

An Evaluation of the Greater London Authority's Parent Advocacy Project in Pupil Referral Units

Summary of key findings

'Parents feel they have made good progress and in one case stated that of all the people they have spoken to over the years, this has been the most useful experience', Parent Advocacy Service Deliverer

What was the Parent Advocacy project?

The parent advocacy project was a Greater London Authority (GLA) initiative as part of 'Time for Action'. Under Project Brodie, the GLA identified five Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) to take part in the pathfinder project for 15 months, beginning in January 2011. Barking and Dagenham, Ealing, Hillingdon, Lewisham and Sutton were allocated £100k (£20k each) to implement or enhance services that dealt specifically with parents and children in PRUs. The purpose of this was to improve the relationship between PRU, parent and child, and to improve the child's attendance and behaviour.

The PRUs represented five diverse areas of London, and so their approach to implementation differed to suit this. Overall, the following approaches were used, and proved successful as part of the whole project:

- **Outreach and one-to-one support.** Parents gained from intensive one-to-one support (sometimes joined by their child) with a parent liaison officer, reflecting on family situations and solutions.
- **Group support and skills building.** Parents attended weekly meetings in PRUs with other parents, focusing on parenting strategies and drawing strength from shared experience.
- **Shared learning amongst pathfinders.** At regular intervals throughout the project; the project team, PRUs, service deliverers and local authorities would meet and share knowledge and opinion on best practice so far.

At the end of the funded period in March 2012, the project had engaged 68 parents and 70 children across the five pathfinders. Also, Barking and Dagenham secured further funding from the

LA to continue parent advocacy work, and other PRUs recognised the value of continued parent advocacy services.

How was the Parent Advocacy project evaluated?

An independent evaluation was commissioned from White Consultants Limited (WCL), with support from London Metropolitan University (LMU). The evaluation developed a framework that set out:

- deliverables such as detailed data and analysis;
- team roles for the central team;
- core activities such as seminars and knowledge sharing opportunities;
- timeline for the work

The above was agreed with the GLA team. This informed the shape and nature of WCL activities. Further, an interview template and plan was created by WCL, who conducted 20 interviews (both via telephone and face-to-face, as groups and individually) with the following core stakeholders:

- PRU staff
- LA staff
- Service Deliverers
- Parents engaged in the project
- Children engaged in the project

The results of these interviews can be seen in the Final report and adjoining analysis.

The evaluation team also conducted four data collections involving parents and children engaged in the project. This aimed to establish a baseline and any subsequent improvement of parents self confidence in terms of providing for their child, and the child's attainment, attendance, behaviour

and attitude in the PRU. All of the data collected was analysed by the evaluation team, and is available in the Final Report¹.

Further, shared knowledge formed a stable foundation to this project, and so five seminar sessions were run by the GLA during the 15 months.

As this project was a pathfinder, the evaluation also considered the wider strategic value in relation to other similar projects running both in the UK and abroad; for example WCL considered various reports conducted on behalf of the UK government, and also a field experiment in French middle schools conducted a project with similar aims to the parent advocacy project.

Key findings from the evaluation

Did the project deliver its target outputs?

Broadly, the project set out to deliver two aims:

1. To trial an approach coordinated the roles of PRU, LA, service delivery, parent and child to improve attitude and behaviour in children, and their relationships with family and education.
2. Engage 100 families in the process.

It was decided during the project that the target output had to be re-calculated to reflect the difficulty of engaging parents from the beginning of the project. The target output was revised to 65 in May 2011, a target that was achieved by the end of the project.

The project approach was set up to tackle multiple issues, including family relationships and children's relationships with education, broadly under the category of youth crime in the capital. There is some improvement across the 70 children that took part in this project².

When asked if they had seen any change in their parent at home, a child replied, *'Well Mum smiles more,'* – A Child Participating in the Parent Advocacy Project, Barking and Dagenham PRU

Did the project benefit the families it set out to support?

The data analysis showed that broadly, the project benefitted the clients it served. This was however, less easy to identify in terms of the data collected from the assessments and surveys due to the small margin of improvement; particularly in the child measures. On the other hand, data collected during interviews and seminars showed some improvement in terms of self-reflection by the parents and children, and the positive aspects observed by PRU staff and service deliverers as a result of the parent advocacy work conducted.

'I feel as though you [the service deliverers] have all listened and have given me advice and support, it has really helped. I was really upset this morning and having a bad day, you have all helped me see that life can be better' – Parent involved in the Parent Advocacy Project, Sutton PRU

Was there a need for the project?

A literature review and survey delivered during the evaluation confirmed the strategic need for a project such as this. In one case, the parent advocacy project was referred to by one PRU headteacher as an 'adaptor' that could help parents to 'plug in' to various support networks, that they otherwise do not always take advantage of.

In the interviews conducted with parents, one response reflected that the service delivered helped parents more than any other service they had been offered before.

This project focused on improving education and relationships, creating a valuable support network between the educational institution, service deliverer, parents and the children. There is a need for this type of inclusion when considering solutions for children in PRUs who can come from the most vulnerable families in society.

Did the Parent Advocacy activities duplicate the services provided by others?

The project offered unique provision (wraparound service/holistic support) by involving all core stakeholders in each stage of provision.

On some occasions, individual pathfinders found that parents were already in touch with other provisions, and therefore services in these cases

¹ Website address for Final Report here.

² See the Report for more detail.

were halted as the potential duplication was recognised. This happened in only a small number of cases; in others, parents may be in touch with other provisions where parent advocacy work was complementary to the work being done.

Did the Parent Advocacy project achieve what it set out to do?

As a pathfinder, this project succeeded in identifying a number of approaches to implementing parent advocacy in PRUs. The range of implementation strategies (as outlined in the Final Report) is suitable for the structure of PRUs as they differ from each other; for example in size, ethnic intake, school years they provide for and so on. Examples of best practice in the five PRUs that partook were also identified.

Challenges for Parent Advocacy

All five PRUs involved in this project found it difficult to engage parents in the beginning of, and during, the project. Improving engagement methods will continue to be a challenge, but it can be eased through shared knowledge sessions, as PRUs can learn from each other's experiences.

1. Qualitative data collection proved difficult during this project. This will continue to be a challenge in terms of resource and skill for PRUs. An approach of how to handle this challenge is laid out in the Handbook that was published in association with this project and evaluation³.

2. The different internal structure of PRUs can make it difficult to conduct cross-comparisons of data collected to assess any parent and child improvement. Using an external measuring tool can be useful to try and mitigate this as it is not specific to any one PRU structure and can complement current PRU measures.
3. Changes in local authority structures and policy reports such as DfE reports on truancy⁴ have had an effect on the path and reflection of this project. These could continue to have an effect on further parent advocacy projects.

Future learning for the GLA

The parent advocacy project was effective as it sought to improve the behaviour, attitude and attendance of children in PRUs by looking at the broader picture and considering the effect the family and school can have on a child.

Inspiring parents to advocate their own position and considering how they can best support their child can, as seen in cases in this project, encourage some improvement in the attitude and behaviour of children in the capital.

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³ Link to Handbook

⁴ See Charlie Taylor's reports, accessible from here: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/behaviour/a00204776/taylor-review-of-alternative-provision>