

Summary of the independent evaluation of Round One of the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme

Background

The Department for Education's (DfE) Children's Social Care Innovation Programme was set up in 2014 to kick start new approaches to delivering significant and sustained improvement in children's social care. Round One of the programme saw £110 million invested in 53 projects. The aims of Round One of the Innovation Programme were stated as:

- the quality of services increases so that children who need help from the social care system have better life chances
- local authorities achieve better value for money across children's social care; and
- there are stronger incentives and mechanisms for innovation, experimentation and replication of successful new approaches.

The Rees Centre at University of Oxford was appointed as Evaluation Coordinator for the Programme. The [final report](#) provides an overview of the initial 57 evaluations of the 53 projects. Although the evaluation period was relatively short a main finding was that, in many of the projects, service users, social workers and others thought that services had improved.

Findings

Improved outcomes included:

- reductions in children in care, children identified as in need, children in residential care and increased reunifications with birth families (in 24 of the 45 project evaluations that reported on these outcomes)
- reductions in numbers of children entering care or days spent in care (14 out of 23 projects in which these were key aims)
- positive improvements in staff knowledge, attitudes and self-efficacy, (in a third of the projects in which these were key aims)
- only 4 projects of the 12 that aimed to do so, provided strong evidence of improvements in social worker turnover but all 5 projects that intended to reduce caseloads did so
- better value for money was reported in the evaluations of 25 (nearly half) of the projects, some very considerable.

In projects in which positive outcomes were reported, the following factors seem to have contributed to these improvements:

- family-focused, strengths-based practice (focusing on the positives) that builds families and/or young people's capacity to address their own problems
- direct social work contact with families and young people that is flexible and reflective
- specialist adult workers (for example mental health, domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, substance abuse) providing expert and timely input
- multi-professional teams, undertaking assessment and reviews of individual cases
- consistent support to parents and foster carers through one main link person and for young people, key worker support which is young person-centred
- working with all family members including perpetrators in domestic abuse cases
- genuinely enabling young people to take responsibility for the services they receive.

Recommendations for Practice

Children's services providers may wish to take note of the features of promising practice in improving outcomes that emerged from Round One including:

- using a systemic, family-focused, strengths-based approach that supports families and young people to take more responsibility for their own lives
- multi-professional working that involves a wide range of services including specialist workers in substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, CSE, female genital mutilation and offending to make a distinctive but synthesised contribution to case reviews and decision-making
- providing consistent support to parents, young people and foster carers through one consistent 'key worker'
- maximising direct contact with families and young people that is flexible and reflective
- providing high quality social work supervision by clinicians or consultant social workers
- maximising education, employment and training (EET): providing support and training opportunities for those transitioning from care, so that they can find and maintain EET
- using short-stay residential provision but resisting financial drivers to fill beds.

DfE have considered the findings from across all the Round One evaluations including the recommendations above and drawn on them to identify seven features of practice and seven outcomes. These can be found on the [Innovation Programme](#) website.

Recommendations for evaluation of Round Two

We made a number of recommendations to inform the evaluation of subsequent rounds of Innovation Programme funding, many of which have been adopted. Our recommendations included that future evaluations should:

- target much larger samples, especially of young people whose voice could, in general, have been better represented in Round One
- seek to adopt the most robust designs possible including randomised control trials (RCTs), and where these are not possible, well-matched comparators
- have more consistency on outcomes and measures
- standardise approaches to cost benefit analysis so that comparisons can be made across projects – including measures taken, time period assessed, costs assessed, sample sizes and methodology
- explore further the relationship between outcomes for children and families, and changes in social work and/or professional practice through more robust methods, in order to test out the specific approaches that lead to the most improvement in outcomes
- evaluate both sustainability and, where appropriate, transferability of effects in projects aiming to scale and spread Round One innovations
- consider using embedded researchers as a potential way to address the research-practice gap, but acknowledge that they require adequate resources.

This evaluation study was carried out between January 2015 and December 2016 by the Evaluation Coordination Team, The Rees Centre, University of Oxford and these evaluations are available on the Innovation Programme and Rees Centre websites as a series of reports including:

- Full Evaluation Reports for all Round One projects – [Innovation Programme website](#)
- Thematic Evaluation Reports – [Innovation Programme website](#) and [Rees Centre website](#)
- Final Evaluation Report – [Innovation Programme website](#) and [Gov.uk website](#)