

Compass Service Evaluation Summary

Background

The aim of the Compass Service was to build upon the success of a therapeutic education service in Norfolk (the Compass School) through a bespoke multidisciplinary package of care that supports young people who are Looked After Children (LAC) or are at risk of being taken into care, to ensure that they can remain with the family wherever possible and be reunified at the earliest opportunity. This comprised developing the Compass Outreach Service, the Virtual Residential School, and the Family Development Unit, which will allow families to receive individualised care designed around their needs. As the full Compass model had not been implemented at the time the evaluation report was written, the evaluation focused on the Compass School and the Virtual Residential School.

Aims

The aims of the project were to reduce local authority costs of children entering or remaining in care, combined with an improvement in educational outcomes for looked after children.

Evaluation

The overarching aim of the evaluation was to examine whether and by what means the Compass Service is effective at improving young people's wellbeing. A quantitative driven, multilevel mixed methods design was used, with a qualitative component to triangulate the quantitative data.

Compass Outreach Service data was analysed to describe the service provided to parents and young people and to explore trajectories of 99 young people seen by the Compass Outreach Service. Outcome data was collected when young people joined the service and again 4–6 months later, and analysed to explore how appropriately young people and families' mental health needs were met by the Compass Service. Qualitative data consisting of interviews with 22 young people and 17 parents or carers, and focus groups with 24 Compass staff, was analysed to understand how experience compares to other services that young people, parents and carers might have used in the past, and how service users' and providers' needs were met. Cost-benefit analysis was also undertaken.

Findings

Evidence suggested that the Compass Outreach Service was associated with a reduction in the use of statutory social care services: with regard to 99 cases discharged from Compass Outreach Service, 9 cases who had been admitted to the Service with a legal status were discharged without one, and only 3 children could not be prevented from becoming 'LAC' from admission to discharge, as reported by Compass staff. Furthermore, Compass Outreach Service data showed that out of the 16 young people who were living in foster care at referral, 5 were successfully returned to their homes. Data also showed that only 11 out of 70 young people who were living at home at referral could not be prevented from going into foster care as reported by Compass staff.

In terms of Compass being effective at improving young people's wellbeing, key findings included the following:

- Staff described sustained long-term work with children, young people and families as helping to stabilise home environments, reducing out-of-county placements or children becoming looked after and increasing reunifications.
- According to most parents and young people, the Compass Service provided a more holistic approach compared to other services as it focused not only on the child but also on the family. They felt the service supported confidence, self-esteem, behaviour, and family relationships. Parents said the home visitation service made it easier to talk about difficult situations.
- Outcome measures completed by young people, parents and teachers showed no change in young people's internalising and externalising problems or in young people's self-esteem. Positive changes in young people's hyperactivity problems and total difficulties were reported by young people, and changes in young people's peer problems and total difficulties were reported by their parents. Furthermore, staff reported that, as a group, young people had a better level of functioning 4 to 6 months after entering Compass.

Cost benefits

There was a positive cost benefit outcome equating to a saving of £3.39 for every £1 invested in the project. However, the analysis was based on COS closed cases, meaning it excluded open cases that might have been in the Compass Service for a long time. The team has now begun to collect costs data on all cases.

Recommendations for policy and practice

- Wider dissemination of information about Compass would help the innovation to be embedded and to reach a greater number of young people and parents. It will be crucial to maintain the level of care with larger numbers of service users.
- Compass should be expanded to include all the components of the model (such as the Family Development Unit).

Changes made in services in response to evaluation findings

- Findings from the evaluation have been used by the Compass Service to help secure further funding for the programme.

This evaluation study was carried out between October 2015 and October 2016 by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, London, with York Consulting providing the economic evaluation.

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