University of the West of England

BRISTOL

Flying Start programme in Neath Port Talbot: Impact evaluation

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Executive Summary

The primary aim of the Flying Start programme is to improve educational and social outcomes for children in the most deprived communities across Wales. Targeted investment is dedicated to offering free part-time, quality childcare for two to three year olds, enhanced Health Visitor support, parenting programmes, and basic skills including the language and play programme (LAP).

The overall aim of this research is to explore the impact on families of the services offered within the Flying Start programme. This stage of the research was to engage with key stakeholders about the purpose and function of the evaluation and ensure involvement in the design of the evaluation.

Qualitative research was the most appropriate methodological approach for the study; the underlying logic to the approach was participatory evaluation. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were undertaken with stakeholders within Flying Start: childcare providers, health visitors, midwives, educational psychologists, the Flying Start Co-ordinator and members of the project advisory group. The main fieldwork took place over a period of 6 weeks in June and July 2011. Each interview was audio-recorded and then listened to together with the transcript. Themes and issues were identified and tabulated.

The main intention of Flying Start as identified broadly by the participants was:

- To secure positive outcomes in the medium- and long-term for children between the ages of 0 and 3 years of age.
- To break the cycle of deprivation for children in the target group.

The participants' perceptions were that:

- Children who had received Flying Start provision were invariably better prepared to engage with learning and were more socially mature on entering nursery school, than when Flying Start provision had not been available. It had enhanced their coping abilities and readiness for school. Flying Start has been pivotal in securing an early identification service in Neath Port Talbot.

- Flying Start has been a central force in moving practice in playgroup settings forward and in developing the skills of playgroup leaders. However, there remains variation in the standard of childcare provision.

- Flying Start is having an impact with regard to the support it is providing for children and families in need. This includes support to enable children to participate in free playgroup provision, the early identification of children's particular educational needs, helping to raise parents' aspirations for their children, with evidence of long-term involvement with particular families. Building relationships with parents and families was identified as a key aspect.

- Flying Start had the potential to address and transform deep-rooted social problems in the community. There was an awareness that it is unlikely that it will be immediately evident, or indeed accessible to, short-term evaluation.

- Provision to support young children to reach their full developmental potential can best be met where the health and education support is effective and freely available to young children at risk.

- Flying Start has undoubtedly helped change professional practice across agencies generally. However, concerns were voiced about the 'postcode lottery' allocation as opposed to an allocation primarily based on an assessment of need.

- The importance of multi-agency working is central to the success of Flying Start. Flying Start has helped facilitate greater sharing of information between agencies. This has helped to start to overcome one of the recognised difficulties of multi-professional multi-agency working. It is clear however, that much remains to be done and many areas where further refinement is called for.

Representatives of all relevant organisations and professions drew attention to the complexities involved when evaluating the extent of the impact of the different elements of the Flying Start initiative. Targets need to be carefully selected and agreed across agencies. There is a need to review progress and impact over a longer time-frame and to adopt a focus that relates to the 'end-users' (families), and not just relying on the views and opinions of professionals.

It is important that the perceptions particularly relating to parents and families are validated. The purpose of the next stage of the evaluation process is to prioritise asking about the kind of effects Flying Start is having upon beneficiaries and how this relates to the stated outcomes of the interventions as seen by the commissioners and providers.

Introduction

Background

In 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government introduced two new grant programmes designed "to help improve the life chances of children and young people living in disadvantaged circumstances". The Flying Start programme forms part of a range of iterventions aimed at 'early years' (i.e. children aged 0-4 years). These interventions are underpinned by a range of research studies that have established that there are income related gaps in terms of child development generally and school readiness in particular with respect to this age group. Evidence from the Sure Start programme in England suggests that there were some improvements in child health and development when comprehensive services were provided to low income families combining parent support with early child care.

Flying Start was funded by The Assembly to support high quality services including extra health visiting, free high quality childcare for two year olds, basic skills programmes and parenting courses for families with children aged 0 to 3 years in chosen targeted areas.

In practice, Flying Start has been targeted at securing early intervention when concerns are raised about the needs of young children, avoiding referral of young people into the care system and avoidance of other crisis remedial systems. In the longer term, this initiative is seen by the Welsh Assembly Government as attempting to reduce the number of people with very poor skills whilst at the same time, reducing the rates of criminal behaviour, truancy and drug use, to foster higher employment, increased earnings and better qualifications at the end of schooling (Welsh Government, Flying Start Website)[1].

Funding was initially secured until April 2011, it has now been extended for another three years to 2014.

The Flying Start programme in Neath Port Talbot was recently evaluated (2010) as a part of the national evaluation of Flying Start and Cymorth which was carried out by Ipsos MORI and SQW Consultants; the University of the West of England (UWE) team were the academic consultants to the evaluation. This evaluation mainly focussed on the perspectives of

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[1] http://wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/parenting/help/flyingstart/?lang=en.

commissioners, professionals employed by the local Trusts and Authorities and those engaged in delivering the provision.

However, comparatively little attention has been focussed on the impact of the investment from the perspective of the end users: children, young people and their parents. It is with a view to filling this gap that Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council commissioned UWE to provide the next phase of local evaluation with a brief to concentrate on the impact of Flying Start on the targeted children and their families. It was agreed at the outset that, before direct work with Children and their families could begin, there was a need for clarification of the commissioning group's expectations and ambitions for the evaluation exercise, alongside engagement with other key stakeholders about the purpose, function and expectations of the evaluation. The thinking behind this was to ensure that the key stakeholders were involved in contributing to the design of the evaluation and that their perspectives and values are incorporated into the evaluation design. This report represents the outcomes of this process.

Findings of the National Evaluation (2010)

The national evaluation of Flying Start found that the programme had been operationally effective. It was said to have:

- significantly increased the accessibility of services which in turn has lead to increased and higher levels of take up as well as increased engagement in wider services

- effectively built relationships and engaged with those families that are traditionallyharder to or whose engagement with mainstream services is minimal

- engaged parents in the lives of their children

- worked with those families with the highest level of need

- identified needs earlier as well as wider issues or problems

- created effective referral routes either to other Flying Start entitlements or to wider generic services

- developed effective working relationships with local schools which greatly aided the transition from Flying Start, to nursery, to school

- established an effective multi-agency approach to delivery

- recruited a wider group of professional staff to better meet local needs

- invested in staff development and training

- achieved generally high levels of satisfaction and a strong demand for the services.

Findings of the Neath Port Talbot Case Study (2009)

The area based case of Neath Port Talbot (NPT) which contributed to the National Evaluation was conducted in 2009 and found that:

- The involvement of the CYP Partnership Management Group, in all key decisions with respect to Flying Start, had the value of ensuring that all the key stakeholders (CYP services, Education and Lifelong Learning, Health and Voluntary Sector providers) were engaged from the beginning of the process. However, there was no direct involvement of potential beneficiaries in the immediate planning of the Flying Start provision.

- The model of delivery that was being developed in NPT was a professionally integrated and holistic model. The range of different occupations involved in delivering services appeared to complement each other and provide a child-focused service. Whilst it was too early to make any definitive statements about programme outcomes and impacts, there was some evidence to suggest developmental progress in relation to the target group of 0-3 year olds.

- The development of Flying Start was seen as having contributed to the improvement of multi-agency working in NPT.

- The extension of training provided to Flying Start childcare providers to all childcare providers could enhance the movement towards more universal, quality, child-focused services.

- There was a strong feeling expressed by a number of interviewees that access to Flying Start entitlements for all children and families would accelerate progress towards the overall aims of the Single Plan.

Recommendations for Neath Port Talbot from the Case Study

The key challenges and recommendations from the evaluation to the Children and Young Peoples Partnership in relation to Flying Start were to:

- Disseminate the lessons learned around the integrated model of early intervention.

- To improve consultation and direct involvement of potential beneficiaries; parent and community views were accessed in the same way as for the Single Plan, ie. through the multi-agency participation group.

- To increase the quality of provision in childcare settings by ensuring that the Flying Start model of training and childcare provision is made available to all settings. There are several childcare settings that provided childcare already and these generally do not apply the same structures within the sessions as those that are solely for Flying Start children.

- To develop and increase the base of local child-minders to provide a more focused, local childcare provision which will also enhance employment in the area.

It is within this backdrop of previous findings and recommendations that the current inquiry is situated.

Aims of the present evaluation

The overall aim of the research reported here is to explore the impact on families of the free childcare places, the intensive health visiting support, the midwifery and the educational psychologist services offered within the Flying Start programme. It was agreed with Neath Port Talbot that the main research objectives of this stage of the project were to:-

- Engage with key stakeholders about the purpose and function of the evaluation

- Ensure that the key stakeholders are involved in contributing to the designing the evaluation

- determine the basis for the evaluation questions, design, and methods.

The purpose of the engagement with the stakeholders at this stage was to ensure that the focus of the evaluation, and ultimately the outcomes of the evaluation, are owned by and support the needs of the key stakeholders.

Our aim was to develop an understanding about the connection between a funded intervention and the outcomes observed and experienced by its stakeholders, i.e. about its impact. It was anticipated that the evaluation process will:

- lead to understanding about the impact of Flying Start on the lives of whom it is targeted at and on the culture and learning of the partnership that provides it;

- identify successful and transferable interventions with a view to facilitating the sharing and adoption of good practice;

- provide a steer to managers about the type of interventions worth funding in the future; and

- lead to impact evaluation being an integral and natural process for those engaging in early years interventions.

Methodology

Due to the nature of the evaluation a qualitative methodology was used because of the in-depth information it can yield. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were undertaken with stakeholders: childcare providers, health visitors, midwives, educational psychologists, the Flying Start Coordinator and members of the project advisory group.

The initial phase involved carrying out some introductory visits to the key stakeholders at their respective professional meetings. This included the Flying Start programme team and a mix of coordinators for childcare. In addition, a Project Advisory Group was put together and a meeting was held with the members - key stakeholders in Neath Port Talbot. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce the research team to the staff and, for the latter, to clarify the commissioning group's expectations and ambitions for the evaluation exercise.

In addition to the commissioners a further two groups key stakeholders to engage with was collated and two key groups were identified:
1) Personnel involved in implementing each element of the interventions:

   a. Childcare providers/playschool managers
   b. Health Visitors
   c. Midwives
   d. Educational Psychologists
   e. Flying Start Co-ordinator

2) Those served or affected by the interventions: a sample of the users of these services (including those who are well positioned to offer a view on the longer-term consequences of the investment (including head teachers and infant teachers of related early year's provision).

The underlying logic behind this approach could be described methodologically under the banner of 'participative evaluation[2]'. While this can encompass a range of different epistemological strategies, in this instance we are adopting what Cousins and Whitmore (1998)[3] called 'practical participatory evaluation', i.e. it implies, with reference to Flying Start, an

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[2] Participatory evaluation implies that, when doing an evaluation, researchers, facilitators, or professional evaluators collaborate in some way with individuals, groups, or communities who have a decided stake in the program, development project, or other entity being evaluated.
[3] Cousins, J. B., and Whitmore, E. "Framing Participatory Evaluation." In E. Whitmore (ed.), *Understanding and Practicing Participatory Evaluation.* New Directions for Evaluation, no. 80. San Francisco, 1998.

approach to broadening decision making and problem solving through systematic inquiry.

Fieldwork and Interview Schedule

The Flying Start Coordinator provided the contact details for all the personnel, following which the research team telephoned each stakeholder to arrange a face-to-face interview. Some of these were one-to-one, others were in groups, for example all midwives together. The choice of which of these two strategies a stakeholder took part in was made by each interviewee when the research team contacted them.

The main fieldwork took place over a period of 6 weeks in June and July 2011 at times that were convenient to both the interviewees (participants) and the research team. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in the interviewees' office space or choice of location.

Following discussions with the Project Advisory Group and the Flying Start Coordinator a semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up. With the purpose of eliciting answers from the interviewees on the following aspects:

- shorter-term outcomes of Flying Start
- longer term impact of Flying Start
- whether the necessary resources were available
- purpose of Flying Start
- impact of Flying Start on interviewee
- impact of Flying Start on interviewee's work
- impact of Flying Start on families
- what sort of outcomes are relevant and why
- change in staff member and approach to their work

A semi-structured interview is one where the interviewer has a set of required questions, and usually a list of suggested follow up questions, with the aim of the interview outlined. This aims to ascertain the responses needed to gain data to answer the evaluation objectives. Within this the interviewer may ask supplementary questions, depending on the responses of the interviewee, to elicit a more in-depth response or follow relevant threads raised by the interviewee that the interviewer may deem appropriate to the evaluation.

Each interviewee completed a consent form and the interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of the data

While qualitative research was the most appropriate methodological approach for this study, it is important to bear in mind that this type of methodology deals with perceptions rather than facts. Conclusions and recommendations can be made based on a cohesiveness of perceptions held by those interviewed. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the most appropriate people are interviewed as part of the process and that a disparate group are included (in order to get a complete picture of the perceptions) to triangulate the data gathered. This will help to ensure that the view held is that of the majority or a particular, identifiable group.

With this in mind, each recording was listened to together with the transcript and themes and issues were identified and tabulated. Where necessary, clarification of meaning was sought and, from the evidence gained and in relation to the aims of the evaluation, we were able to discuss and ultimately come to conclusions about Flying Start.

Evaluation Findings

Perspectives on the Purpose of Flying Start

The main objective of Flying Start

It is perhaps not surprising that most of those interviewed were clear that the main intention of Flying Start was to secure positive outcomes in the medium- and long-term for children between the ages of 0 and 3 years of age.

> *'The purpose is actually to get better outcomes for children em...with a focus on early intervention. Both at a child and a family, family... level'.*

> *'At the very highest level, you could say the core aim is about children having a flying start in life, which if you translate that further you're saying in terms of young people being able to live a fulfilled life and to fulfil their own individual potential that they are given the greatest environment… where families can be supported to provide their children with the enabling environment'*

Essentially, Partnership managers and providers, seem to view Flying Start as an enabling facility to support young people acquiring the necessary skills and attitudes to succeed.

Some of the key professionals interviewed in Neath Port Talbot were able to reflect on the progress made to-date and to identify how further refinement might support the aims of the initiative as articulated by the Welsh Assembly Government. Particular attention was drawn to the need to ensure that the focus of the intervention should be securely focussed on the family, as opposed to merely a child-based intervention:

> *'See that those youngsters with particular needs are better supported in a fairly holistic...and I say fairly, but fairly holistic way. But in particular I see it really as a focus on the family in a community setting, where the support comes in, rather than at an individual child level'.*

> *'obviously you can only deal with the needs of a particular child, but the settings need to be supported for a family in they need to be supported around the community environment'.*

This interpretation of the way forward seems to have much to commend it since it does demand that several (if not all) of the stated aims of the initiative

are more likely to be met. Such an approach would seem to maximise on economies in terms of deployment of resources and personnel.

Breaking the Cycle of Deprivation - and all that comes with it

The importance of breaking the cycle of deprivation is a perspective that seems to be shared across the various services participating in the initiative. Health Visitors, Child Care providers, Educational Psychologists all drew attention to the appropriateness of adopting a holistic approach.

> *'I do believe in the Social Healthcare model, I think that's good to see the multi-disciplinary approach to care.'*

> *'Obesity and substance misuse; teenage pregnancy rates etc. Breast feeding rates in Neath Port Talbot, all are poor. Social deprivation. So we're concentrating on all of that.*

> *'Parenting education, to ensure that all the teenagers do get ante-natal care and ante-natal education, is very much around sterilisation; cot death, smoking in pregnancy...the risks of co-sleeping...care safety for the baby; immunisation. Then there's their own health and well-being around Rubella; MMR, obviously they can't have it while they're pregnant, but you can promote them to have it straight after the baby. And contraception, smears etc., so their own health'.*

> *'And then mental health and well-being. We have been lucky to persuade the Mental Health Directorate, because perinatal mental health's a big issue and obviously you often find then its linked to deprivation'*

This shared vision across services is in itself encouraging. This is given added weight when progress relating to multi-professional and multi-organisational practice amongst Flying Start professionals in Neath Port Talbot is further considered later in this report. More significantly, the proposed final phase of this evaluation would look more closely at the extent that Flying Start is actually addressing this critical dimension of its ambitions and will capture the views and reflection of the end-users.

Support for Children

Children's Experience Outside of the Home Environment

It was suggested by some of those interviewed that enabling the children to engage productively with adults outside their immediate family was an important aspect of the Flying Start provision. Furthermore, it provided a

valuable home-school link enabling the children to be better prepared for starting school.

> *'Children looked after by mum and dad often find it harder to trust other adults. The children who come to Playgroup - including Flying Start children - tend to be more prepared and confident to start school'*

Several of the interviewees drew attention to the importance they placed on attendance to free playgroup settings, not least in terms of the subsequent maturation and social competences achieved by the children who benefited from this.

> *'We have good links with local schools, they always say (feedback) that they know our kids when they arrive – they know how to sit, wash their hands etc.'*

Professionals interviewed indicated that parents were keen to ensure that their children were able to do well at school whilst also able to mix well with peers. In addition, they were better able to interact with others than might have been the case without Flying Start support at that young age.

Nursery school headteachers, together with playgroup supervisors, drew attention to the fact that the children were invariably better prepared to engage with learning and were more socially mature on entering nursery school, than when such provision had not been available. This, they ascribed to the playgroup experience (which often included regular visits to the nursery setting prior to transition):

> *'Routines are important – they learn to sit as a group, they take turns. When they first arrive they listen a lot, then their lips move when we sing and they will eventually copy and sing the songs'*

> *'As a result of attending the playgroup, the children learn social and language skills that place them well in advance of other children when they enter Infant School. They are able to sit quietly and listen to stories, put their hands up and take turn. It's also the case that some that arrive here very shy, will learn to speak and sing and join in with the other children – they receive a lot of positive reinforcement.'*

Transition to School

It is clear that as a result of accessing Flying Start provision, children and their parents/families are generally in a much stronger position to cope with starting school, having had the benefit of transition from nursery to school rather than home to school. This was an aspect of Flying Start provision that all the

professionals interviewed felt strongly about and agreed that the provision had greatly enhanced these children's coping abilities and readiness for school.

> *'We have a transition meeting with the Headteacher of the progression school. We give packs to the parents, arrange a visit for them to the school, and we do other occasional visits to the school.'*

> *'We hold transition meetings with the Infant School. These visits are done in collaboration with the parents – we take the children to the school. At the pre-transition point, the views of parents are also used and these are passed on to the school in the transition reports/evaluation.*

> *'in terms of enhancement, it's an enhancement to give children and families a good grounding and good foundation. The feedback we're hearing in terms of the advantages of children attending pre-school settings, is that the schools feel that the, or observe quite concretely that the impact that Flying Start is having by enabling these pre-school placements to be made has a significant impact on the child's preparedness for school'.*

Despite the fact that most participants agreed that attendance at well-run playgroups could be seen to result in many benefits at the transition stage to school, some drew attention to the importance of avoiding complacency and questioned whether there were further improvements that could further enhance that process.

> *We have to then question is that preparedness as good as it could be? Is the enhancement and is the service, the programme and stuff sufficiently making that preparedness good. And our feelings at the moment are that actually, no there is still more work we need to do'.*

Indeed, there was further evidence to suggest that far from there being a universally high quality provision in place which all children can benefit from, some may be receiving inadequate support from the provision they access. The emphasis adopted in some settings was viewed by some participants as either inadequate or inappropriate.

> *'Playgroups vary in how they work – from very good on the one hand to providing a baby-sitting service on the other. Flying Start playgroups also tend to vary as much as private playgroups, depending on the quality of the leadership of the organisation.'*

'Well I think [Name of Play group] is such an established organisation they've got their own sort of procedures; policies and they're not very keen to change'

Getting the balance right between supporting children's educational development and their social development was a key discussion point. This can vary from playgroup to playgroup, and may be influenced by the background and skills of their staff and the emphasis that playgroup leaders placed on both. The following comment shows that this is an issue that requires some attention if the children making use of Flying Start are to gain the maximum benefit from their playgroup.

'There seems to be a potential shift in focus for the school from Education to personal and social skills (in the early years at least). This can result in the children coming from playgroup with poor language skills – not knowing basic things like nursery rhymes'

Early identification of Children's Individual Needs

Many of the participants stressed the important role that Flying Start had in enabling the early identification and subsequent intervention for children experiencing various degrees of support for learning needs and/or or those about whom there is concern regarding care issues. The practice put in place through the Flying Start initiative seems to have been very influential in refining this.

'I think the education is something that I wouldn't really have thought about before when I was generic health visiting, but now I do really see the importance of picking things up early and putting support in early so if you have identification of any developmental or behavioural problems - has really come to the front for me.'

'In three weeks, since coming here he has been seen by the Educational Psychologist, two Health Visitors and the Speech Therapist.'

'We see the children every day and can see signs of things, and can contact, for example, the Educational Psychologist.'

'The most positive aspect has been the early identification of children with SEN [special educational needs] and action being taken much earlier.'

It is generally recognised that early identification is critical where young people's life chances are concerned[4]. The evidence from our enquiries to-date suggest that Flying Start has been pivotal in securing such a service in Neath Port Talbot.

> *'With Flying Start referrals, we respond immediately and visit the child in its play setting or at home. With referrals from schools, this isn't the case. We have to work within allocated time slots that are allocated to each school.'*

> *'There is a danger that without Flying Start the Flying Start children's issues would not be picked up. These years are so important, if we can get important things done now ... healthy eating, instil the joy of learning, better exercise etc.'*

It is possible that there are serious ethical considerations that need addressing if, as the evidence suggests, early access to intervention strategies following speedy identification is a feature of the support that is available to children who are eligible for Flying Start support. However, those who are not, may experience a far less speedy process.

Monitoring and Reporting Children's Development

Many participants pointed out that those children eligible for Flying Start support are also regularly monitored and their progress reported to parents and where appropriate, to schools at the point of transition. Participants were enthusiastic about this practice and claimed that as a result of Flying Start training, early years settings were better prepared to adopt monitoring meaningful procedures for all children in their care.

> *'We assess the children every half-term and set targets for them based on the outcomes of these assessments. The assessment is mainly related to social and language development. We can and do, refer any children we are concerned about to the EPs [Educational Psychologists] and they get seen as priority. The views of the parents are also included'*

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[4] E.g. Judith D et al (1987) Early identification of children's special needs: A study in five metropolitan communities[*] The Journal of Pediatrics Vol111 (5) November, Ps 651-659

> *'We have written feedback (on progress) from parents on every child, including Flying Start. All records were filed and stored.'*

> *'We have Baseline Assessments then we progress from there. Flying Start has some that go beyond our own'.*

Attention was drawn to the important role that parents play in this process, as active contributors, as well as the significance given by professionals to informing parents of their child's development and progress.

> *'We have written feedback on progress from parents on every child, including Flying Start. All records were filed and stored'*

> *'Work goes home to parents at the end of each term so that they can see what their child can do.'*

> *'We are also open to parents, always ready to speak to them and discuss their child's development or talk about any concerns they may have'*

There is no doubt that Flying Start has been a central force in moving practice in playgroup settings forward and in developing the skills of playgroup leaders to take greater ownership of the Individual Play Plan (IPP) process. This has involved training the playgroup staff to ensure that they maintain the IPPs and use them to influence and direct their planning with the children throughout the day. One interviewee outlined the main aim as:

> *'Empowering playgroups to make maximum use of IPPs is in itself an impact indicator. We're educating the playgroup staff to view the child as a totality – and this too is another impact indicator.'*

There is some evidence however, that despite the availability of training opportunities and the support provided by professional services, some partners in the process are not always as fully aware or familiar with good practice demonstrated in other settings.

> *'I'm uncertain of the monitoring that takes place at the playgroup. There are three playgroups at the centre, one being Flying Start funded, that are managed by one person'.*

This, perhaps, suggests that whilst there is ample evidence of increasing dialogue and sharing of good practice across the multi-professional model employed by practitioners in Neath Port Talbot, it is not always shared in some sectors and further work on this would benefit all concerned.

Support for Parents and Families

It is evident from interviews held for this phase of the enquiry, that Flying Start is having an impact with regard to the support it is providing for children and families in need. This ranges from support to enable children to participate in free playgroup provision through to the early identification of children's particular educational needs and subsequently supporting their personal, social and educational development.

> *'Without Flying Start many parents could not afford to pay Playgroup fees'*

> *'If there was no more funding for Flying Start it would be devastating, particularly if they have experienced one child who has had the benefits of the 5 sessions of Flying Start - they see what their siblings are missing'*

> *'If he needs 1:1 support he will get 5 sessions as Flying Start (only two sessions if not Flying Start)'*

There is also evidence of long-term involvement with particular families stretching across different generations, with Flying Start building on previous professional relationships with family members. Building trust and furthering engagement with particular families also resulted from the fact that some of the key workers, and their families, were well known within the local community.

> *'We also have knowledge of the whole family after years of working in the area. In many cases, we have worked with the parents of the young children that get referred to us now.'*

> *'We see ourselves as part of the community. At first some parents didn't trust us but once they knew who my family were, that they were well known locally, my mum was a nurse, my father-in-law ran local football teams and we also run the beavers/cubs/scouts...'*

It was evident from talking to participants that only with Flying Start funding would many children have the opportunity to attend a playgroup and benefit from its educational and social opportunities. Attention was drawn to the fact that when funding was not available, even for a limited period of time, for example during the summer holidays, this had an immediate effect:

*'During the holidays Flying Start does not operate and those children
don't come. Sometimes the grandparents pay for two sessions in the
summer for continuity for the child.'*

Direct Benefits of Flying Start for Parents

The enquiry highlighted a number of significant benefits of Flying Start for
parents. This had two distinct aspects to it. The first was helping them to
become better parents, '...*on top of that, they've got the intensive so-called
Health Visiting service to try and help improve parenting skills.'* The second
was helping them to raise their own aspirations, build their confidence and
support them to engage with social, educational and work opportunities that
might otherwise not be available to them.

> *'Flying Start has brought parents out of the home and they see that
> they can have a (positive) relationship with an 'authority figure. Better
> even than with the Health Visitor.'*

> *'It gives them (parents) opportunities to do training ... leading to work
> opportunities later'*

> *'Mums have done some college courses, and some mums help out.
> They are invited to training and some do come.'*

> *'Some parents make good use of the space that this provided for them
> – and make use of this to go back to work etc. Some have attended
> college courses and then come here to practice what they have learnt.'*

There is evidence that professionals engaged in Flying Start are identifying
areas for refinement that is likely to enhance the impact of Flying Start once
implemented. Interestingly, in this case, attention was drawn to the additional
advantage that could be accrued as a result of involving parents more directly
at an operational level in Flying Start. Whereas to-date focus has tended to be
located on what professionals are offering, there may be benefits in engaging
parents in aspects of delivery.

> *'one of the things we'll be looking at is when the Assembly informs us
> about the intended expansion of Flying Start and we start to review the
> way that we're doing things, we will be wanting to involve families in
> that process'.*

What is less clear at this stage of the enquiry is the way that Flying Start is
perceived by parents and the degree of agreement between the parents
themselves and professional views about the impact of Flying Start support on
the day-to-day lives of those who have been able to access it. Whilst there is

ample anecdotal evidence from professionals of positive impact on parents, there is as yet, little objective evidence of the actual take-up by parents of the opportunities identified above, let alone any real understanding of what difference this has made to their life styles and future aspirations.

Rapport with Flying Start Parents and the Wider Family

Building relationships with parents and families was identified as a key aspect of the work being carried out by professionals engaged in Flying Start. Great care is taken during that process not to give parents the impression that they are being patronised, but rather that they are respected and viewed as an integral and important part of the team.

> *'One of the most important things for me is the relationship you build up with families. That's a difficult area as well in that you try to build up a relationship where they can trust you and then obviously you have to do your job as well and you have to make referrals to Social Services etc.,'*

> *'Great care is taken not to patronise the parents. It's important that they are respected and that they also get to respect us'.*

> *'We have to be careful not to be patronising to parents, we respect them. Cousins, grandparents, uncles and aunties all come to playgroup (even if it is just to pick them up)'*

From the interviews, it was apparent that working within Flying Start could lead to a greater rapport with parents and the wider family and that this was beneficial for the child, as well as helping to build community relations.

> *'We also have knowledge of the whole family after years of working in the area. In many cases, we have worked with the parents of the young children that get referred to us now'.*

There was a feeling amongst some professionals that some parents (for example, where the child was on the at-risk register) may be more prepared to visit a playgroup and engage in a more open discussion with playgroup staff than with other professional service providers.

> *'Mum would not visit the Surgery because they knew that they would be monitored there – a different colour comes up on the receptionists screen if they are under the Social Services.'*

The playgroup in this instance was seen as a safe place where the parent could feel unobtrusive and where reassurance could be sought from staff.

Again, securing the views of the parents who have experienced and used playgroup opportunities in this way would move professional understanding forward significantly.

Whilst the positive use that can be made of playgroup and child care settings reported above is on the face of it encouraging, other views shared with the research team took a different perspective. It was felt by some participants that a minority of parents seem to have used Flying Start to disengage from some of their own parenting responsibilities. Specifically, that some might have declined fuller engagement with the playgroup to make the most of the Flying Start opportunity. One informant thought that some parents might 'renege' on their responsibility as parents, for example, by *'.. sending them to school with nappies as they got used to toilet training being something that the playgroup did – not them.'*

Such findings might suggest that care needs to be taken to ensure that parents are not encouraged to become dependent on professional support and that some may need to be encouraged to play a more active part in supporting their children and to assume their normal parental responsibilities. This kind of outcome demands closer investigation and strategies may need to be put in place to address it.

Raising Parental Aspirations and Boosting Confidence

Significantly, professionals produced anecdotal evidence that Flying Start was helping to raise parents' aspirations for their children. It also helped boost their own confidence, refining parenting skills and ambitions for the future.

> *'For parents it has raised their expectations for their child. They see what the child can do, it raises the child's confidence, the parents raise their aspirations and expectations.'*

> *'Flying Start has allowed some parents to go back to college and they see that they can go on and achieve more when their child has started school'.*

> *'A lot of mothers enjoyed the 'baby massage' classes at college and they used it on the children here. For many parents, it has raised their expectations for themselves as well as their expectations for their children. It has raised the confidence of both parents and children.'*

Access to parenting programmes facilitated by Flying Start seems to have had a significant impact on families and has raised awareness of the programme whilst also supporting the development of important parenting skills. Despite this, some participants offered a view that such provision might be enhanced

if there were measures in place to ensure greater consistency in the delivery of such programmes.

> *'Parenting courses have very different values and approaches – Action for Children ran some parenting courses for Flying Start but they were very different to the courses run by Barnardos'.*

Apart from the fact that much of that is achieved directly as a result of the way that the Flying Start programme has been structured and developed, there is evidence that a lot is also an incidental consequence of engaging with the initiative.

> *'Mums have done some college courses, and some mums help out. They are invited to training and some do come'.*

> *Children need to develop relationships with caring adults, and sometimes the 2 ½ hours they are away from mum can also make her a better parent (giving her a break).*

Community Cohesion

The ambitious long-term aims of Flying Start, as stated by the Welsh Government, are to: reduce the number of people with very poor skills, reduced the rates of criminal behaviour, truancy and drug use and to foster higher employment, increased earnings and better qualifications at the end of schooling. This inevitably poses substantial challenges to managers and practitioners alike.

It is therefore encouraging to be able to report that those interviewed had a clear understanding that they were involved in a very important transformational process and one that attempts to ensure that subsequent generations in the area are better prepared to live productive and happy lives. In particular, Flying Start was seen as having the potential for addressing and transforming deep rooted social problems in the community – often associated with long-term unemployment, poverty and lack of aspirations and expectations.

> *'I think a lot of it is trying to change people's perception so that they haven't got the on-going culture and of more people perceived to be the 'norm' of not working, you know, on benefits. I do agree that a lot of it is to do with the education and if you can pick problems up in the*

early stages, and put that support in, hopefully you're changing....not immediate, but for future generations'.

'Because it's a programme that's seeking to address child poverty initially. To [long pause] improve life chances and opportunities in areas where there might be less than in other areas. It is difficult I mean even as I'm saying that, I'm aware of the Partners being disconcerted about the fact that it's in a defined geographical area'.

'Health Visiting is a very difficult thing to measure. I mean, on parenting, the area I work, it would take twenty years to see the benefit you know, an input for parenting skills. It's not just that one thing, it's all the other things that go with it, you know - lifestyle.... unemployment....lots of drug and alcohol use impacting on parenting and the lack of engagement is the big problem.'

'I think a lot of these Flying Starting areas, you do get the culture where..... Its pockets of families and you know, so are all the same, and you know it's a little bit like following the sheep I suppose. It's trying to break that cycle. Behaviour; routines; improvement on any problems that were there previously.

'The area where I work is a geographical patch, which in one way is a really good thing for Flying Start because it's a community and being in a community and having all the families in that community on your caseload is a really good thing because it is all about community networking - But then you've got the other side of it then you can't control your numbers'

'I mean I think it's a great programme you know, it's got enormous potential for supporting families and for helping em...young children develop in those early years....em......but...as you say, it's a long term that we will see the outcomes'.

This really is a challenging agenda and as noted by some participants, this ambition is unlikely to be immediately evident or indeed, accessible to short-term evaluation. Nevertheless, it is important that the subsequent phase of this enquiry collects what evidence is available from those living and working in the area that may demonstrate that Flying Start is indeed addressing the agenda of community and social cohesion.

Context and Implementation Issues

Significance of a Firm Focus on Education

The main thrust, in terms of provision for young children with the best start in life, was identified from the outset as located within five priorities: language development; cognitive development; social and emotional development; physical health and early identification of need. It is perhaps not surprising then that participants felt that these, collectively, can best be met where the education support (with appropriate support from other services) is effective and freely available to young children at risk.

> *'I think the central part for me is...the education side of it. Fortunately then to have a good start in education with the free playgroup provision and then on top of that, they've got the intensive so-called Health Visiting service to try and help improve parenting skills'.*

> *'I think the education is something that I wouldn't really have thought about before when I was generic health visiting, but now I do really see the importance of picking things up early and putting support in early so if you have identification of any developmental or behavioural problems - has really come to the front for me'.*

Though this was not just stressed in terms of Flying Start but in terms of education in general in Neath Port Talbot:

> *'I am very concerned to see that we make improved progress in Neath Port Talbot at baseline assessment and Key Stage 2 Teacher assessment, because it's an area of broader strategic concerns for us because the evidence is that with that it's not an area where Neath Port Talbot performs well. There are an enormous number.....once you start delving into those issues, so there are an enormous number of complexities, not least of which is around 'consistency of teacher assessment'. From school and from cohort to cohort. So it's easy to be drawn to some simplistic conclusions but we do need to do a lot of work in terms of getting a bit more into the data'.*

Communication with Parents

Flying Start has undoubtedly helped change professional practice across agencies generally and nowhere is this more evident than in some private nurseries that now also cater for children who are entitled to Flying Start support. Gaining access to the professional development programmes provided by the Flying Start team has been a particular bonus for staff employed by these nurseries and other private childcare settings and

influential in changing practice. Interviews indicated that consideration is being given to issues such as how to improve communication with parents and to ensure that they are being kept informed of their child's progress:

> *'Work goes home to parents at the end of each term so that they can see what their child can do'.*

> *'They always ensure that they have someone available to speak with parents'*

Others evidenced good practice that extended beyond the point when a child is first received at the setting so that both parent and child is supported and reassured:

> *'We do home visits before they start, then we invite them here to see what we do and how good and safe it is.*

> *'We can help them to go on parenting classes'.*

Whilst such progress is encouraging, there remains some evidence that there is no room for complacency and that further progress is needed to ensure good practice universally. One interviewee drew attention to the fact that:

> '*Pre-Flying Start, playgroups did not communicate with schools, only if a child had special needs*.'

Interestingly, one school also felt that a dedicated Flying Start playgroup (rather than mixed Flying Start-private) might enable better communication and a more open dialogue with schools. They felt that despite the evident improvement that had been made, communication between the two institutions continued to be inadequate at present.

It should be noted that this evidence has been solicited mainly from professionals who reflected on how they engage with parents and/or what they have observed in the practice of others. A clearer and more accurate perspective is likely to be secured where the evidence is arrived at through meeting with parents directly and requesting their observations of how playgroup leaders and other professionals communicate with them. Their view as to the way that professionals respond to requests and suggestions from parents would also form a further useful dimension.

Flying Start Funding and Playgroups Equipment and Staff

Flying Start has helped some playgroups to keep their numbers viable and the associated financial support has enabled them to maintain staffing levels at a

desirable level whilst also improving their provision by support for the purchasing better equipment and resources.

> '*We also purchased the best quality resources, as you can see, and these have been looked after carefully. We believe that the children should experience the best'.*

> '*We have a very stable staff – the same three staff have been here since the beginning, plus the same three relief staff that we can call in.'*

Observation, whilst meeting with and interviewing playgroup leaders, provided us with substantial evidence that those sampled had indeed secured play equipment of extremely good quality. Whilst much has been reported earlier regarding the training provided by Flying Start for playgroup personnel, there presently exists little evidence as to how effective the playgroup leaders are in terms of interacting with the children in their care and how what has been learnt as a result of the training translates into practice at playgroup level. At present, there is also little evidence regarding the quality of the private playgroup provision in relation to that provided by dedicated Flying Start playgroups.

Demand for Flying Start places

There appeared to be a contradiction in the evidence relating to the take up of Flying Start places. The majority view, as experienced through the interviewing process, highlighted a big demand by parents to secure Flying Start places for their children.

> '*It is working very well, demand for places is high with many parents asking for places for their child.'*

> '*Because of the risk of being over sub-scribed Flying Start don't advertise. People hear about Flying Start from the Generic Health Visitor, or from other people via word of mouth.'*

Some interviewees however, took a different view and suggested that inadequate publicity of the availability of Flying Start provision was resulting in a lack of take-up of opportunities, especially in terms of childcare support:

> '*It's working well but we could do more to make it more attractive. We've done a Child Care sufficiency assessment that every Authority is required to do and what has become clear is actually the uptake of child care by those people in Flying Start areas and the other areas is quite low'.*

This is an issue that has not gone unnoticed by Flying Start managers who have identified it as an issue that needs addressing:

> *'What we want to do is market, or promote the benefits of the pre-school environment for the child and that issue of preparedness for school. Yeah we think we need to do a bit more on that'.*

Despite these concerns, there can be little doubt that the introduction of Flying Start has resulted in increased business for many playgroups. Similarly, were funding for Flying Start to end, it would be likely to result in a significant decline of revenue for providers. This is a fact that was recognised by providers and Flying Start managers alike:

> *'I understand that it's generated a considerable amount of business for the Providers and of course conversely, if the programme ends at some point it will have very significant impact'.*

Postcode Lottery

Several of those interviewed however, expressed a concern about the seemingly unjust and possibly wasteful allocation of Flying Start provision. This was perceived to be primarily allocated on what they termed as a 'postcode lottery' basis, as opposed to an allocation primarily based on an assessment of need.

> *'It is a postcode lottery – who gets free places and not. It is easier for us as we are pure Flying Start.'*

> *'It is a postcode lottery and obvious mistakes have been made with some people missing out.'*

Concern was expressed regarding the fact that Flying Start provision was set up as an entitlement to all families with children who live within the areas identified as being eligible for support. Many felt that such an approach represented a flawed philosophy at the design and implementation stage and that those scarce resources could be better used were the allocation to be based on specifically identified and targeted families:

> *'It is I think, not right to think that all people who live in deprived areas are deprived and that all deprived people live in deprived areas. So statistically I think there are relationships, but the difficulty for me is that the programme is a universal entitlement one based on postcode assessment. I'd be much more comfortable with a focus on those families who are deprived. Rather than deprived areas'.*

I'm no expert, but from what I'm hearing it creates some difficulties. It allows us to be able to say 'this is where we're providing the service which can be helpful' but clearly there are situations where some flexibility might be needed and in the light of the Welsh Government's intention to expand the programme, we'll re-visit that'

Some of those interviewed suggested that this was inequitable and that funding should enable all children and families across the authority to access the enriched provision, seeing this as a more just distribution of resources.

*'Some people think that Flying Start provision should be open for **all** children and not just for the selected few. The guidelines however, are very clear but it is often interpreted differently by different people and acted upon differently. Consequently, the provision will vary across the authority. I don't know if that's a good thing or not.'*

Multi-professional and Multi-agency Working

The importance of multi-agency working is central to the success of Flying Start as is evident in some of the statements offered by participants during this phase of the enquiry.

The Flying Start team in Neath Port Talbot have invested in a Perinatal Mental Health Nurse post. Now that's new. It's only just getting off the ground, So we're able to have an MDT [multi-disciplinary team] approach to the problem …. which is new and that's really exciting because it's been quite hard to get that multi-agency sign up'.

'I think it's [Flying Start] an enhancement of the universal services that are available; the children are the primary beneficiaries, but others would benefit from a service that particularly focuses on those early years'.

In doing so, Flying Start has helped facilitate greater sharing of information between agencies. This has helped to start to overcome one of the recognised difficulties of multi-professional multi-agency working.

It is clear however, that much remains to be done and many areas where further refinement is called for. One of the main areas that participants identified as important to address is that of greater agreement and clarity on specific roles provided by the different partners. This would ensure that scarce resources are not duplicated and that one service does not assume that an issue is being dealt with by another.

'There is a need to clarify our roles and decide on which professional could best engage with the family – and that decision should be recorded. It all needs formalising.'

'Things are being strengthened now so that there is clarity about roles and responsibilities and stuff, they're looking at delivering the clear approach that they had in mind'.

In order for there to be any possibility of clarity in terms of role allocation, it is necessary that all participants are familiar with what other agencies have to offer. In practice however, this is not always the case:

'I think it's quite obvious - you know - the lack of understanding of each other's' roles still. Within the team we've got a speech therapist. Now my relationship with her is much more straightforward than my relationship with somebody who's got a local authority background. And what I find as well is the buck always seems to stop with me - with regards to input of a families or making referrals to Social Services or whatever even though there may be a number of people involved with that family. The buck always seems to end [here] but everyone seems to look to us to sort problems out. I mean I feel we are the most important part of this but I often feel as if I'm the least important part'.

Another related issue (and one that can compromise the development of something as complex as multi-agency and multi-professional working) is the extent to which participating in Flying Start has enabled great strides to be made in terms of sharing information, whilst not compromising any professional ethical codes.

'Flying Start has put important processes in place e.g. the sharing of information is part of signing up for it'.

'…. we reveal any concerns we have with families or children, so that's Monday morning, half-past nine. Hour, hour and a half and we reveal any concerns....'

'The once a month meeting is the base meeting, takes about three hours. I give updates if there are any and the meeting is theirs then, they tell us what they've done...'

This is no mean achievement and the lack of trust and confidence across and between different professional groups in the caring professions has long been tested as a result of tensions generate by a lack of information sharing. It is

particularly reassuring to note that the presence of Flying Start in Neath Port Talbot at least, is encouraging and enabling such practice.

On the other hand, representatives across the various agencies involved drew attention not only to the benefits of multi-agency working but also to how the increased demands brought about by enhanced provision inevitably resulted in added pressures associated with increased workloads.

> *'The area where I work is a geographical patch, which in one way is a really good thing for Flying Start because it's a community and being in a community and having all the families in that community on your caseload is a really good thing because it is all about community networking - But then you've got the other side of it then, you can't control your numbers'.*

> *'the person before me had the same caseload and the same issues really - they haven't really been properly addressed. There's myself, full time, and there's another Health Visitor, she works three days. So there's no capacity anywhere else to off-load any of the work'*

> *'don't think it's [Flying Start] ever been fully complemented staff-wise has it?'*

> *'But then there should be enough people in post to take on children 'cos obviously some families, not benefitting and should be benefitting'.*

> *'My impression is that it's working well but the sticking point still seems to be the recruitment of the Health Visitors'.*

The issue of appropriate and adequate resources to address the demands of Flying Start is well rehearsed and accepted in the main. How these resources are distributed across the various professions involved can again become a source of tension between members of various agencies. Left unchecked, such tension can quickly endanger the good practice already developed.

> *'I know that the dynamics of this multi-agency, multi-disciplinary working are complicated by issues of accommodation, and issues to do with professional reporting and accountability and stuff and I think it's really important that we're very clear about what is the co-ordinator's responsibilities and role and so on and what's the professional responsibility that's held by the employing agency'.*

> *'Yes we've got another big issue with the team over accommodation - I'm stuck over here and my team's over the road.'*

A further challenge to effective multi-agency working – and one that is both inevitable and at the same time hugely problematic to resolve – is that of differing personalities and conflicting professional views as to the most appropriate course of action to employ. Within a multi-professional team, the two can occasionally conflate and as a result, pose a significant challenge to all concerned.

> *'I think it's the relationships that then lead to people actually doing things together'.*

> *'Well there was one family in particular that I did the development check and I knew there were issues with this child, you know with his communication skills and I was thinking he could possibly have ASD, the parents wouldn't accept any referrals anywhere to anybody. Then I did say, well we've got an NHS Psychologist on the team, she could come in with me to see him at home. And she [the EP] refused [because] she said she would rather see him in playgroup and see what he was like there.   And as it happens he was only in playgroup for a couple of days you know. And that was an opportunity that was really missed. I think'.*

Conversely, where positive relationships are fostered across multi-professional teams and between different agencies, the prognosis can be hugely positive and productive working assured:

> *'I've got good links with the school; the Headmistress there is very good..She'll ring to say what she is doing and I think that's a bit of a refreshing change (laugh). [She'll] ask to come along to the meeting basically, but she's already instigated it. I think she's very partial to the school and she wants the best for the children and it's just nice to be on board where everybody wants the same outcome I suppose'.*

These issues have clear implications for management, and it is not something that has gone unnoticed at that level.

> *'The reality is that there are tensions and there will inevitably be tensions because people, they get out bed to do a particular thing. And we just need to make sure that we get everybody collected and collaboratively working'*

> *'So you're seeing; not only witnessing, they know each other, they've got a good relationship but if an idea is generated about something that*

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can be helpful for others in schools they're quickly getting on with doing it'.

A further potential barrier to effective multi-agency working, and one that has been well documented, is that of the 'language barrier' that can exist between different professions and that limits meaningful dialogue between and across professions. It is perhaps not surprising that despite the increasingly refined practice in inter- and multi-professional practices resulting from Flying Start in Neath Port Talbot this is an issue that has not yet been fully resolved.

> *'People talk different languages, we've got different sectors and people feel that their sector should have primacy'.*

Interestingly, some participants placed great significance on obtaining premises that are shared by different professions and view this as having the potential to address the constraints and barriers discussed above. Within such an environment, different professionals could interrelate and develop better working relationships whilst at the same time clients would get a better service through being able to access different professionals when visiting such a centre.

> *'I think one of the things is being really accessible to parents and. We need a Centre really where in the area where everybody can be accessed. And where we can all, can work together as a team, because we're quite fragmented'.*
>
> *'I don't think we've got a....you know like an identified area where you know people are or you know that's that Flying Start and that's where the team work. Because you can have multi-agencies all the way down the line, but you only need a small amount of multi-agency to actually make a team work'.*
>
> *'Premises. That's a big thing. Well it's going to be a base for everybody for a start...that's where everything you know works from that base really. And it's not just like one base; there should be bases in all of the Flying Start areas.*
>
> *'[Swansea] all sort of set it out in their schools and they've got their multi-agencies working from there. So everybody is at hand then. I mean you know we have got an element of it here, in this office. Of course we're all then working out from different areas'.*

The place and role of the team manager is seen as pivotal in securing the smooth functioning of the service. In the absence of such a person, other

team members may well feel at a disadvantage within a multi-agency context and this could have negative repercussions for the client experience.

> *'We've been without a manager for nearly a year now - ten months. And when we did have a manager although - you know- she was excellent when she was here, she was doing other things for the Trust. It's like being a voice. For [the profession] - you know - that's what we need'.*

> *'I think [a strong manager] would give us direction, purpose and certainly some sort of structure, 'cos I think structure of the Flying Start is definitely lacking'.*

It would seem that the presence of a strong team manager is significant not only in ensuring that team members are clear about their own role but also that they are equally clear about how their engagement meshes with the work of others across the larger multi-agency context.

Measuring Impact

Representatives of all relevant organisations and professions drew attention to the complexities involved when evaluating the extent to which different elements of the Flying Start initiative was impacting on practice and outcomes.

> *'Our role isn't always immediately evident to our stakeholders - we're not always explicit about it. We have plenty of anecdotal evidence of our impact, but no empirical evidence'.*

> *'Identifying children's problems at an earlier age – does that have an impact on their later behaviour? We believe that it does but it's very difficult to generate empirical evidence to prove that it does'.*

> *'I mean, Health Visiting is a very difficult thing to measure. I mean, on parenting, the area I look, it would take twenty years to see the benefit you know, an input for parenting skills. It's not just that one thing, it's all the other things that go with it, you know - lifestyle.... unemployment....lots of drug and alcohol use impacting on parenting and the lack of engagement is the big problem'.*

> *'What is it we are trying to evaluate? And there's a tension here between evaluation and measurement in a sense that traditionally evaluation models saying we can measure what's happened. Outputs*

as you know are easier to measure. We are talking about something else. How, from your perspective, are outcomes being framed? How do we know...what is an outcome from Flying Start for instance? And what's the difference between, if you like, transitional outcomes as a means to an end and what's the end itself?'

' I think the impact in terms of the future, other than something like preparedness for school that's identified by the Educationalists, is difficult to measure and other factors start to come in in the future like the quality of teaching and facilities in the environment and all the rest of it'.

Some respondents highlighted the fact that whilst it is possible to report progress when measurements are taken from a particular perspective, were alternative indicator to be selected as the measure however, the rate of impact could look quite different. This highlights the importance of ensuring that targets need to be carefully selected and agreed across agencies.

'I think on the one hand people being clear about what they're doing and why they're doing it and what their model is, why they've selected. So if you're going to say we're going to invest much more in Pere-natal Mental Health Services, or we're going to invest much more in Parenting programmes or we look to market more the opportunities there are for Pre-school opportunities. I think the Partners should be very clear about what it is that they're hoping to get from that and where the evidence is that that will give them what it is they are hoping to get?'

The challenges inherent in securing objective, quantifiable evidence of impact over a limited/short-term basis are well understood. Consequently, professionals need to reflect on anecdotal evidence and observations over a period of time in order to determine the extent to which their interventions are impacting on practice.

'An important part of our job with playgroups is to get them to take greater ownership of the IPP [Individual Play Plan] process. We train them to that end and then ensure that they are maintaining the IPPs to influence and direct their planning with the children throughout the day. Empowering playgroups to make maximum use of IPPs is in itself an impact indicator. We're educating the playgroup staff to view the child as a totality – and this too is another impact indicator..

One informant commented that '*Flying Start has raised the profile of childcare'* and others signalled the positive benefits of having more and deeper

engagement with parents. However, there was also caution that it is difficult to measure impact and to evidence change in parental engagement with their child:

> 'Measuring impact is hugely problematic. Parents don't know what they're doing well. My role is to point this out to them. Much of it is informal observation – and we don't record impact in any formal way.'

> 'Do the parents believe in themselves more? Does the parent listen to its child? Is the parent better able to be constructive when their child is playing up?'

Others went further and felt that there was a need to review progress and impact over a longer timeframe and to adopt a focus that relates to the 'end-users', or 'clients', as opposed to relying on the views and opinions of professionals alone.

> 'Think what is gonna be helpful is actually looking at what really happens in terms of outcomes over a prolonged period of time [rather than working on the views of people who may think that Flying Start has worked, or has not worked]'.

> '….. but it will also be asking us clearly to identify how do we know whether or not people are any better off. So whereas we can say this many people received an enhanced visiting service and it's that percentage of the population of people who live in Flying Start areas have received that. So the real question about how do we know that they're any better off largely I guess we would get that answer from asking them?'

This enquiry has drawn attention to many complex and challenging issues that relate to any attempt to evaluate the impact of Flying Start on the community. Perhaps the main lesson learnt is that whilst the views and reflections of key professional groups are important, these alone are unlikely to provide the definitive insight into how a programme such as Flying Start is operating.

Conclusions

- Key stakeholders have given their views on the issues that need to be considered and addressed when undertaking an evaluation of the impact of Flying Start on the families and their communities. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence from stakeholders about the positive impact of Flying Start but limited objective evidence.

- Children who had received Flying Start provision were invariably perceived as being better prepared to engage with learning and were more socially mature on entering nursery school, than when Flying Start provision had not been available. It had enhanced their coping abilities and readiness for school. Flying Start has been pivotal in securing an early identification service in Neath Port Talbot.

- Flying Start has been a central force in moving practice in playgroup settings forward and in developing the skills of playgroup leaders. However, there remains variation in the standard of childcare provision.

- Flying Start is having an impact with regard to the support it is providing for children and families in need. This includes support to enable children to participate in free playgroup provision, the early identification of children's particular educational needs, helping to raise parents' aspirations for their children, with evidence of long-term involvement with particular families. Building relationships with parents and families was identified as a key aspect. Less clear at this stage of the enquiry is the way that Flying Start is perceived by parents.

- Flying Start was seen as having the potential to address and transform deep-rooted social problems in the community. There was an awareness that it is unlikely that it will be immediately evident, or indeed accessible to, short-term evaluation.

- Provision to support young children to reach their full developmental potential can best be met where the health and education support is effective and freely available to young children at risk.

- Flying Start has undoubtedly helped change professional practice across agencies generally. However, concerns were voiced about the 'postcode lottery' allocation as opposed to an allocation primarily based on an assessment of need.

- The importance of multi-agency working is central to the success of Flying Start. Flying Start has helped facilitate greater sharing of information between agencies. This has helped to start to overcome one of the recognised difficulties of multi-professional multi-agency working.

- There remain difficulties with multi-agency working, there are variations in services offered, Flying Start does not appear to be widely marketed with families and there is minimal understanding of the impact of Flying Start on the life-styles, decision-making and future aspirations of the families.

- Representatives of all relevant organisations and professions drew attention to the complexities involved when evaluating the extent of the impact of the different elements of the Flying Start initiative. Targets need to be carefully selected and agreed across agencies. There is a need to review progress and impact over a longer time-frame and to adopt a focus that relates to the 'end-users' (families), and not just relying on the views and opinions of professionals.

- Nevertheless, access to Flying Start seems to have had a significant impact on families and has raised awareness of the programme whilst also supporting the development of important parenting skills, but only by gaining the perspective of families will we gain an insight into how Flying Start is truly operating.

The Next Steps

This report has established what the perspectives are of a particular set of stakeholders (commissioners and providers) as to the purpose and desired outcomes with respect to the range of Flying Start interventions. It is important that the perceptions particularly relating to parents and families are validated through exploring in more detail the impact of this provision on the lives of the parents who have made use of the resources.

The purpose of the next stage of the evaluation process is to prioritise asking about the kind of effects Flying Start is having upon beneficiaries and how this relates to the stated outcomes of the interventions as seen by the commissioners and providers. What has emerged both from this report and the piece of qualitative work undertaken by Ipsos MORI as a part of the national evaluation is that across the different entitlements the following benefits were expected:

- Breaking the cycle of deprivation and all that comes with it
- Early identification of Children's individual needs
- Monitoring and reporting Children's development
- Social development and behaviour i.e. children would be more confident and independent and better able to interact with both children and adults;
- Improved language, literacy and numeracy,
- Improvement in how children made the transition to primary school
- Increase in activity levels, such as drawing, singing and reading as opposed to watching television;
- Support for parents, families and children
- Enhanced family wellbeing because parents would have better behaved children, more time to do chores therefore less stressed
- Raising Parental Aspirations and boosting confidence and self esteem
- Greater degree of community cohesion

It is envisaged that a selection of families who are/were engaged with the Flying Start programme will be interviewed thus providing illustrative cases to show what the interventions were like from the families' point of view.

The intention of the interviews is to engage with the viewpoint of parents and to understand how their motivations, intentions and beliefs determined their responses to Flying Start. From the responses of the commissioners and providers interviewed for this report it is clear to the evaluators that the interviews with the parents and families need to ascertain:

- Socio-economic status, health and educational experience of parents and other family members

- Whether the family saw early intervention as appropriate in making a difference in their child's life

- Do resources address the needs of the young people attending such provision better than those in non Flying Start playgroups?

- Did Flying Start interventions enable the family to help their child grow, learn, and develop?

- Did involvement with Flying Start assist the family in building a strong support system?

- Did they enhance the family's perceived ability to work with professionals and advocate for services?

- Did involvement with Flying Start help the families with any decision-making processes?

- Is it possible to draw a comparison between private playgroup provision and Flying Start provision?

The significance of accessing the views and experiences of those who have been the recipients of the initiative will provide a fuller analysis that can be drawn upon by managers and professionals to further improve early years provision. What this exercise has facilitated is an opportunity to identify a final phase to this work that is likely to generate an evaluation that offers a dimension rarely achieved in evaluation exercises of this nature.