



Evaluation of the Local Authority Child Poverty Innovation Pilots

London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

Key Messages from 'Family Solutions'

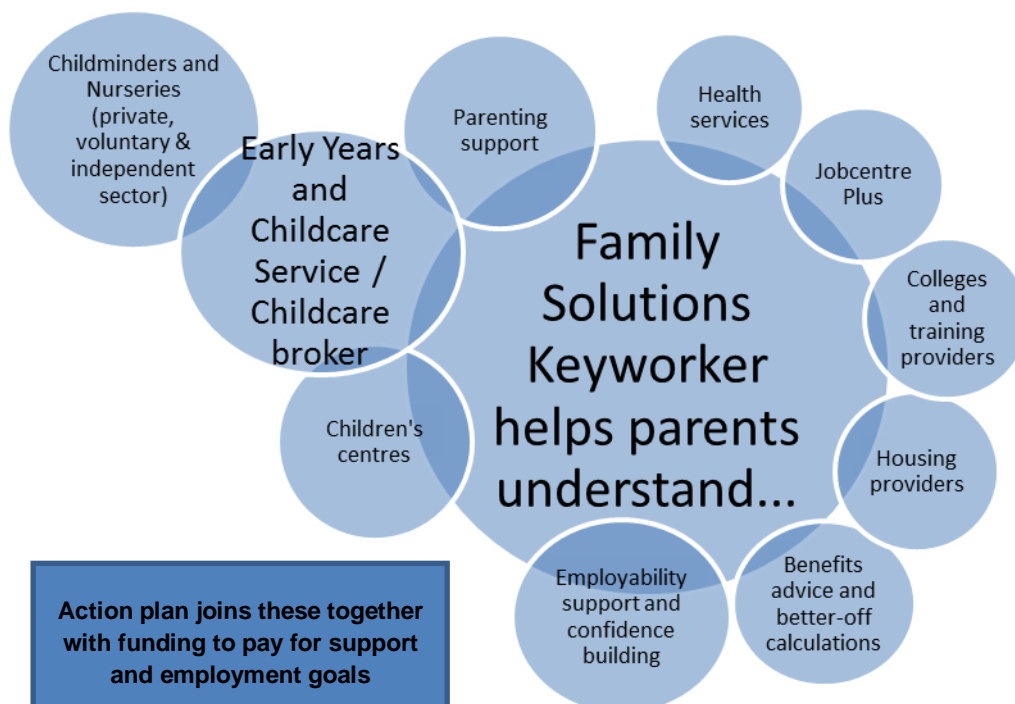
In 2008, the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham (LBHF) received just over £1m of funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, now the Department for Education, DfE) to run a two-year pilot project to reduce child poverty in the borough. Called the Local Authority Innovation Pilot (LAIP), the project aimed to stimulate new, local ideas for identifying families in need, reducing worklessness, increasing family income, and improving outcomes for resident children and families. The learning from the pilots around England is intended to inform and shape local and national responses to child poverty, by showing 'what works' in responding to families' needs.

An evaluation was carried out by GHK Consulting Ltd. This is a summary of the key messages and learning to date from *Family Solutions*, the main initiative funded by the pilot.

About 'Family Solutions'

- Hammersmith & Fulham is a wealthy borough by national standards, but severe poverty and deprivation are present in pockets across the borough in large and small estates. According to HMRC data from the outset of the pilot (2006), 36% of children in the borough live in low income families that are receiving workless benefits, with a further 14% of children in low income working families where one or both parents are working.
- Local policy, as set out in *Work Matters*, is focused on tackling the barriers that lead to intergenerational worklessness, ensuring that residents have access to local employment opportunities, and enabling local agencies to work together to generate sustainable jobs that improve residents' long-term prospects by giving them a 'hand up'.
- The pilot also built on local initiatives. For example, it was known through the *Childcare Matters* work that helping parents with the cost of childcare could help parents to stay in work, once they had found work.
- **Family Solutions** was developed by the Early Years and Childcare Service, working in partnership with local social enterprise Tendis, in order to "trial innovative and joined-up solutions to enable families to access a wide range of services targeted at improving children's life chances and enabling families to move out of poverty by supporting parents to make informed career choices and access sustainable employment".
- Family Solutions decided to target families where one or both parents were unemployed, had at least one child under the age of 12 years old, and with a household income of £20,000 or less. It was expected that these criteria would help the pilot to focus on engaging 'hard-to-reach' parents on many of the borough's most deprived estates, who were not engaging with other services such as children's centres and childcare, and who needed support to become employable.

- The project focused on increasing participation in training and employment related activities among parents with young children, because many of these parents are receiving income support and are expected to return to work once their children are older.
- Looking after young children is full of challenges, and parents can struggle to find paid work in the future if they do not have the opportunity to get recent and relevant work experience, update their skills and qualifications, and develop clear and achievable career goals. They also need help to get used to how the childcare system works, so they are familiar with, and confident in choosing affordable and quality childcare options that can fit around a job.
- Some parents in poverty are also hampered by other problems such as severe debt, difficulties with parenting, money management, or family relationships, poor knowledge of the English language or local services, or issues connected with their health or housing.
- Although many of these parents may not come into contact with social services or other active interventions because they are 'just coping' rather than having more dysfunctional lives, these problems can become insurmountable barriers to parents returning to work and being able to improve their children's lives, especially if parents are isolated and lack a supportive family or social network to help them.
- It is also clear that no single agency can take an overview of all these barriers, with the knowledge to advise and guide parents towards to a range of specialist services in the borough. That is why Family Solutions was intended to bridge this gap, by developing a personalised, 'keyworking' model of support to parents, who could access a consistent, single source of help as and when it was needed. The keyworker was called a Family Facilitator.
- Family Solutions marketed its services directly to families and took self-referrals, as well as spreading the word among local children's centres and other professionals who could then encourage eligible parents to get in touch with the service. The idea of an 'opt-in' model was intended to encourage parents that were motivated to help themselves but who might not have known 'how', distinguishing Family Solutions from conditional services or models based on sanctions. There was no time limit on the amount of support that parents could receive, and over the course of two years some parents dropped in and out of active engagement as they pursued college courses, training and employment.



What did Family Solutions do?

- Between 2009 and 2011, Family Solutions worked with 227 eligible parents and 220 families with children.
- Each parent met the Family Facilitator at the start of their involvement to discuss their individual wishes for future employment, their skills needs and barriers to returning to work. The initial meeting could last for up to two hours and was often the start of a longer process of engagement.
- Family Facilitators were able to:
 - help parents to make realistic choices about their education and training, providing one to one guidance throughout
 - identify and pay for vocational training (where other sources of funding were unavailable) that would help parents to achieve their goals
 - use a flexible fund to pay for exam fees, equipment, books, laptops and other small items that would help parents to succeed in their pathway to employment; as well as paying for extra-curricular activities for children
 - provide in-house training to boost parents' confidence, help with money management skills and increase wellbeing
 - supported parents with job and college interviews and at meetings with ESOL providers, helping them to access other services
- Family Facilitators also worked with other services:
 - the childcare broker at LBHF, who was able to find appropriate places in local settings for the children, so that parents could benefit from free childcare during their training, job search and the first three months of employment
 - children's centres, to ensure that parents were accessing services for their children
 - benefits advice services, to ensure that families were receiving the benefits that they were entitled to and so that parents knew about the financial consequences of returning to work
 - referring parents to Triple P and Take Three Days courses
 - debt advice services (towards the end of the pilot)

What did Family Solutions achieve?

- Family Solutions recruited parents and families from a diverse range of ages (73% of parents were aged between 25 and 44, with smaller numbers of younger and older parents) and ethnic backgrounds (51% of parents were from a Black or Black British background; 24% of parents were White, with the remainder of parents from other ethnic groups).
- The beneficiaries came from estates all over the borough, including 50 parents from the White City estate, 29 from Old Oak, 17 from Wormholt, 14 from Edward Woods, and 14 from Fulham and Lancaster Courts.
- Approximately three-quarters of families were lone parent families, and 10% of parents said that they had a disability.
- 37 parents returned to employment, into jobs including catering assistant, childminder and teaching assistant.
- 35 parents were supported to attend job interviews and 114 parents produced CVs with the support of their Family Facilitator.
- Approximately half of the parents benefited from at least one further education / vocational training course, including pre-employment and NHS healthcare assistant courses.
- A wider group of parents benefited from ESOL and other courses such as 'Take Three Days' and Family Solutions' own in-house training courses in massage and wellbeing, presentation skills and money management. Parents that attended these courses generally gave positive feedback.

- 162 children accessed childcare in high quality settings as a result of pilot funding, while 34 children received financial support to participate in extra-curricular activities.
- The overwhelming majority of parents that the evaluation team spoke to had a positive experience of working with Family Solutions. The following quotes give just two illustrative examples of things that parents said:
 - *“[The Family Facilitator said] I’ll make the initial phone call and then you can take it from there’, and I’ve found that really, really, especially helpful, when I’ve not been able to pick myself up... They’ve never left me by the wayside.... just having someone at the end of the phone has been a lifeline for me at times.”* (Unemployed lone parent, female)
 - *“Some people that go to the Jobcentre don’t really like their advisors. I like going to [my Family Facilitator] because he’s interested, and trying to help. Down the Jobcentre, some of them aren’t trying to help you”* (Unemployed lone parent, female)
- Helping parents with childcare also proved to be beneficial for children’s development, with parents saying that it had helped their children to make more progress than they would have done at home:
 - *“I can definitely see him [my son] getting a good education, especially through his nursery... I look at him when he comes home from nursery and he’s always been a happy child but [now] he’s interacting with other children all the time, whereas before he didn’t know how to mix with the other children, but now he’s so calm”* (female lone parent)
 - *“It’s been brilliant because [my daughter] has come on a hell of a lot since she’s gone to nursery... She’s more confident, she’s saying a lot more words, she’s just more happy, she’s got friends in nursery now. She’s more happy, more running around screaming, eating a lot more, her sleep pattern’s a lot better as well”* (female lone parent)

Learning from Family Solutions

- **Workless parents are enthusiastic and motivated to return to work:** Family Solutions showed that there was a high demand among lone parents on income support and other target groups to get into training and look for a job. The pilot could not meet all the demand and was turning away many people who could have benefited, whose employability needs were not necessarily being met by other services.
- **Childcare and the cost of childcare is the most important barrier to returning to work:** Free childcare for training, volunteering and work related activity is a particularly important feature of the Family Solutions offer. Childcare in London is very expensive, and even when it is provided for free (e.g. by colleges) it is oversubscribed. By removing this barrier and introducing parents to affordable and quality childcare, free childcare has enabled many beneficiaries to become more employable. It has also introduced them to the benefits of different childcare settings, making it more likely that parents will continue to use affordable settings.
- **Many workless parents have a long journey before they can return to work:** Among the target group for the pilot, there was a much higher need for training than anticipated. As well as parents that had few formal qualifications, there were parents that needed to succeed in education in order to gain confidence. Other parents had qualifications, but little experience, and therefore needed support to access volunteering or work placements.
- **Parents that are low in confidence and experience need guidance:** Parents may be more likely to enter sustained employment if the training that they do matches their aspirations for work, but few parents seemed to have had the chance in the past, to express their wishes for a future employment path. On several occasions, beneficiaries have stated that an important factor in their decision to engage was the way in which their Family Facilitator encouraged them to think about the jobs they wanted to do the most. On the other hand, some parents may limit their own aspirations for employment (for example, they may initially express a desire to work in childcare because they imagine that the hours would suit them, rather than a particular liking for the work itself) and need careful guidance to think of other opportunities and possibilities.

- **Consistent support is important to mitigate unplanned events that can disrupt parents' confidence and their pathway to employment:** Similarly, the Family Solutions records reveal that unplanned events can knock parents' job search back: for example, housing problems, problems with their children, domestic violence, debt, to name just a few issues. During these periods the continuing support of the Family Facilitator was important so that parents were able to continue in their training or move onto other programmes such as Work Ladder – even if they did not find employment during their time with Family Solutions.
- **Working families are also at risk of poverty:** Often, it is very difficult for parents to take up full-time work as low paid jobs and the rate of child tax credits make parents worse off when they return to work. Some parents work for a few hours a week or occasionally take up cash-in-hand jobs; and these parents often need just as much support with training and childcare, to build up their confidence and skills so that they can apply for jobs that offer a pathway out of poverty as opposed to casual work. However, there are few programmes that offer such support to working parents.
- **Individualised, open-ended, welcoming and flexible support is an effective way of engaging hard to help families:** Each parent has different needs for support in relation to employability and it is important that this is recognised by employability services. For many disengaged parents, it takes time and often, more than one appointment, to persuade them that services can help them; holistic support is not often provided by statutory services, leading to parents having low expectations of how services can help them. Poor services also appear to reinforce low aspirations and confidence.
- **There is a shortage of accessible training opportunities:** Although level 2 and basic skills qualifications can be funded through other sources, there is often little funding available for people in poverty who may already have (often outdated) school-leaving or foreign qualifications, but who want to pursue level 3 qualifications or other higher vocational routes. Many parents are also denied the opportunity to train because they lack the money for travel, exam fees and equipment and books for their courses – the face value of a course fee rarely represents the true cost of training. The **Family Solutions flexible fund** was therefore very important in supporting learning, as college hardship funds are difficult to access and may not always be able to help with the costs of equipment or travel for parents in poverty.
- **There is a high demand for ESOL:** A great many parents had ESOL needs as they either had very limited English, or their English was not good enough to allow them to apply for jobs. A lack of English can also affect parents' confidence in themselves and their skills. Family Solutions encountered many parents who would have benefited from ESOL programmes, whose needs were not met by the diminishing number of funded places that are available. In addition, Family Solutions was able to work closely with adult education services to offer a higher standard of ESOL to beneficiaries than parents otherwise would have had access to.
- **Starting the journey to employment as early as possible is important:** Services need to be proactive and support should be available to unemployed parents throughout their children's lives, not only in the period shortly before the parents are expected to go back into work. Family Solutions showed that parents on income support can be engaged in preparation for work long before they go onto active benefits such as jobseekers' allowance – increasing the likelihood they will find sustainable work when their children are older.
- **Bridging the gaps between employability providers and children's services is difficult, but necessary:** The approach of using a 'single keyworker' took time to become embedded and develop as a model, as the Family Facilitators needed to build up their skills. By the end of the pilot they had made substantial progress. However, it was still difficult for them to persuade parents that they might benefit from money management courses, and take up benefit checks to ensure they received the income that they were entitled to (in the end, Family Facilitators also learned to perform better off calculations to help with this). Some stakeholders also felt that more engagement of parents could be delivered through outreach, although there might be a trade-off between this and the time that could be spent working with existing demand. Therefore it is important to continue to build on the partnerships that Family Solutions has begun.