noted quite specific barriers to engaging customers from ethnic minority communities, which tended to be more transient and mobile. This made it harder to engage with people from these communities on an ongoing basis.

'The thing with here is that there is a lot of what we call mobile parents, which means that a lot come here from other countries and they use it as a stop-gap before moving out of the area to resettle somewhere else permanently. And then you've got a whole new lot coming in again.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

Language barriers were also identified as being a barrier to engagement at times.

'One of the biggest issues is the language barrier. It doesn't matter what event you put on, if you can't overcome the communication issues, it is very hard. It's not one particular language. You couldn't say, could we look at maybe training or something? That's not going to work because it's such a multicultural area.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

4.3 Factors facilitating pilot engagement

As discussed in Section 4.1, the most successful means of engagement appear to have been through outreach in the children's centre (by the Personal Adviser) and through word-of-mouth. This is borne out by the responses from children's centre users, many of whom reported being initially engaged with the pilot through these two methods.

This section draws on the responses of children's centre users engaged in the pilot to highlight some of the key factors that had facilitated their initial and ongoing engagement. Among the people we spoke to, these factors broadly reflected positively on the pilot and are identified below.

4.3.1 The informality of engagement

Pilot customers clearly appreciated the informality of the approaches, the informal setting in which they took place (the children's centre) and the personalised way in which the Advisers engaged with them.

Customers reported that as a result of such informal engagement, they often felt more comfortable, more able to open up and trust the Personal Adviser and more free to discuss personal issues. A number of customers also mentioned that they felt less intimidated and less 'judged' by the Personal Adviser than they had felt using the Jobcentre Plus office.

4.3.2 Easier physical access to the children's centre

A significant number of the customers stated that one of the biggest benefits of having work-focused services in their local children's centre was that it was physically easier to access. Many of these views were expressed in comparison to the location and accessibility arrangement of their local Jobcentre Plus office. Children's centres were reported to be more accessible for customers with pushchairs and buggies. For those customers whose local Jobcentre Plus office was located in a town centre, there was also an issue around the distance and cost of travelling there, or around driving and parking there.

4.3.3 A better environment for parents and children

Customers also noted that children's centres offered a nicer environment to engage with work-focused services than other places in the community – for both

themselves as parents and for their children. The children's centre environment was described as more child-friendly with more activities to keep their children occupied. It was also important to customers that staff at the children's centre were already familiar with themselves and their children, so they did not need to worry about taking their children in there. This also created a sense of this being a more trusted environment in which to access such services, because staff were already known to the customers and their children.

Again, most of these views were expressed in comparison to the Jobcentre Plus offices, and to customers actual experiences of having used a Jobcentre Plus office. In particular, some customers felt quite strongly that a Jobcentre Plus office was not an environment to which they wanted to bring their children. For some, this was because there they attached a negative stigma to the people who used the Jobcentre Plus office.

4.3.4 Continuity of Personal Adviser

Another factor which facilitated engagement (and particularly ongoing engagement) with the pilot was the continuity of Personal Adviser. This helped to a great degree the extent to which customers felt able to build up a personal relationship and trust with Personal Advisers. This, in turn, also positively impacted on how much detail customers felt able to disclose to Personal Advisers about their circumstances, and any barriers they might be facing in progressing towards employment, education or training. Continuity of Personal Adviser was also seen as immensely practical for some customers who did not feel as if they had to 'start over again' with a new Adviser every time they needed advice or support – both in terms of explaining their circumstances again, but also in terms of familiarising themselves to someone new.

4.3.5 The privacy afforded by children's centres

A few customers, who had had previous experience of accessing a Jobcentre Plus offices, reported that the children's centre offered more privacy.

'Here, no one really sees what you are doing. You are in a little room and no one is listening to you. At the Jobcentre place it is like everyone can hear what you are saying and then you don't feel like you want to say it because everyone is listening to what you are saying. Here it is more private. You can tell her how you are really feeling and what kind of work you want to do.'

(Children's centre user, depth interview)

4.4 Who is engaging in the pilot?

The evidence from the interim evaluation research indicates that the pilot areas are engaging a mix of customers with diverse circumstances and needs – both traditional Jobcentre Plus customer groups and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customer groups, such as potential second earners.

'About 50 per cent of the customers are, on average, lone parents. There are also a lot of partners, a lot of people on JSA [Jobseeker's Allowance] whose partner wants to go to work...a few IB [Incapacity Benefit] customers as well.'

(Jobcentre Plus district manager)

Overall, this is an encouraging finding as the pilot always intended to engage both traditional and non-traditional groups of Jobcentre Plus clients. However, there is some evidence that indicates that more could be done in future to engage those non-traditional Jobcentre Plus clients who are the hardest to reach because they are not in contact with either Jobcentre Plus or the children's centre. The Management Information, to be included in the final evaluation report, will provide more details of the types of customers being reached.

4.4.1 Traditional Jobcentre Plus clients

There was evidence from the interim evaluation research that traditional Jobcentre Plus client groups, such as lone parents and those on Income Support, were engaging in the pilot. This is hardly surprising given the socio-economic characteristics of the children's centre reach areas profile in the baseline report. High numbers of local residents in some areas were lone parents, from workless households and on benefit. Some of these customers were already regular users of the children's centre, but some were not. Children's centre staff in a few case study sites reported that they were seeing new customers accessing the children's centre for the first time to see the Personal Adviser. Almost all of these customers had been referred through their local Jobcentre Plus office, which had written to them offering them the choice of whether they would like to have their WFI at the Jobcentre Plus office or their local children's centre. Most customers who received this letter opted for the children's centre. In one area, the children's centre manager had calculated that around 80 per cent of parents who had received the letter and who had opted to have their WFI in the children's centre.

'There was a result from the main Jobcentre Plus office promoting it and signposting parents to come in because I've seen people in here who I know do not use the school or the centre.'

(Children's centre manager)

In a couple of other areas, referrals from Jobcentre Plus were few and far between, and in these areas, this was felt to be a missed opportunity

4.4.2 Non-traditional Jobcentre Plus clients

In some of the case study sites, there was clear evidence that the pilot was engaging non-traditional Jobcentre Plus client groups, such as those parents from low earner working households and potential second earners. In particular, there was evidence of the pilot engaging a number of potential second earners (mostly mothers, but some fathers also).

'One of the best things that has happened from the pilot is helping the non-working partners of somebody who is already working. So, low earners. That has been a big success. We have helped a lot of those because they wouldn't get the help or funding elsewhere, would they?'

(Jobcentre Plus district manager)

'The feedback I've had from staff is the customers we're seeing are the ones who wouldn't necessarily use the Jobcentre.'

(Jobcentre Plus district manager)

4.5 Who is not engaging in the pilot?

While the evaluation evidence indicates that the pilot is successfully engaging both significant numbers of both traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus clients, it is possible to identify some groups who were evidently not engaging with the pilot. These groups are detailed below.

4.5.1 The hardest to reach

A number of pilot staff reported that they would like to make more progress in engaging those customers who were the hardest to reach in their view. In other words, those customers who were not accessing either the Jobcentre Plus or the children's centre services, or who were not frequent users of these services.

Many pilot staff reported that they were taking steps to address this, with a view to conducting more outreach work in the local community. In a couple of areas, pilot staff felt that the recruitment of additional 'project' or 'key' workers would substantially increase the amount of outreach work conducted in the community. In one area, they were about to embark on a push towards more actively promoting the pilot in the community, using outreach workers. In a couple of other case study sites, Personal Advisers and children's centre managers reported that they had plans to conduct more promotional work in the community by accessing a wider range of community venues.

4.5.2 Those closest to the labour market

From the in-depth qualitative work with children's centre users (who were a mix of those who had and who had not engaged with the pilot) it was possible to identify a small minority of people who were closer to the labour market than most. These people were usually mothers on maternity leave, with plans to return to work, parents who had prior work experience and some qualifications behind them, or those parents who were confident and able enough to search and apply for jobs themselves.

Among this small group of parents, most were not engaging with the pilot and had no plans to do so.

'No, I am quite happy looking. Like I say, I get the paper every day. I can look at the job points, there are plenty of ways I can find a job. I am quite happy with the way things are.'

(Children's centre user, depth interview)

That those closest to the labour market are not engaging with the pilot is neither unexpected nor a cause for concern, as the pilot was not intended to target these customers.

4.5.3 Those already using other work-focused services

There were a small number of children's centre users who were not engaging with the pilot because they were already accessing work-focused services elsewhere, and were happy with this. Examples of other work-focused services that were being used include a careers adviser at another local children's centre, a lone parents Jobcentre Plus Adviser at the local Jobcentre Plus office, and careers advice which had been provided via other local employment initiatives or charitable schemes.

'Yes but I have a Personal Adviser at the Jobcentre and he is pretty good, so he just made me aware of everything that I needed anyway.'

(Children's centre user, depth interview)

4.5.4 Those who wanted support, but did not think Jobcentre Plus would be able to help them

There were a few children's centre users across the case study sites who said they would like support, but did not think Jobcentre Plus would be able to provide this. One of the most commonly cited reasons among this group of potential customers was the perception that Jobcentre Plus services were only targeted at the most disadvantaged groups, and these people did not see themselves in that way.

'I have gone to ask for advice and saw one before I had [name of child]. Maybe now Jobcentre would be more helpful this time around because I am a lone parent. Maybe there will be more services available to me.'

(Children's centre user, depth interview)

At times, this perception was closely linked to the negative stigma some children's centre users attached to the kinds of people they thought used the Jobcentre Plus office/services.

A less common reason cited by a few children's centre users was the fact that they did not think Jobcentre Plus would be able to offer them specialist careers advice and guidance that they might need to enter a particular occupation or training course.

'I don't see them as having specific knowledge of all areas. My preconception would be that they have generalist knowledge about lots of things. They would have to seek out more specialised information so I may as well do that myself.'

(Children's centre user, depth interview)

It is perhaps surprising to note that so few children's centre users cited previous negative experiences at a Jobcentre Plus office as a reason for not engaging with the pilot. This is surprising because many children's centre users expressed positive views of the pilot in contrast to their less positive experiences at the Jobcentre Plus office. Given this, one might have expected to have encountered more children's centre users who would cite this as a specific reason why they had not engaged with the pilot. The fact that they did not is testament to the success of most of the Personal Advisers in engaging children's centre users in an informal and sensitive way, as well as to the value of placing Jobcentre Plus services in outreach settings which are already used and trusted by members of the local community.

4.5.5 Those with primary childcare responsibilities

The most common characteristic of those who reported that they had not yet engaged with the pilot was those customers who had primary childcare responsibilities. Many customers reported that while they were very likely to access the Jobcentre Plus Adviser in the future, they were unlikely to do so at the present time because of their childcare commitments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was particularly the case where customers had particularly young children, or newborn babies.

Many of these customers did not feel as if they had a choice regarding their role as primary carer for their children, as they were often unable to source or afford formal or informal childcare arrangements. However, a number of customers also expressed a strong preference to be the primary carer for their children as opposed to returning to work. In both these cases, there was not much evidence that either group was engaging with the pilot in significant volumes. Where they were engaging with the Personal Adviser, it was often to find out about their longer-term options, or to query something about their benefits or tax credits.

4.5.6 Those with low levels of motivation to work or train

In a few instances, there was a strong sense among some pilot staff that the pilot had been most successful in engaging those who were already motivated to work, return to work or take up training, but had been less successful at engaging those who were not motivated to return to work. This is perhaps unsurprising as a pilot of this nature will always attract those with the highest levels of motivation, but in areas heavily characterised by generational unemployment and a high number of workless households, this lack of motivation was a particularly big barrier.

'For the most part, if people want to work or train, they'll come and see me. If they don't, they won't.'

(Personal Adviser)

4.6 Chapter summary

Engagement and outreach is arguably one of the areas where the pilot has made the strongest progress to date. Success in this area has not just been in the range of outreach methods deployed (from outreach in the community to posters and word-of-mouth). It has also been in the quality of outreach conducted by the Personal Advisers, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive responses of pilot customers. This has been hugely facilitated by co-locating Personal Advisers in children's centres, where pilot customers have felt most comfortable and have reported much greater ease of access. It has also been facilitated by the continuity of the Personal Adviser role, which has helped build trusting relationships with customers.

Ongoing challenges to the pilot have been external in nature, and mostly beyond the control of the pilot – for example, lack of physical space in the children's centre to accommodate the Personal Adviser, or generally low levels of children's centre users have hindered ongoing engagement and outreach.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the pilot has engaged a good range of both traditional and non-traditional Jobcentre Plus customers. However, two customer groups have posed something of a challenge to the pilot to date. The first is those parents who are not working because of their primary childcare responsibilities and the second is those parents who face multiple and severe barriers to work. For the former group, it will be important for Personal Advisers to continue to work to get customers to think about their medium to longer-term options, if employment is not a short-term possibility (even after childcare options have been considered). For the latter group, who often require more prolonged and intense support, often by more than one agency, it will be important for Personal Advisers to build on and broaden their existing partnerships and contacts so that appropriate interventions are identified to progress the customer towards stability and their work-focused goals. In this respect, a few pilot areas already had clear plans for the future to broaden their outreach work and broaden their partnerships.

5 Observed pilot outcomes to date

This chapter looks at the observed outcomes of the work-focused services pilot to date, based on analysis of the interim research. The pilot Management Information will provide specific information on pilot outcomes in the final report. This chapter draws on the in-depth qualitative work with children's centre users and the case study research.

This chapter looks at the outcomes for pilot participants; the outcomes for children's centre staff and other partner organisations; and the outcomes for Personal Advisers.

5.1 Observed outcomes for pilot participants

The baseline report found that some customers with children under five could present a greater challenge for the pilot as they did not necessarily see work as an option in the short to medium term, alongside their primary childcare responsibilities. This finding suggested the importance of getting these customers to think about, or prepare for their longer-term employment options, along with promoting the benefits and availability of good quality childcare, so that they could consider work as an option once their children start school, or earlier. The baseline report concluded that this would be an important criterion within the evaluation for assessing progress on the pilot.

The findings from our interim evaluation research have broadly validated this earlier finding by identifying a great deal more progress on softer outcomes for pilot participants than on harder employment outcomes. These kind of soft outcomes have emerged to be important first steps towards employment, as they have helped many customers prepare and think about their employment and childcare options.

5.1.1 Hard outcomes

All case study areas reported evidence of employment, training or education outcomes. These varied to some degree across the case study sites, depending on how well the Jobcentre Plus Adviser had settled into the role, developed links with partner organisations and training providers, and engaged with customers. In some cases, particularly where the Personal Adviser was involved in arranging courses for customers, this also depended on the availability of particular kinds of training provision (i.e. English for Speakers of Other Languages classes) and on demand for it. If there was not a critical mass of customers willing to attend a particular course, it was often not possible to sustain.

The hard outcomes reported mostly included attendance on non-certified, short courses such as first aid, basic skills, or childcare – usually held at the children's centre or a local community venue. They also included a smaller minority of vocational and educational courses, such as National Vocational Qualifications, run at local colleges. In one case study site, they had invested in computers and 250 licences for online training courses, with the intention of setting these up in a dedicated room in the children's centre for customers to access. A significant minority of customers who had accessed the pilot had also secured volunteering placements through the pilot, mostly in the children's centre for those who were interested in working in childcare or teaching in the future.

Achieving many of these outcomes often depended on Personal Advisers being able to remove practical barriers to work or training. The most common of these were practical help with the cost of attending interviews and courses (travel costs and costs for clothing); help with sourcing and financing childcare (to allow customers to attend training or education courses); advice with childcare options and costs (with a view to customers taking up employment); and information about funding/grant assistance for education and training courses.

'The next step is to find out what childcare is around. I'll do that. That's why, although the pilot's in the recession and we haven't got the job starts that perhaps we would've wanted, a lot of people are far closer to being ready for that when the recession ends.'

(Jobcentre Plus line manager)

There was much less evidence of hard employment outcomes from our research. Most of the case studies reported that while some customers had entered employment, these did not constitute a significant volume of job entries, and were mostly among those customers who were already looking for work, and the most job-ready. This is perhaps not surprising given that the pilot had only been running for approximately 10 to 11 months at the time of the case study research. It is perhaps also not surprising given that many customers were some distance from the labour market, or did not consider employment an immediate priority alongside their childcare responsibilities. However, there was little doubt among most pilot staff and partner organisations that, while hard employment

outcomes were likely to be some way off for those who were furthest from the labour market and for those with primary childcare responsibilities, many of these customers were progressing towards employment nonetheless, albeit with smaller steps.

'Every Government wants to see a massive amount of change very quickly, but these things take years and years. These children may not see the real benefits of their parents entering paid employment for some time, way after the end of the pilot. Therefore, linking it back to saying, "well, actually it was the pilot that helped that family to enter employment..." the links become more tenuous as time goes on.'

(Together for Children (TfC) pilot lead)

5.1.2 Soft outcomes and distance travelled

The pilot to date has had most success in delivering soft outcomes and moving participants closer to their employment or training goals. From the interviews with clients, and case study work with pilot staff and partner organisations, there were three main areas of change identified, which were indicators of soft outcomes and distance travelled by clients:

- greater confidence;
- increased awareness of opportunities and options;
- access to job preparation skills and support.

All of these were felt to be important measures of distance travelled, although there was often considerable overlap between them. For pilot participants who were furthest from the labour market, progress on all three indicators had usually contributed to their distance travelled, particularly with regard to gaining greater confidence. Pilot participants who were closer to the labour market more often evidenced particular progress on the latter two of the indicators. For example, there were many pilot participants who did not lack confidence but who needed help in identifying their options or preparing for job interviews.

'In terms of families starting the journey, of getting back to work, making those foundational steps: confidence building, identifying training needs and have those supported, being supported in terms of going to interviews, claiming benefits – that's all happening.'

(Children's centre manager)

Greater confidence

Greater confidence was identified by customers and pilot staff to be one of the key outcomes of the pilot, as a lack of confidence was one of the most widely reported barriers to work for many customers furthest from the labour market. Several of the Personal Advisers had tackled this barrier by giving pilot participants a sense of direction and some aspirations, and then working with them to

identify transferable skills which employers would want. It was also reported that confidence levels tended to increase when they had regular contact with the Personal Advisers, or through attendance on a training course. Confidence also tended to increase when progress was made against any of the other two soft outcome measures.

Increased awareness of opportunities and options

Increased awareness of opportunities and options was another important soft outcome of the pilot, particularly in terms of moving people further towards their goals. Much of this involved talking through with customers their previous work, education and training experience and identifying their employment goal. From there, Personal Advisers would either identify relevant opportunities for the beneficiary or talk through their options. These opportunities mostly consisted of appropriate job vacancies, education or training placements or volunteering experience. Some pilot participants were considering re-training as part of a career change, or were thinking about self-employment. These pilot participants were often already aware of how they had to achieve their goals, and what their next steps needed to be. Most, therefore, sought advice and guidance from the Personal Advisers as to how their future plans might affect their current income level and their tax status, and where they might be able to gain financial support along the way. Both Personal Advisers and customers noted that this kind of engagement had made a major impact in terms of raising awareness of the possible routes and avenues that were available to customers – either in the short term or longer term – and of the financial support that could be available in some cases.

'Whether you put the idea to them and they think, that's great, I'm going to do that, or they come up with something and then you tell them how easy it is to pursue and they don't have to worry about funding...I could quote a couple of cases of how people have moved on. The beauty of it is they wouldn't have been able to do it without my support. They're able to fulfil their dream with the support of me being in the children's centre. Had I not been here, it would have been a lot more difficult for them to move forward.'

(Personal Adviser)

In cases where information was not readily available to the Personal Advisers, some would often then go out and source this for the beneficiary, particularly in instances where they felt the individual needed more intensive help.

'If I was in the Jobcentre and somebody said to me, "I want to go to college, I want to do a course" I would be saying to them: "right, go to the college, find out what's available and come back to me". Here it's a lot more, "what course can I do at the college"? And I'm sourcing that for them, because you know that's the difference. You know that if you said to them, "go away, contact the college, find out what it is", they wouldn't do it. There is a lot of hand-holding to get them through it but that's where the successes are coming from, because you wouldn't have the time to do that in the Jobcentre, to hand hold to get them there.'

(Personal Adviser)

In other cases, where the individual possessed enough confidence to source this information themselves, the Personal Adviser would signpost them to the appropriate sources of information.

An important part of increasing awareness around opportunities and options was making customers aware of their childcare options. There was evidence that Personal Advisers were becoming more confident in doing this, as they settled into their role and learned more about the childcare available to customers in the local area (and how much this would cost). We identified a number of instances where Advisers had made customers aware of the availability of local childcare, sources of financial support for childcare costs, or directly funded childcare through the pilot so that the customer could attend a training course. This was particularly beneficial for those customers who had engaged with the pilot but who were not registered at the children's centre at the time.

Access to job preparation skills and support

Access to job preparation skills and support was identified as another important soft outcome for many pilot participants. A number of pilot areas had run some form of employability training, often in the form of group sessions. This included interview technique training, help with CVs or some form of tailored job search. This was often linked to increased levels of confidence, with some pilot participants reporting notable improvements in their CV, or interview techniques which had boosted their confidence. For a few customers who had secured job interviews through the pilot provision, but who were from low-income households, pilot resources were also used to help them with travel costs to and from the interview and with sourcing appropriate clothing for the interview.

5.1.3 Personalised, flexible and more intensive support

Delivering personalised, flexible and more intense support to many customers has been an important and largely successful outcome of the pilot. Section 4.3 has already detailed the ways in which this has been important to engaging customers in the pilot, and keeping them engaged in the pilot. However, it is important to recognise that although many Personal Advisers had some grasp of the pilot aims prior to the pilot, they did not fully realise the level of work this would entail (in terms of their time, resource, effort, etc.) until they started work on the pilot and started encountering customers with multiple barriers to work.

'Because I hadn't got any knowledge before of what the job was even going to entail, I thought, "Oh it will be easy to get people into work". It's only when you come and actually start working with them that you realise that there's an awful lot to do before you go into that, if you want to, you know, sustain them in employment.'

(Personal Adviser)

As Section 2.2.2 has detailed, while Personal Advisers initially found themselves spending large amounts of time on especially complex cases (where they were unfamiliar with other services who they could refer to for specialist support), they have since been more successful in working together with other agencies and partner organisations to meet customers' multiple needs. A key part of this success has come about as a result of growing links with partner organisations in the children's centre network, which has enabled the Personal Advisers to address barriers to work in a more holistic fashion and as part of a larger package of support. This is discussed in more detail in Section 5.3.1.

5.1.4 Improved access to, and awareness, of work-focused services

As evidenced earlier in this report, most customers reported that the work-focused services in their children's centre were more physically accessible and user-friendly for them, as well as being in a more relaxed, comfortable and trusted environment. For these reasons, many of these customers also expressed a strong preference to continue accessing work-focused services in the children centre setting – a finding consistent with our baseline research with children's centre users.

In a few cases, there was also evidence that the pilot had helped to change negative stereotypes and stigma attached to Jobcentre Plus services among customers, thus helping to break down barriers to accessing work-focused services.

'Yes I think the fact that Jobcentre Plus is in the children's centre helps remove some of the negative stereotypes that going to the Jobcentre used to have. The fact that you might come out of a Jobcentre and bump into someone might be a little embarrassing or intimidating for some families, but I think having them on site in the children's centres has done a lot to negate the negative stereotypes that have been around for a while.'

(Children's centre manager)

Aside from improving access to work-focused services, however, the pilot has also achieved high levels of awareness among children's centre users. Most children's centre users we engaged in the interim research reported that they were aware of the service, and the Personal Adviser, even if they had not yet engaged with the service yet.

Levels of awareness regarding the specific services on offer were, unsurprisingly, the highest among those customers who had actually used the service, and also among those who knew of friends and family who had used the service. Among

those who had not used the service, or who reported that they had not needed to use the service, there were much lower levels of awareness as to the specific services on offer – although encouragingly, many were nonetheless aware that the children’s service were offering work-focused services through a Personal Adviser.

5.2 Observed outcomes for children’s centre staff and other partner organisations

It is possible to identify two outcomes for children’s centre staff and pilot partner organisations as a result of the pilot. The first is an increased awareness among children’s centre staff and partner organisations of work-focused services, which in turn leads to an increased number of referrals to the Personal Adviser from staff and partner organisations. The second is an increased awareness of the Government’s agenda around tackling child poverty among some children’s centre staff and partner organisations in a few case study sites. These are both addressed below, in turn.

5.2.1 Increased awareness of work-focused services

A key part of the Jobcentre Plus Adviser role was to raise awareness of work-focused services among children’s centre staff and wider partner organisations. Through this, the pilot was to embed work-focused services within a multi-agency setting so that customers’ barriers to work could be tackled in a more holistic way. There is evidence that the pilot has started to make good headway into this task, as both children’s centre staff and pilot partner organisations nearly all reported a good level of awareness of the pilot provision and of the specific services on offer. As Section 4.1.3 also detailed, this awareness was most evident in the relatively high number of referrals being made to the Personal Adviser by children’s centre staff and partner organisations. In addition, many partner organisations welcomed the children’s centre link with Jobcentre Plus because they felt that some of their clients could benefit from being signposted to this service.

‘I’m more able to direct people. Where before I might not always have thought Jobcentre, I think about Jobcentre more. Now, I’m actually considering [named Personal Adviser] a lot of the time. As soon as they’re not working, or they say anything, I’m thinking to myself, “oh [named Personal Adviser]”. It just makes a massive difference.’

(Partner organisation)

5.2.2 Increased awareness of the wider Government agenda on tackling child poverty

The other outcome for some of the children’s centre staff and other pilot partner organisations was an increased awareness of the wider Government agenda tackling child poverty through employment. Pilot guidance states that this was a key aim of the pilot, and there is evidence that in some case studies, this was proving to be successful.

'The nursery staff...I think their attitude and understanding has changed a lot because they would not have had any prior knowledge before. So because the pilot Adviser is now going into a nursery and chatting to them and joining their team meetings and training, it's definitely broken down those barriers and that understanding.'

(Children's centre manager)

The way in which Personal Advisers have gone about raising awareness about this message has varied, but most seem to have chosen the 'softly softly' approach, taking their time to settle into the role, and familiarise themselves with the staff before communicating these key messages. This reflected a recognition among Personal Advisers and line managers that the Government message on getting parents back into work was 'not something they would necessarily applaud', in the words of one Personal Adviser. As such, many Advisers only chose to tackle the issue when it came up in the course of conversation with children's centre staff or partner organisations, rather than forcing the issue as a topic of conversation.

'It's a bit like religion. Don't ram it down their throats if they don't ask.'

(Personal Adviser)

While this may have arguably been a slower way of communicating the message to children's centre staff and partner organisations, it was no less effective and seems to have avoided the risk of damaging relationships within the children's centre, or among partner organisations in the early stages of the pilot. Personal Advisers reported that they tried to emphasise the benefits of employment for parents to other pilot staff and partner organisations to ensure that the message was well received and understood. They explained not just the financial benefits of improving income, but also the benefits of improved self-esteem, confidence and of providing a positive role model for the children involved. In these instances, there is evidence that these messages were positively received.

'A lot of children's centre staff are starting to cotton on now and they're very much aware that yes, they're supporting families in a very universal sense, but ultimately we want these parents to return to work and we want these children to be living in a household where there's somebody working and therefore bringing them out of poverty. So I think it has helped to cement people's understanding that actually children's centres are very much about a big picture around child poverty and the return to work agenda.'

(TfC lead)

In a couple of the case study areas, Personal Advisers did not think it was necessary to proactively communicate the Government's child poverty agenda. This was because these particular children's centres were already well versed in the issues around child poverty (mainly due to the demographics of their local communities) and were already supportive of the idea that employment could help alleviate the circumstances of those families on the lowest incomes.

In most of the other case studies, there was little evidence that much was being done to proactively communicate the Government's wider agenda on employment and poverty. This was because of several reasons. Firstly, some Personal Advisers seemed to be content with the fact that their presence and informal engagement with pilot staff and partner organisations alone had done much to dispel a lot of the initial fears that were evident at the start of the pilot, about how the Jobcentre Plus Adviser would set about engaging children's centre users in the work-focused agenda. Secondly, a few Personal Advisers simply assumed that because they had not encountered an open hostility to their work in the children's centre, that there was no need to promote the Government's agenda on employment and child poverty to children's centre staff and partner organisations. Finally, a couple of Personal Advisers reported that they simply had not had much time to devote to this activity amid the demand for their services among customers and their outreach work.

5.3 Observed outcomes for Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers

It is possible to identify one key outcome of the pilot for Personal Advisers: improved relationships with partner organisations and children's centre staff. These relationships meant that they were better linked into a wider support network for customers, and therefore better able to address customers' needs in a holistic way should they face multiple barriers to work. As such, this outcome was beneficial to both Personal Advisers and customers.

5.3.1 Improved links with children's centre networks

A number of the Personal Advisers, along with a smaller number of pilot staff and partner organisations, reported that the most notable outcome of the pilot was the links it had facilitated between Jobcentre Plus and the organisations working within the children's centre network. Personal Advisers in a few case study sites were able to mention a number of instances where they had engaged a customer in the pilot, only to realise that there were other barriers that had to be addressed first before employment or training could even be considered. In these cases, Personal Advisers stressed the benefits of the pilot in making them aware of other organisations and sources of support that they could refer to.

'Like I said, one of my parents came to see me with a benefit query, but through her conversation I realised that she's experienced some form of domestic violence and then I asked her, "would you like me to refer you onto somebody who could help you?" And I did. To me, that's a good thing. That wouldn't have happened anywhere else. It only happened because I knew there was a domestic violence worker here and she's connected with a social worker here as well. I think it's really good that whoever she needs to see, we are all in one place.'

(Personal Adviser)

'It's happened to me on three or four occasions. I had one lady where I had to just say to her in the end: "look, let's not even think about work or training because you've got too many other issues". She was in tears here, she'd got too many issues going on that I referred her to somebody else in there who I knew could help her, so that she could then come back to me when we'd got her stable. I'm looking at what Sure Start can do for their family and I'm part of Sure Start...and that's the same for every single person in the team.'

(Personal Adviser)

'Yesterday I registered a young mum. As I was talking with her I realised that there were issues around her post-natal depression. Yesterday I spoke to [named Personal Adviser] and she is now taking them both on, and is looking at both the dad and the mum, working with the health visitor, because she specialises in post-natal depression. This girl wants to train and [named Personal Adviser] will do that bit now with them both and the health visitor will do her bit and I will start encouraging her until she starts college. So that's three agencies that within a couple of days may have actually changed their lives.'

(Partner organisation)

Related to this, there was also evidence of shared learning between Jobcentre Plus and the children's centre staff and partner organisations. Many Personal Advisers in the case study sites positively noted how much they had learned about family-related issues from the children's centre network of organisations. For example, one Personal Adviser reported that she had enjoyed learning from children's centre staff about the Every Child Matters agenda and hearing from a range of practitioners such as health professionals and the police at children's centre events.

'I think I am more aware of the issues people have – obviously the child protection, that kind of thing; my knowledge on that is increasing. When I go back to the Jobcentre I'll know a lot more, even if that's only knowing where to signpost people to. Ultimately that will lift that family out of poverty and move them on.'

(Personal Adviser)

In two case study areas, there was evidence of Personal Advisers actively using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) to ensure that customers' needs were tackled in a more holistic way, building on the CAF assessment.⁵

⁵ The CAF is a standardised approach to conducting assessments of children's additional needs and deciding how these should be met. It can be used by practitioners across children's services in England. The CAF aims to deliver services in a more integrated way that is focused on the needs of children and young people.

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has detailed a number of key outcomes for the pilot participants, the pilot staff and the Personal Advisers. Among these, it is possible to identify three areas in which the pilot has made most progress to date. These are:

- improved access to, and awareness of, work-focused services in children's centres among children's centre users, the local community, children's centre staff and partner organisations;
- soft outcomes for pilot participants;
- providing personalised and holistic support to those participants who have multiple or complex barriers to employment.

The pilot case studies have made strong progress on raising awareness and improving access to work-focused services. They have also made strong progress on delivering a personalised service and a range of soft outcomes for customers who have engaged in the pilot. However, evidence that work-focused services have become embedded within wider service delivery around families is a little more varied across the case study sites. This means that, at the time of writing, work-focused services are some way off being fully embedded within their multi-agency settings and children's centre networks. This is largely to be expected given the interim stage of the pilot, and given that partnership working has taken longer to get underway than anticipated (see Chapter 3).

Nonetheless, interim evidence indicates that this progress could gain momentum as referral routes bed-in, Personal Advisers consolidate their relationships with partner organisations, and as awareness about the pilot spreads through word-of-mouth and further outreach activities in the community.

6 Challenges to the pilot

Throughout this report, various challenges to the pilot have been identified. The purpose of this short chapter is to summarise these challenges, while also outlining others that have not previously been identified.

Many of these challenges are surmountable within the remit of the pilot, although they are likely to continue to present a considerable barrier to pilot progress. However, other challenges have emerged from factors which operate outside the pilot, but nevertheless constrain the circumstances within which the pilot staff have to operate – i.e. the characteristics of the local labour market. These challenges are summarised below.

6.1 Clients' personal circumstances

Our in-depth qualitative work with children's centre users and our interviews with case study staff revealed that a number of customers presented a particular challenge to the pilot through their circumstances, which often consisted of multiple barriers to work or training and which required interventions from more than one agency. The resulting difficulties for some Personal Advisers, especially in the early days of the pilot, have been detailed already in Section 2.1.3. While some Personal Advisers were addressing this problem through building better referral links with other agencies, who could offer appropriate, specialist support for customers, it was clear that for others, it was going to be an ongoing challenge to try to balance the time spent on these cases with other competing demands on their time.

Just one illustration of the kind of personal circumstances that Personal Advisers encountered included a customer with a disabled child, and another child with a health condition that required frequent hospital visits and appointments. She had a partner, but he had just been made redundant. She had worked most of her adult working life, and was a qualified play worker and youth worker, currently studying for a National Vocational Qualification in pre-school practice. She wanted to work but had been dismissed from her last job because her employer had not been willing to grant her time off for her child's hospital appointments. She was desperate to take up paid work, but also recognised that her child's needs came

first. As such, she felt largely unable to plan for the future and felt only able to take 'each day as it comes'. When asked what she would find most helpful, this particular customer said that daycare for her disabled child would be most useful so that she could return to work. However, she could not afford daycare on her income level.

While this particular customer's circumstances may not have been insurmountable (the Personal Adviser might have been able to offer help to the partner, or sought specialist advice from an organisation supporting families with disabled children), they do serve to illustrate the challenge for Personal Advisers in supporting such people into work or training in the short to medium term (even those who are relatively close to the labour market).

6.2 Distance from labour market and barriers to work

The employability characteristics of some clients who were engaging with the pilot heavily determined their 'starting points' in terms of progressing towards work or training. Of these employability characteristics, a lack of qualifications and/or work experience, as well as a lack of English language skills emerged as two key challenges for the pilot. The largely deprived profiles of most of the pilot areas meant that there were a number of clients with these characteristics, who frequently required more intensive help than that which might be required for jobseekers on mainstream employment programmes.

Low levels of qualifications and/or a lack of previous work experience meant that clients were a considerable distance from the labour market, not just because they lacked these attributes *per se*, but often because this was linked to lower levels of confidence and together this presented many additional difficulties in activities such as job search and CV preparation. Many Personal Advisers noted that the progress of these clients was much slower in comparison to others, and that much smaller steps were needed before employment goals could even be considered.

In more ethnically diverse areas, a lack of English language skills among some customer groups also emerged as a significant challenge for the pilot, as these customers were also some distance from the labour market. Again, it was observed throughout the course of the in-depth qualitative interviews with customers that those who struggled with English language skills also lacked confidence. In a few areas, Personal Advisers had been able to source language and English for Speakers of Other Languages courses for these customers, but this depended on the local availability of language training provision. Some of those with a lack of English language skills were highly qualified and experienced in their country of origin. In these cases, the issues were how to have their qualification recognised in the United Kingdom (UK); how to access any re-training they might need to work in the UK; and/or how to gain relevant work experience in the UK. It is not clear from the evidence how far the pilot was managing to help these clients, although Personal Advisers did report that they often found it much harder to progress this client group.

6.3 Childcare responsibilities

Childcare was cited as the most significant barrier to employment and training among the customers we spoke to. As our baseline report showed, the main issues around this were the availability of childcare (one children's centre reported that there were only three childminders in the local area) and the costs of childcare. Regardless of whether these barriers were perceived or real, these two factors were cited time and time again as a barrier for customers. In a minority of cases, customers were also concerned about the quality of local childcare, which meant that they preferred to take on this responsibility themselves. Personal Advisers and children's centre staff also reported these issues as a major challenge to the pilot. Encouragingly, in many case study areas, this challenge was being addressed effectively. Some pilot areas that could not provide this childcare themselves, because they lacked a nursery or crèche facility, or staff capacity, had spent their discretionary funds sourcing additional childcare arrangements so that customers could attend training or college courses. In other cases, Personal Advisers had referred customers onto the Free Childcare for Training and Learning for Work Pilot.

It is worth noting here that, for many customers, their family and caring responsibilities did not necessarily prevent them from considering employment, but merely constrained the circumstances in which they would be able and willing to work (i.e. close to their home and with flexible hours). This was reflected in the fact that teaching assistant vacancies or childminding were popular preferences among many customers because of the opportunity for them to work locally, during school hours and often in close proximity to their children.

What was a more significant barrier for Personal Advisers were those customers who had exercised their preference to care for their children full time and not return to work. While they could still offer advice and guidance to these customers about their longer-term options, many Personal Advisers reported that it would be unrealistic to expect hard employment outcomes from this group of customers, within the timespan of the pilot. When one mother was asked about whether she had any plans to return to work, education or training in the longer term, she replied that her preference was to care for her children full time:

'If I want to be a mum I can be a mum.'

(Children's centre user, depth interview)

6.4 Local labour market conditions

The local labour market also exerted an external influence on pilot outcomes. The recession, which coincided with the pilot start-up, was presenting a considerable challenge in many case study areas, with Personal Advisers reporting cases of redundancy among customers and their partner organisations, and people who had recently lost their job and who were looking for work. A few Personal Advisers who were able to progress customers to interview stage also reported increased competition for jobs in the local labour market as a result of the recession and rising unemployment. These factors had a particularly negative effect on those who lacked transferable skills – especially those in low paid and low skilled work.

Rural areas reported that job availability was generally fairly low because of the lack of employment opportunities in comparison to bigger towns and cities. This was often compounded by longer travel-to-work distances that many people either could not afford, or could not undertake because of poor transport links. However, even in urban areas, travel-to-work distances were reported to be a major challenge to the pilot because many customers were not willing or able to work outside their immediate locality. Reasons for this were usually cited as travel costs or because customers had to drop/pick up children from nursery or school.

Even when there were jobs available (and in some areas, Personal Advisers did note that there were suitable vacancies), these were often cited as unsuitable for customers, because they offered little flexibility in the hours worked. Many of the jobs were also low paid and some customers felt that these jobs would not be financially worth their while. Other jobs were low quality and customers (especially those closer to the labour market) prioritised job satisfaction over taking just 'any job'.

6.5 Geographic location and children's centre sites

The geographic location of some of the children's centres also presented something of a challenge to the pilot, particularly with regard to the impact on the level of footfall. This has been touched upon in Section 4.2.1 already, where it was noted that children's centres in the rural areas noted a particularly low footfall because of their geographic location. However, even in urban case study sites, footfall could vary slightly between locations depending on how close and accessible the children's centre was to the local community, transport links and other community amenities. For example, in one location the Personal Adviser noted that the fact that the children's centre was based at the end of a road, on the fringe of the immediate local area meant that many people did not use the centre. In contrast, in another area, one children's centre reported a higher footfall than other local centres because it was based in the middle of a housing estate. Children's centres based near transport links or schools also appeared to benefit from a higher footfall.

With the exception of the rural locations, geographic location did not pose a significant challenge to the pilot. However, it did often impact on how hard Personal Advisers had to work to engage higher volumes of customers in the local area.

During the course of the interim evaluation research, it became clear that the variation between the layout of the children's centre sites also presented a challenge for some of the pilot areas. A few children's centre sites have more than one site for the facilities and Personal Advisers in these areas reported that they often found it harder to divide their time between the sites, particularly if significant travel was involved. In a minority of sites, a lack of particular facilities, such as a nursery or crèche, was also reported to have an impact on levels of footfall and therefore, levels of engagement with customers. In some children's centres there was also a recognition that a lack of space and rooms constrained aspects of pilot delivery.

'...we're extraordinarily lucky we've got this building. The fact that we've got a location where people can both meet each other and where there are training rooms, and the really lovely drop-in facility and the crèche facility, means we've got a focus where you can actually do stuff together. And that's not true of every children's centre.'

(Children's centre manager)

6.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has summarised some of the key challenges to the progress of the pilot. Many of these are not insurmountable and can be addressed within the remit of the pilot. Furthermore, many of these constraints are not a fixed phenomena, but were very likely to change over time. For example, with regard to circumstantial constraints, many customers who had engaged with the pilot were taking up advice, job search and training with a view to gaining employment in the future, once their responsibilities lessened or their circumstances changed. These customers were often looking forward to a time when they would be able to work, spend time away from the home and feel more independent.

However, other challenges, particularly around the local labour market and economy, were more intractable and continue to exert a negative pressure on the pilot, especially in terms of restricting suitable employment opportunities for those customers who were ready to look for work. It is necessary to account for such challenges as they form an important context in which to consider the overall progress of the pilot to date.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Pilot delivery: critical success factors

- **Personal Advisers with the right mix of skills** has been a consistent feature of successful pilot delivery. Personal Advisers who possess flexibility, resilience and strong interpersonal skills emerge as a critical success factor to delivering work-focused services in an outreach setting. These skills have proven to be key in mitigating the challenges arising from the new working environment that Personal Advisers have found themselves in, as well as the new way of working and new client groups. These skills have also been important in facilitating partnership working with children's centre staff.
- **The readiness of Jobcentre Plus staff to work outside of their usual targets** has also been a hallmark of successful pilot delivery. It has left Advisers free to undertake much of the outreach work that is central to a pilot of this nature and has proven conducive to partnership working with the children's centre staff. Most importantly, it has been more appropriate to the circumstances of the client group, most of whom have not considered work to be a short-term priority because of their primary childcare responsibilities.
- **Personal Advisers supported by children's centres and line managers** has facilitated delivery of the pilot. Personal Advisers who reported good levels of support from children's centre staff and line managers found it easier to deliver their services, to communicate potential problems and issues, and to integrate into their new environment. They were also better able to avert potential tensions and conflicts over differences of procedure, working practice or working priorities.

- **Tailoring pilot provision and delivery to local needs and circumstances** has been an important feature of successful pilot delivery. A key 'enabler' to meeting the needs of the local community was the use of the discretionary pilot funds. This was being used in a variety of ways to flexibly plug gaps in provision or meet specific needs arising from pilot implementation. For example, discretionary funds have been used to cover the costs of buying in childcare to run alongside work-focused services, when local provision was not available. It has also been used to cover additional expenses for attending courses and interviews; to source training or fund volunteering projects; and to run area-wide engagement events. In one pilot area, these funds had been used to employ an additional worker to assist the Personal Adviser in developing community outreach work and to address the ad hoc demands of the job so that the Personal Adviser could have more time with parents.
- **A dedicated working space for the Personal Adviser** in the children's centre has facilitated effective pilot delivery. A private space offers the Personal Advisers and parents the necessary privacy to discuss confidential issues, facilitating engagement with parents. A dedicated workspace also means Advisers can have more time with parents at their own workstations, as opposed to sharing a room with other children's centre staff and activities. More generally, some office/interview rooms are not considered to be conducive to promoting customer engagement, being too small for purpose or not child-friendly.

Although having space for the Personal Adviser within the children's centre was perhaps not a critical factor to successful delivery (where children's centres simply could not spare the space, some Personal Advisers often found a constructive solution), it was most definitely a facilitating factor. A private room for the Personal Adviser facilitated engagement with the parents and provided a base from which to conduct their work-focused activities.

7.2 Partnership working: critical success factors

- **A flexible and committed approach to making the pilot work among all partner organisations** has been key to successful partnership working. This enabled staff to overcome any problematic 'cultural' differences encountered (different ways of working) and to find alternative solutions that would not negatively impact on the pilot.
- **Opportunities to work shadow** or visit the children's centre prior to the pilot going 'live'. A key facilitating factor to partnership working would appear to be some form of shadowing (of children's centre staff) prior to the start of the pilot. Where this had happened this was reported to be helpful in exposing Jobcentre Plus staff to the different ways of working in children's centres and giving them a better idea of what their role would involve. Where this did not happen, some pilot staff reported that shadowing children's centre staff (even for day) would have been useful in preparing Jobcentre Plus staff for the new environment, different priorities and a different way of working.

- **Regular communications** between the children's centre manager and the Personal Adviser. Another important critical factor to partnership working by Jobcentre Plus staff has been regular communication with children's centre staff, and the centre manager/Head in particular. Clear lines of open communication have been key to addressing any problems quickly and preventing their escalation into bigger issues. Once one party understood why the other had to work in a particular way, or had to adhere to particular protocol, they were more willing to accommodate this.

7.3 Engaging parents: critical success factors

- **The ability of the Personal Advisers to make themselves accessible to parents.** A key requirement has been to provide a personalised service that is sensitive and responsive to parents' needs, which are often numerous and complex in nature. The continuity of the Adviser role enabled Advisers to gain parents' trust and build up a relationship with them, thus sustaining their engagement in the pilot. Supportive children's centre staff helped to facilitate Personal Advisers access to parents.
- **Prioritising outreach activity early on in the pilot** (over work-focused activities, such as Work-Focused Interviews) has also been key to engaging parents early on in the pilot, raising awareness of pilot provision and allowing Advisers to get to know parents by making themselves visible and approachable. Establishing this sort of familiarity and trust with parents has proven to be a necessary precursor to engaging them in more structured work-focused activity.
- Given that so much of the success of the Adviser role depended on this kind of face-to-face, personalised contact, which was able to fit around the often hectic schedules of parents, **the role appears to best suit full-time hours.** Those Advisers who worked part-time, or as part of a job-share did not feel that these arrangements lent themselves well to the nature of the role, and of the outreach work in particular.

Overall, the evidence from the interim evaluation research indicates that the pilot has had notable success in some key areas, including the range of outreach activities, the informal and trusted nature of engagement with children's centre users, and the personalised and intensive support provided by Personal Advisers. Personal Advisers have largely settled into their roles well, especially considering both their new environment and a new way of working, and customers are overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the pilot – from initial engagement to the quality of help provided by the Personal Advisers. Crucially, there are early signs that work-focused services are beginning to embed themselves in many areas, with some partner organisations and agencies now coordinating their efforts alongside the pilot to address the needs of parents and families in a more holistic way.

In terms of pilot outcomes, there have been more soft outcomes for customers than there have been hard employment outcomes. This is to be expected. As the baseline report showed, the demographics, labour market profiles, childcare responsibilities and personal circumstances of children's centre users indicate that for many, employment is a longer-term reality. Given this, many pilot staff and partner organisations felt that hard employment outcomes might not be captured within the lifespan of the pilot and that the focus should be on the softer outcomes which often mark the 'turning points' for many customers – turning points upon which further progress towards employment hinge. Indeed, the evidence to date would seem to validate this, as much of it points to increased confidence levels among customers, much greater awareness among customers of work/training-related opportunities and options, and easier access to job preparation skills and support.

Perhaps the most recurrent theme in our analysis of pilot delivery is the ongoing challenge of 'cultural differences' upon the effectiveness of the Personal Adviser role and upon overall pilot performance. These differences were identified as a potential risk to the pilot in the baseline report, and the evidence from our case study research is that this remains an issue. The differences have manifested themselves in two ways, mainly through the target-orientated expectations of the Jobcentre Plus line managers, but also through the difficulties that the Personal Advisers are having in managing the unstructured nature of the work and in meeting the complex and multiple needs of customers.

7.3.1 Future areas of focus for the evaluation

The baseline evaluation report in 2009 identified three key issues that needed to be explored in future research. The first was the central role and skills of the Personal Adviser in contributing to the overall success of the pilot, particularly with regard to atypical aspects of the Personal Adviser role. The second was the importance of support from children's centre staff in contributing to the success of the Personal Adviser role. Finally, the report highlighted how important it will be for the pilot to prepare customers for longer-term employment options while also promoting the availability of good quality childcare. This was important because many children's centre users who were surveyed in our baseline survey of children's centre users did not consider employment to be a priority in the short to medium term alongside their childcare responsibilities.

Overall, the interim findings detailed in this report validate all of the above issues as legitimate areas for continuing focus. However, there are two important additional considerations going forward. First, given that many pilot areas have not yet achieved the breadth of partnership working than they might have hoped, it will be necessary to make a future note as to how much progress is made on this front. Given that the pilot has now had time to bed-in and overcome many of the start-up and implementation issues that were problematic at the start, further progress on this should be viable. Second, and most critically, it will be important to see how well Jobcentre Plus staff have adjusted their own working practices

and behaviours to facilitate pilot delivery – in particular, the target-orientated expectations of the pilot held by the Jobcentre Plus line managers, which continue to exert a negative pressure on the work of the Personal Advisers. To a lesser extent, these working practices and behaviours have also manifested themselves in the ways Personal Advisers have had to grapple with the largely unstructured and ad hoc nature of the role, and of customers' demands.

8 Next stages of this evaluation

This chapter outlines the next stages of the evaluation, up to June 2011.⁶

8.1 Wave 2 qualitative research with children's centre users (summer 2010)

In summer 2010, we will contact and aim to secure depth interviews with those interviewed in the previous round of interviews (summer 2009). Interviewers will record in field notes their own perceptions of any changes in the interviewees' attitudes, manner and presentation. These longitudinal interviews will explore similar issues to the ones explored in the previous year (described in Section 1.3.2), but will identify and explore key changes in circumstances, employment/training/benefit status, attitudes to work and training, use of Jobcentre Plus services and future plans.

8.2 Wave 2 case study research (towards the end of the pilot)

The aim of this stage of research will be to gauge any changes in the experience and perceptions of the pilot from re-visiting the case study sites. We would aim to explore similar issues to the ones explored in the first wave of case study research (described in Section 1.3.3), but will identify any key changes to pilot delivery, staff experiences and perceptions of partnership working, communication of the pilot to staff and customers, and the impact of the pilot to customers.

⁶ Management Information (MI) is being collected separately as part of the pilot and this will be integrated into the final report of the evaluation, which will bring together comprehensive findings from across the evaluation.

The format of the case study research will follow the same format as the first stage: we will aim to interview four to six stakeholders in each of the ten case study sites (55 interviews), including pilot staff, Together for Children staff, local authorities, and other childcare and employment support services providers. We will also carry out discussion groups with children's centre users (one at each centre), and carry out structured observations of interactions between children's centre users and children centre staff. Children's centre users who take part in discussion groups will be paid £20 as a thank you for their participation.

8.3 Wave 2 user survey (towards the end of the pilot)

This will form the second wave of the user survey (the first being the baseline survey conducted in January 2009). This will follow a similar format to that of the baseline survey. It will involve a face-to-face visitor survey at the children's centres using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing. Survey questions will centre around personal and demographic details, employment status of respondents and their partners, benefits claimed and level of income, use of Jobcentre Plus services, preferred site for the location of work-focused services (Jobcentre Plus office or children's centre), and use of children's centre services. The survey will use around 90 per cent of the same questions that were used in the baseline survey.⁷

8.4 Comparison study

This stage of the evaluation will aim to assess whether or not increased take-up of work-focused services, and use of such services as a motive for visiting children's centres, is attributable to the pilot, or would have occurred in its absence. The comparison study will contextualise findings for the pilot areas, comparing them with around eight children's centres, across three to four areas. The areas to be included will be selected to provide as close a match as possible for the pilot areas, in terms of labour market and demographics.

The comparison study will consist of both qualitative and quantitative case study research and a survey of children's centre users.

8.5 Final report

The final evaluation report will pull together all the findings from the different strands of the evaluation to draw overarching conclusions and policy recommendations going forward. It will also include pilot MI as part of the findings and analysis.

⁷ Marangozov, R. (2009). *Work-focused services in children's centres pilot: evaluation baseline report*. Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No. 602. A copy of the questionnaire used in the baseline survey is attached in Appendix C of the baseline evaluation report.

This report provides findings from the interim stage of the evaluation of the 'work-focused services in children's centres' pilot.

The work-focused services in children's centres pilot is one of a suite of Child Poverty Pilots that were announced in 2008. The pilot is operating in ten local authority areas (30 Sure Start Children's Centres in total) in England, providing work-focused services through a dedicated Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser, as well as activities designed to meet local needs. It is running from January 2009 to March 2011.

The aim of the pilot is to test how children's centres can offer a more effective means of engaging parents in labour market activity, moving them closer to work, and ultimately into employment.

A mixed-methods evaluation is in place to assess the impact of the pilot and explore experiences and perceptions of its implementation. The evaluation includes surveys of centre users, interviews with parents, staff and stakeholders and analysis of DWP administrative data and data collected specifically for the evaluation.

The evaluation is being undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies.

The interim stage of the evaluation consisted of:

- qualitative research with children's centre users;
- in-depth interviews with pilot staff and partners; and
- discussion groups with children's centre users.

These were carried out across ten case study sites, one from each local authority pilot area.

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