

Activity Agreement Pilots Process Evaluation

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Summary

The Activity Agreement (AA) and Learning Agreement (LAP) Pilots were launched in 12 areas of England in April 2006, initially for a two-year period. Activity Agreements were designed for young people (aged 16 or 17) not in employment, education or training (NEET) and operated in eight of the 12 areas. Young people had to be NEET for 20 weeks to be eligible. They received an allowance (three variants of which were being tested in different pilot areas) and continuous support, and in return, agreed to take part in tailored activities designed to help them progress towards an employment or education and training outcome. Learning Agreements were aimed at 16 to 17 year olds in jobs without training (JWT) and also operated in eight of the 12 pilots areas (ie both pilots operated in four areas and they each operated separately in four others). Under a Learning Agreement, young people took part in agreed activities, which had to include undertaking a designated course.

This summary focuses on findings from the Activity Agreement Pilots.

The evaluation

The evaluation had three main strands:

- **a quantitative element**, using surveys of young people to measure the impact of the pilots in comparison to a number of control areas
- **a programme theory element**, focusing on testing some key aspects of the policy to identify what works, what does not and the reasons for this
- **a process evaluation**, examining the ways in which the pilots have been set up and delivered and the main issues associated with their implementation.

This report focuses on the process evaluation, which comprised three waves of fieldwork in the pilot areas. Respondents included project managers, operational staff from Connexions and local LSCs, and representatives from education and training providers.

Key findings

The Activity Agreement pilots generally functioned well, with project managers playing a crucial role in the management and local implementation of the initiative. Proposals to extend the pilots for a further 18 months from April 2008, combined with the opportunity to provide greater flexibility to young people's entry to the programme, were welcomed. The key findings from the process strand of the evaluation were:

- The AA pilots enabled Connexions staff to develop further their existing strategies to support their work with young people who were NEET.
- The three core elements of AAs, namely financial support, intensive support and individualised activities for young people, all had a significant role to play in engaging and retaining young people within the programme. While the offer of weekly payments acted as the initial 'hook' to engage young people, the intensive support offered by AA Personal Advisers (PAs), together with the opportunity for young people to determine and negotiate their learning needs, sustained their participation.

- The initiative enabled Connexions staff to work more closely with staff from JobCentre Plus, so that benefits check arrangements could be conducted with education and training providers, in order to procure relevant provision. This strengthened links between local stakeholders.
- Many examples of innovative practice in the procurement and management of AA provision were found. Wider sharing of good practice between pilot areas on the development and procurement of individual/group programmes of learning should be further developed and encouraged.
- While take-up rates were lower than anticipated in some pilot areas, success outcomes were being achieved within AAs. Young people tended to leave the programme early (usually around 12 weeks) and in most areas around 50 per cent immediately progressed into some form of education, employment or training (EET). Progression rates to EET had also increased at the 13 week follow-up stage.
- The Discretionary Fund was perceived to be a critical success factor in the effective delivery of AAs. The Fund gave Project managers and their staff the autonomy, the capacity and the responsibility for commissioning individual or group packages of learning and training, and funding any associated costs, such as travel or equipment needs.

Management of AAs

AAs were managed locally by Connexions Partnerships. Management and organisational structures tended to be more complex where a pilot area comprised a number of local authorities' areas.

Two models of implementation were in evidence.

1. **Local Area Autonomy** - predominantly in large pilot areas, where project managers had a strategic role in overseeing the delivery of the pilot by operating through a network of local managers.
2. **Central Management** - in pilot areas which comprised a small number of local authority areas, project managers retained responsibility for operational staffing and had a standardised approach to the delivery of AAs.

With regard to potential national roll-out, the demise of Connexions Partnerships and the re-integration of Connexions Services within individual local authority control, which was concluded in 2008, would mean that the 'umbrella' role carried out by project managers could not be replicated within any new arrangements. Any future roll-out of AAs would need to take account of these developments, so that local management strategies that enable the development and coordination of arrangements between local authority areas can be devised.

Potential alternatives to the current delivery model might be:

1. to nominate one local authority to lead the management and delivery of AAs across a number of local authorities in a given area
2. to invite Government Offices (GOs) to assume the responsibility of co-ordinating AA delivery throughout their areas

3. to locate the responsibility for AAs in the new clustering arrangements for local authorities within sub-regional groupings, which was set out in the recent consultation document *'Raising Expectation: enabling the system to deliver'* (DCSF / DIUS, 2008). The sub-regional delivery of AAs allows for: increased opportunities for young people, economies of scale in provision, management and administration.

Staffing structures

The preferred model of delivery was through the appointment of dedicated AA PAs, whose skills were considered to be similar to those required by mainstream Connexions PAs. This enabled young people to access individual and concentrated levels of support and guidance, while retaining familiar staff management practices.

Pilot areas had increasingly moved towards 'tiered' staffing arrangements, which involved utilising the professional skills of PAs to offer intensive support and guidance to young people, while employing staff at lower grades either to assume the administrative tasks of setting up and managing provision or to support and mentor young people with more routine parts of their AA programmes. This example of good practice should be replicated within any national delivery model.

Links between key stakeholders

In most areas, the piloting of AAs had strengthened links between Connexions and JobCentre Plus. Joint working had facilitated staff secondments, the sharing of offices and improved communications. Pilot areas developed positive links with many education and training providers, which were offering flexible and responsive provision to meet individual needs.

Management Information

The lack of a uniform and fully operationalised MI system across all pilot areas weakened the management of the initiative, in terms of accessing accurate data across all pilot areas. Prior to the launch of any national initiative, a review of current arrangements needs to take place, so as to ensure that any national delivery of AAs is fully supported by one MI system, which is able to deliver data which are timely, responsive, consistent and accurate.

Delivery of AAs

Marketing and Promotion

While there was evidence of a wide range of marketing and publicity activity, it was the one-to-one engagement between AA PAs and young people and increasing evidence of young people's awareness through 'word of mouth', which appeared to be the most effective strategies for entry into the initiative. Any future planning for the potential roll-out of the initiative may wish to review the likely added value for take-up rates of expenditure on marketing and publicity strategies and materials.

In most cases, AAs failed to engage with some of the 'hardest to reach' young people, in particular those who were estranged from their parents and living independently. This was because of the conflict of interest that existed between their benefit receipt and their ability to take up the offer, since young people in receipt of benefits were not entitled to claim the AA allowance, although they were able to participate in other aspects of the programme. In any rolled out model of AAs, the entitlement by young people to benefits such as JSA, Carers' Allowances and the Leaving Care Allowance should be sustained alongside the payment of any AA allowance, in order to incentivise and secure the participation of young people in the 'hardest to reach' groups.

Provision

As the pilot developed, Connexions staff increased their levels of expertise in identifying and working with an array of providers in their localities in order to procure bespoke provision that met individual needs. They also developed a greater understanding about how trends in the take-up of AAs within an annual cycle of delivery, impacted on the contracting of provision. This expertise could be more widely used to inform national policy development.

Positive Outcomes

Approximately 50 per cent of young people moved into positive outcomes, that is, some form of education, employment or training (EET) before completing their 20 weeks on the programme, with the average length of stay being around 12 weeks. This highlighted the impact of a short period of financial and intensive support on a young person's propensity to leave NEET group status. Young people who remained in the programme until the 20 week expiry date tend to have the greatest needs. Fifty per cent of young people were entering EET at the end of AAs and this proportion rose considerably at the 12 week follow-up stage. While it was reported that progression into positive outcomes increased to between 65-75 per cent after 13 weeks, entry rates into EET varied depending on the time of year that young people left their programmes. For example, they could access full-time education in September and January and some entry to employment was governed by seasonal demands for labour and training opportunities. Some areas had seen a reduction in their NEET figures, particularly among 17-year olds.

While all areas had exit strategies in place for young people, there was a greater emphasis on recruitment to AAs. Exit and follow-up strategies warrant more resourcing. In addition, greater links could be developed between PAs and providers, in terms of coordinating young people's transitions.

Conclusions

- AAs were a valuable additional initiative for practitioners working with young people who were NEET. Greater flexibility to the eligibility criteria, which was applied to AAs during their third year of operation, should increase take-up rates.
- Connexions staff successfully managed the procurement and operation of provision. There were many examples of innovative provision and ways of working, which should be shared more widely between pilot areas and evidenced as good practice for any national roll-out.
- A significant proportion of young people moved into positive outcomes before completing their 20 weeks on AAs. Consideration should be given to offering greater flexibility in young people's length of stay on the programme, since evidence suggests that some young people with the greatest needs require more than 20 weeks of intensive support.
- AA participants should be re-classified as 'NEET active' and/or removed from core statistics on NEET figures during their length of stay on the programme. This would improve referrals to the programme, as participation on AAs would have an immediate effect of reducing local NEET figures.
- AAs were recognised as offering value for money, through successfully elevating some young people into EET and thus eliminating the negative consequences of long-term unemployment.

Future considerations

The evaluation of the extensions to the pilot, which started in June 2008, should:

- continue to monitor take-up rates, to determine the extent to which flexibilities to the eligibility criteria make a difference
- determine the extent to which flexibilities to the eligibility criteria affect intakes into other forms of government supported training provision, most notably E2E
- gather evidence to ascertain whether a change in status is needed for young people on AAs, so that AAs are assessed as making an immediate contribution to reducing NEET targets
- evaluate the impact of on-going organisational change on the delivery of the AA pilots, in particular the movement of all Connexions provision into Children's Trusts
- monitor the impact of increased take-up rates on the ability of Connexions Services to retain low PA caseloads and the capacity to broker individual engagement packages for young people
- identify examples of innovative practice with regard to the procurement and management of provision
- continue to monitor the relationship and interaction between AAs and other local and national initiatives, such as the September Guarantee
- evaluate consistencies between pilot areas in relation to their monitoring and exit strategy arrangements for young people engaged on the programmes
- monitor the perceived effectiveness of marketing and publicity strategies on take-up rates
- gather evidence on the sustainability of EET destinations beyond the 13 week follow-up stage, among young people who completed AAs.

1 Introduction

The United Kingdom has one of the lowest rates of post-16 participation in education or employment in Europe, with the problem being particularly acute at age 17. Just under ten per cent of 16 and 17 year olds in England, around 100,000 young people, do not participate in any form of education, training or employment. A further 85,000, around six per cent of the cohort, are in jobs, which do not offer accredited training. This pattern is found across the UK.

The 2005 Budget announced the piloting of two new initiatives aimed at extending participation in education and training among young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and young people who were in jobs without training (JWT). Sixty million pounds was allocated over two years to Activity Agreements and an Activity Allowance (AA) Pilot to support and encourage disengaged 16-17 year olds back into learning. In addition, £80m over two years was allocated to Learning Agreement Pilots (LAP) for 16-17 year olds in work with no training to increase access to training options for this group. Activity Agreements and Learning Agreements were piloted in 12 areas of England from April 2006 for a two-year period. Young people (and in some areas, parents) were offered a weekly allowance in return for agreeing to a plan and completing activities to integrate them back into learning. In addition, in some pilot areas, young people received bonus payments in recognition of their achievements, and financial incentives were paid to employers in some Learning Agreement pilot areas. A number of variants of AAs and LAPs were piloted, with a view to identifying the most successful models. Table 1.1 sets out the pilot areas and the variants which were piloted for both AAs and LAPs. This report concentrates on the implementation and delivery of the AA pilots.

Table 1.1: Pilot areas for the Activity and Learning Agreement evaluation

AA area	AA variant	LA area	LAP variant
Cornwall and Devon	Variant 2 £30 per week to YP	Cornwall and Devon	Bonus payment only
Greater Manchester	Variant 3 £20 per week to YP and £30 per week to family	Greater Manchester	Bonus payment and wage compensation
London East	Variant 3 £20 per week to YP and £30 per week to family	London East	Bonus payment and wage compensation
West Yorkshire	Variant 1 £20 per week to YP	West Yorkshire	Agreement only
Greater Merseyside	Variant 2 £30 per week to YP	Lancashire	Bonus payment only
Tyne and Wear	Variant 1 £20 per week to YP	South Yorkshire	Bonus payment only
Central London	Variant 2 £30 per week to YP	Black Country	Agreement only
Kent and Medway	Variant 1 £20 per week to YP	Essex, Southend and Thurrock	Agreement only

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), the Centre for Education and Industry (CEI) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to undertake the evaluation of the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots. The evaluation comprised three strands:

- **a summative evaluation**, which involved the collection of quantitative data in pilot areas and a number of control areas, in order to measure the effectiveness of the pilots
- **a process evaluation**, which explored the local implementation and delivery of the pilots in each area, and
- **a programme theory evaluation**, which aimed to identify and test the key theories which underpinned the policy development. Essentially, this strand looked at what worked or did not work, and why or in what circumstances, that was the case.

1.1 Activity Agreement Pilot (AA)

The Activity Allowance was payable for a period of up to 20 weeks to 16 and 17 year olds who were continuously NEET for 20 weeks or more. Recipients were required to demonstrate progress towards learning in order to continue to qualify for weekly financial support.

In addition to the allowance, a personally negotiated contract (the Agreement), which outlined specific steps the young person should take to move into education, training or employment in return for access to financial support, was developed between a Connexions Personal Adviser (PA) and the young person. Young people received continuous support from their Connexions PA throughout the process. As part of the Activity Agreement, a flexible programme of personally tailored activities for the young person was agreed between the PA and the young person. These activities could be part-time or bite-sized courses, part of mainstream provision or commissioned through the Connexions Partnership and could include basic skills provision, vocational taster courses or personal development courses, as well as bespoke activities.¹

1.2 Extension to the Activity and Learning Agreements

An eighteen month extended period of trialling the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots began in April 2008. The objectives of the pilots in the extension phase were to:

- test the effectiveness of earlier intervention
- test the effectiveness of brokerage and Learning / Activity agreements as a tool for re-engaging young people, notably those dropping out of learning, now and within the context of Raising the Participation Age (RPA)
- monitor and understand how the extension is managed and implemented in different areas and highlight good practice and any problems in the process, with a view to informing the current NEET / JWT situation and RPA
- understand what works (or does not work) within the extension: to understand how young people respond to agreements and brokerage and to understand for whom, in what circumstances, and in what respect, the intervention worked for the 'stock' of NEET and JWT, as well as illustrating how the approach would work under RPA.

¹ Source: Activity Agreement Pilot Guidance, November 2005.

Also, from April 2008, changes were made to the variants which were currently operating in the pilot areas. These included the following three new elements of the AA being tested:

- Model 1: 13 and 20 weeks AAs
- Model 2: AAs for those previously in receipt of EMA
- Model 3: Vulnerable Groups AAs.

1.3 The Report

This report focuses on the presentation of findings from the three stages of the process evaluation, which constitutes the final report on the AA pilots from this strand of the evaluation (see Maguire et al. 2008, for a review of the first year findings from the evaluation). It draws on data from:

- an examination of the implementation and administrative mechanisms through which the pilots were introduced, with particular emphasis on the perceptions of those responsible for the pilots' local management
- the views of those involved in the delivery of the pilots about their perceived relevance and early impact, and how they had been received in each locality.

The next section of this report describes the methodology for the process evaluation.

Chapter 3 considers the management of the Activity Agreement pilots. Chapter 4 then looks at the delivery of the Activity Agreement pilots. Chapter 5 explores the outcomes and emerging issues relating to the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA). Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the process evaluation.

2 Methodology

The aim of the process evaluation was to understand the local implementation of the pilots, map the context in which the initiatives were piloted and to highlight good practice. The process evaluation for the AA pilots had two strands:

- data collection on the local implementation and delivery of the pilots
- the collation of contextual information.

2.1 Data collection on the local implementation and delivery of the pilots

Data collection for the process evaluation primarily involved visiting the pilot areas three times during the course of evaluation. Findings from all visits to the pilot areas (three in total) are presented in this report.

2.1.1 Initial visits

Initial visits were made to all pilot areas in May/June 2006 and interviews were conducted with local project managers. Early visits to the Activity and Learning Agreement pilot areas enabled evidence to be collected on the initial implementation of the initiative(s), take-up rates and any reported 'teething problems'. A total of 13 face-to-face interviews were conducted with AA project managers and other key staff. The majority of interviews were tape recorded with the permission of respondents and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Findings based on an analysis of the data generated from initial discussions with project managers are presented here. Individual area profiles were drafted, in consultation with local project managers, and updated at the end of second round visits. For most areas, additional information was gained from copies of local delivery plans, and publicity and administrative materials.

2.1.2 Second round visits

A second round of visits to the pilot areas, to interview project managers and a range of other local stakeholders, took place during the latter part of 2006 and early in 2007. In all pilot areas (both AA and LAP), a roundtable discussion was held with project managers and local delivery staff and a maximum of eight face-to-face interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including education and training providers and representatives from Jobcentre Plus and the Local Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In order to provide a better understanding of local implementation models, the number of interviews with representatives from key organisations was extended in six pilot areas. Most notably, there was an emphasis on expanding fieldwork in pilot areas that encompassed large geographical areas, those that covered a number of local authority areas, those which were delivering both pilots and those where separate management and delivery arrangements were in place to implement each policy initiative. Fieldwork was extended in the following pilot areas:

- Greater Manchester, which included ten local authority areas and was delivering both the Activity Agreement (AA) Pilot and the Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP).
- West Yorkshire, which included five local authorities and was delivering both the AA and the LAP.
- London East, which is a large urban area (ten local authorities) and was delivering both the AA and the LAP.

- Cornwall and Devon, which is a large rural area and was delivering both the AA and the LAP.
- Greater Merseyside, which is a large urban area (six local authorities) and was delivering the AA.
- Kent and Medway, which is an urban/rural area and had 11 access points to AA across the area.

A range of data-gathering techniques, which were tailored to the particular requirements of each pilot area, were used. These included:

- In-depth face-to-face interviews (maximum of three)/telephone interviews (maximum of six) with representatives from key organisations, such as, Jobcentre Plus, the voluntary and community sector, education and training providers, and the Youth Offending Service (YOS).
- Scrutiny and analysis of reports and documents (eg publicity material).
- When appropriate, observation of procedures and practices, such as meetings between Personal Advisers (PAs) and young people.

This resulted in an additional nine interviews being conducted in each of the six pilot areas which had been identified as requiring additional fieldwork. During the second round visits to the AA and LAP areas, a total of 98 respondents were interviewed in AA areas and this constituted the largest fieldwork phase.

2.1.3 Third round visits

A final round of interviews with project managers and the second phase of the extended programme of fieldwork in six pilot areas were conducted at the end of 2007/early 2008. A total of 61 respondents were interviewed within AA pilot areas during the third round visits. Roundtable discussions and face-to-face interviews with project managers and other key staff were tape recorded (with respondents' permission), and were either transcribed verbatim or written up by the interviewer for subsequent analysis. This report presents an analysis of the data generated from group discussions, face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews that were conducted during the three visits to the AA pilot areas.

3 Management of the Activity Agreements (AA) Pilots

This section considers the management of the Activity Agreements (AA) pilots, including management delivery models, staffing structures, recruitment and staff turnover, links with local stakeholders, the perspectives of providers on the management of the AAs and management information requirements.

3.1 Management models

There was universal agreement among the respondents that they had welcomed the opportunity to manage one or both of the pilots in their areas. The piloting of AAs provided the opportunity for Connexions Partnerships / Services to help to develop further their strategies to support their work with young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). This had invariably been an organisational priority for some time. In addition to extending staffing resources, funding provided through their involvement in the AAs had enabled Connexions personnel, often for the first time, to become directly involved in both designing and commissioning provision to meet the needs of their target group.

Project managers had overall responsibility for the implementation of AAs, and operated within targets which had been agreed within delivery plans (section 3.1.1). There were two types of management structures, which had largely been determined through the make-up of the pilot areas and which were responding to differing needs.

- **Type A - Local Area Autonomy.** In the majority of cases, pilot areas were large and encompassed a number of local authorities. In order to work across local authority areas, project managers liaised, in each local area, with a manager, who, in turn, had responsibility for local delivery (including staffing, local marketing and recruitment etc.). While project managers retained responsibility for strategic direction for the pilot, local areas usually had a great deal of autonomy over the implementation of AAs.
- **Type B - Central Management.** Where the pilot area comprised a single Connexions partnership and a small number of local authorities, project managers had the capacity to have overall strategic responsibility, as well as to have a 'hands on' role within the implementation of the pilot. In this model, project managers retained responsibility for delivery staff and were better able to standardise procedures across the pilot area.

The management of the AAs within local areas relied heavily on Connexions Partnerships, which assumed responsibility for overseeing the direction of the pilot in their areas. In some cases, this ranged across a number of different local authority areas.

***Learning Point:** the transfer of responsibility for Connexions to individual local authority control, which concluded in 2008, had, in most areas, reduced the role of Connexions Partnerships in terms of coordinating the work of individual Connexions Services. Any future roll-out of AAs will need to take account of these developments, so that local management strategies, which enable the development and co-ordination of arrangements between local authority areas can be devised.*

3.1.1 Delivery plans

In all pilot areas, delivery plans setting out proposals for the design and implementation of the pilot(s) were devised at senior management level, and were usually drafted for the AAs by Connexions senior management staff. Each pilot then appointed a project manager with responsibility for developing the initiatives across the pilot area. In some instances, project managers, in consultation with DCSF, had amended the targets and projections which had been set out in the local delivery plans. Where both initiatives were being delivered, it was usual for two project managers to be appointed, with the pilots being managed independently of each other.

3.1.2 Local project managers

The role of AA project managers within Connexions partnerships was to take strategic responsibility for the local implementation and delivery of the initiatives, including the development and management of systems relating to IT and MI, as well as budgeting, marketing and staffing. In two (of the four) pilot areas which were testing both initiatives, one manager was responsible for the delivery of both the AAs and the LAP. The complexity of the task facing project managers in implementing either one or both of the initiatives varied between pilot areas. In some pilot areas, the establishment of complex management and contractual systems could largely be attributed to the network of local authority areas which co-existed in one locality. For example, in one pilot area, which was operating both initiatives, one local authority was managing the pilots on behalf of ten authorities in the area.

Learning Point: *one local authority was managing the contract to deliver the pilots on behalf of five authorities within the area. Within the Connexions partnership, a project manager had strategic responsibility for the delivery of the initiatives in each of the five areas. An agreement was drawn up between the Connexions partnership and each local authority area outlining their responsibilities, including the recruitment and deployment of staff. Senior Keyworkers had responsibility for day-to-day operational management and reported to a Lead Officer who had been nominated by the local authority for that area. While this was a complex model, involving both Connexions and local authorities in the strategic management of the pilot, it had effectively initiated the embedding of responsibility for AAs within Children's Trusts, which assumed control of Connexions Services from 2008.*

The initial implementation of the pilots was less complex in areas where the contract was managed centrally by the Connexions partnership and where project managers had worked directly with local Connexions Services/offices. Project leaders tended to have had more of a 'hands on' role in local delivery, in particular in relation to staff appointments. However, in all pilot areas, project managers had established a pattern of regular meetings (usually once per month) with local managers. In addition, in some areas, project managers had set up working groups comprising representatives from local operational staff to assist with the development of marketing and recruitment strategies.

In all pilot areas, local steering groups or pilot boards, usually met either quarterly or on a monthly basis. They comprised representatives from local stakeholder groups, including education and training providers, sector skills councils, regional and local government offices, employer and voluntary groups and, in some cases, young people. AA project managers met with their local area managers/team leaders on a monthly basis. In most cases, area managers were responsible for the delivery of the AA in a specific area or local authority area. There was only one pilot area where Personal Advisers (PAs) reported directly to the AA project manager.

3.2 Staffing structures and recruitment

Following the appointment of project managers to oversee the local implementation and delivery of the AAs, the major task facing senior managers in Connexions partnerships was to oversee the selection and recruitment of large numbers of operational staff, in accordance with the staffing levels that had been agreed at national level. The number of posts available to assist with the delivery of each pilot at local level had been determined broadly by the size of the NEET population in each locality. Within each pilot area, staff were allocated between different localities by project managers in proportion to the size of the NEET population. In most areas, within Connexions partnership areas, staff recruitment began in April 2006. The process of recruitment was quicker and more successful for the AA pilots than for the Learning Agreement pilots. This can be largely attributed to Personal Adviser (PA) posts being generally perceived as being similar to mainstream Connexions advisers in terms of

their generic skills, with a focus on identifying and meeting the needs of young people who were NEET. As a result, in many pilot areas, AA operational staff were recruited through internal appointments. The appointment of staff through internal appointments also meant that delays were avoided, since CRB checks had already been completed.

Staff recruitment which was managed by some local authorities departments was subject to delays. Where local authorities were leading the operation of the pilots, their involvement appears to have hampered the early stages of the development of the pilots, in particular with regard to staff appointments. For example, in one local authority, where recruitment of AA PAs was managed by the Youth Service, the appointment process did not start until Autumn 2006 (the pilots started in April 2006).

Operational staff appointed to deliver AAs were given the job title of Personal Adviser, Key Worker or Project Worker. While in most pilot areas, designated AA staff were appointed, there were two pilot areas where two models of operation co-existed. In some parts of the pilot area, designated AA PAs were in post, while in other areas, responsibility for the delivery of AA was combined with the generic caseload of all PAs. It was reported in these two areas that the 'AA adviser model' was easier to manage, since responsibility for the delivery of the pilot rested with a smaller number of people. On the other hand, the flexibility of opening up the delivery of the AA to all PAs was helping at times when caseloads of specialist staff were reaching full capacity.

Learning Point: *in one local authority area, the funding provided to support staffing for the operation of the AA was match funded by the Connexions Service and an additional four PA posts were created to support the delivery of the pilot.*

Staff retention was a greater issue in areas where AA PAs were appointed on temporary contracts. Where staff turnover had occurred amongst PAs, most posts were re-filled very quickly. However, staff shortages were reported in some local areas as a result of staff leaving to take up other posts, prior to their two-year contracts coming to an end. Long-term sick leave was another reason cited for staff shortages. In two pilot areas, it was felt that staffing problems had affected their ability to meet AA target numbers of young people entering and being retained on the programme.

Second and final visits made to the pilot areas identified that some project managers had initiated additional appointments to support the work of PAs. This included the appointment of specialist staff who were responsible for setting up and monitoring AA provision, either within local areas or across the whole pilot area. In addition, some areas had appointed administrative staff to organise transport for young people, to deal with contract issues with providers and to oversee payment systems. This enabled PAs to concentrate their efforts on engaging and supporting young people, while the time-consuming task of identifying provision and maintaining contact with a range of education and training providers was centrally managed. Concentrating the task of overseeing the procurement and monitoring of provision within a specialist role avoided duplication in relation to the number of contacts made to providers and enabled PAs to access the whole range of contacts and provision that had been set up across the area.

The following are examples of approaches adopted in two pilot areas:

Area A: specialist AA PAs were based in a range of premises, such as voluntary organisations and partner organisations which had agreed to act as hosts in each of the local authority areas. This approach was reported to have enhanced networking opportunities with a range of agencies and, in doing so, had resulted in a wider system of referrals being established. In all other pilot areas, AA delivery staff continued to be located within Connexions local offices.

Area B: appointed a number of Contact Workers, who were recent graduates employed as peer mentors to young people. The project manager felt that they offered good value for money, since contact workers were able to manage a larger caseload of young people with less complex needs and were cost-effective to employ. Experienced PAs were allocated to young people who had specific and long-term needs.

The training offered to operational staff varied enormously between pilot areas. While in some areas training comprised an induction programme, in other areas training programmes had been developed and delivered by project managers. In one area, a training needs analysis was conducted for each new member of staff and an individual training programme was drawn up and delivered to meet their needs. In another pilot area, all AA PAs were completing a foundation degree as part of their training and development.

3.3 Links with local stakeholders

The management and implementation of the AAs were dependent on the establishment of close working links between a number of key stakeholders, namely DCSF, Local Authorities, Connexions partnerships and services, and local Jobcentre Plus offices. Respondents were asked to comment on the guidance and support that they had received at a national level from DCSF during the life of the pilot. Local project managers were very positive about their links with DCSF, with regard to the management and delivery of the AAs. Regular contact with the national project manager at DCSF through e-mails, telephone calls, tele-conferencing and a number of workshops had resulted in on-going contact. Managers felt confident about their links with the DCSF and were comfortable about raising any issues they had about the pilots at national level. Guidance from DCSF was clear and consistent. However, earlier notification about the decision to extend the pilots for a further 18 months between 2008-2009 would have been welcomed, together with more information about the ways in which the AAs would be varied in delivery during their extension phase.

AA PAs would have welcomed opportunities such as conferences and seminars, to share good practice and ideas about implementation and delivery with staff from other pilot areas.

3.3.1 Organisational change

The piloting of Activity Agreements came at a time of major change for Connexions Partnerships and Jobcentre Plus. While Connexions partnerships in all pilot areas had established their intended approaches and management structures within their delivery plans, the implementation of the initiatives coincided with the re-organisation of Connexions partnerships. Connexions partnerships/services faced structural change over a two-year period. This involved Connexions working with local authorities in devolving Connexions through the delivery of services by local Children and Young People's Partnerships. In parts of some pilot areas, this process had already taken place, while in other areas, Connexions Partnerships were disbanding in 2008, when all services were scheduled to move within local authority control.

Among Connexions services which had recently been subsumed within local authority control, there was widespread uncertainty expressed by managers and operational staff about the future funding of their posts and anxiety about the future structure and profile of guidance and support services within local arrangements. In particular, it was felt by some pilot managers that the displacement of central teams within Connexions partnerships, coupled with rumour and speculation about the future of Connexions per se, had detracted from the delivery of the AAs. In terms of the implications of organisational change on the potential national roll-out of AAs, it will be important to establish service level agreements and ring fenced funding with local authorities, in order to guarantee consistency in relation to the quality and quantity of staffing and support afforded to the delivery of AAs. One recommendation which was put forward to promote the NEET agenda and to influence policy-making within local authorities, was to target Economic Development departments, as well as Children's Services, since social inclusion was also a key issue within economic regeneration.

In addition, there was some concern expressed about the extent to which AAs would be welcomed within some local authorities, which had already developed their own local strategies and programmes targeted at young people who were NEET. For example, a local authority might focus on programmes targeted at young people who were 'at risk' of becoming NEET, rather than on young people who were long term NEET, as a strategy to meet NEET targets more effectively. Other respondents expressed uncertainty about the extent to which some local authorities really understood the NEET agenda or the role of Connexions.

'They (the local authority) think that tackling a NEET problem is organising, say, a football match and a youth centre.' Local Connexions Manager

3.3.2 Strengthening links with Jobcentre Plus

Through the delivery of the pilot, Connexions staff were encouraged to strengthen their links with local Jobcentre Plus offices, in order that eligibility checks could be carried out for young people by Jobcentre Plus staff and recruitment of young people to AAs could be actively encouraged between the two agencies. Indeed, some local delivery plans set out proposals to second or recruit local Jobcentre Plus staff into Connexions offices. These plans were implemented to a much greater extent in some pilot areas than in others.

While in most areas arrangements had been made to second Jobcentre Plus advisers to Connexions partnerships, in one pilot area a Jobcentre Plus manager had been seconded to the post of Lead Coordinator for the AA pilot. Working at management level enabled service level agreements between Connexions and Jobcentre Plus districts to be set up and delivered. The key role of the manager was to ensure that these agreements were implemented and it was reported to have been successful, due to negotiations being concluded at management level between a highly experienced Jobcentre Plus manager working on behalf of Connexions and her counterparts within Jobcentre Plus. Understanding the differences between administrative systems within the two organisations and building on existing network groups between Connexions PAs and Jobcentre Plus advisers to establish effective communication, had facilitated and enhanced partnership working between the two agencies.

Plans to locate or second Jobcentre Plus staff to Connexions partnerships were delayed or impeded by the restructuring and reorganisation which was taking place within the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) during the early months of the pilot. In addition, staff shortages in some areas resulted in some Job Centre districts being unable to release staff for secondment. In areas where Jobcentre Plus advisers had joined Connexions services to assist with the pilot, they worked as AA PAs with either a full or reduced

caseload. In one pilot area, Jobcentre Plus secondees had drawn on their experience of the Job Trials programme, which was operated by Jobcentre Plus, to identify suitable work placements for young people on AAs. Respondents reported that Connexions services had strengthened their relationships with staff from Jobcentre Plus offices as a result of implementing AAs.

In some areas, PAs are based at regular intervals at Jobcentre Plus offices to provide drop-in sessions for young people who were claiming or making claims for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). An effective referral system from Jobcentre Plus staff to AA PAs when they were based at either Jobcentre Plus or at Connexions offices had been developed.

'We've actually set up a nice little working relationship with Jobcentre Plus. Any young people, 16 or 17, who comes in to claim JSA or seeking information about JSA they have to actually come and see one of the project workers before they can go.... And the young person at least gets to hear it directly from the project worker. They don't have to join..but at least it's creating face to face contact and it helps.' Local Connexions Manager

3.4 Management of AAs: the providers' perspective

During the second and third round visits to the pilot areas, a number of interviews were carried out with education and training providers. Providers were positive about AAs and had become involved in the initiative because of their capacity to deliver flexible provision, in terms of both its content and its timing. The majority of providers had extensive experience of working with young people, with some providers also being involved in the delivery of Entry to Employment (E2E) and Positive Activities for Young People Programme (PAYP). However, the delivery of AAs had brought many providers in closer contact with Connexions for the first time because of their enhanced role within AA management for brokering provision.

Providers spoke positively about their links with Connexions, in terms of the way in which contracts had been set up and managed. PAs were in regular contact with providers through accompanying young people to sessions, attending sessions or conducting weekly follow-ups with providers to check on attendance numbers. While some providers would have welcomed more background information about young people before courses started, in order to assist their course planning and provide more accurate indications about the numbers of young people who would be attending, they recognised that the composition and nature of the client group often made it difficult to derive this information. In addition, providers who were involved in basic skills delivery requested greater involvement in the initial assessments of young people made by Connexions PAs, so that provision could be more specific in meeting individual needs.

While many providers had links with local providers' networks through their involvement in other initiatives, very few had regular and on-going contacts with other AA providers. Although some providers had attended AA marketing and publicity events, the development of closer links between AA providers would help to facilitate the sharing of good practice and enhance the cohesion of the initiative at local level.

3.5 Management information requirements

Third round visits exposed increasing concerns by a number of project managers about the inability of the various MI systems being used across pilot areas to deliver consistent information to meet the data requirements of DCSF.

'MI systems have probably been the single most problematic area that I've dealt with on this pilot. I think if you asked the question to everybody...Has it been putting the Agreements in place, has it been the provision, has it been the audit? They'll all come back and say MI. Depending on which supplier they're with.' AA Project Manager

Two significant issues were reported. Firstly, pilot areas used different IT suppliers or had developed their own systems. Therefore, there was no uniformity across pilot areas with regard to IT capacity or in terms of the MI that was produced. Secondly, while some areas reported no difficulties meeting the varying and differing demands for MI that had been requested from DCSF during the course of the pilot, a number of pilot managers were frustrated by the inability of one contractor to deliver IT programmes to meet agreed specifications. In addition, this supplier was reported to have given a very poor standard of guidance on the programmes which had been operationalised. There were also deep concerns about the fact that an integrated MI system had not been established by this contractor at the end of two-year pilot phase. Consequently, project managers in these areas were forced to rely on individual reports from local offices / operational staff to obtain data, resulting in inconsistencies in reporting.

At local area level, concern was expressed about the ability of PAs to generate consistent data and about demands for data sometimes exceeding their IT skill levels. This issue was more difficult to address when AA PAs were widely dispersed across a pilot area and could not benefit from centralised support. One pilot manager had developed a 'quality information approach', comprising a Smart Sheet, which consisted of a spreadsheet which PAs could use to record key information about young people. The Smart Sheet was subsequently used to generate reports to meet DCSF requirements. In another pilot area, which reported no problem with its centralised IT system, data relating to the impact of AA was generated at individual ward level across the pilot area. This information was used to inform decision-making about which areas might benefit from greater targeting. An added value measure, which compared the length of stay in EET of AA graduates with that of a control group, had also been developed.

3.6 Conclusions

- Most AA pilot areas comprised a number of local authority areas. While AAs were welcomed in the pilot areas, the task of managing the initiative was dependent on the key role of project managers who oversaw the delivery of the pilot, in some cases across a number of different of local authority areas. With regard to potential national roll-out, the demise of Connexions partnerships and the re-integration of Connexions Services within individual local authority control, which were concluded in 2008, would mean that the 'umbrella' role carried out by project managers could not be replicated within new arrangements. Potential alternatives to the current delivery model might be to nominate one local authority to lead the management and delivery of AAs across a number of local authorities in a given area, to invite Government Offices (GOs) to assume the responsibility of coordinating AA delivery throughout their areas, or to locate the responsibility for AAs in the new clustering arrangements for local authorities within sub-regional groupings, which was set out in the recent consultation document *'Raising Expectation: enabling the system to deliver'* (DCSF/DIUS, 2008). The sub-regional delivery of AAs allows for increased opportunities for young people and economies of scale in terms of provision, management and administration.

- In terms of the implications of organisational change on the potential national roll out of AAs, it will be important to establish service level agreements and ring fenced funding with local authorities, in order to guarantee consistency in the quality and quantity of staffing and support afforded to the delivery of AAs. Some concern was expressed about the extent to which some local authorities both understood the NEET agenda and, more specifically, were committed to the delivery of programmes such as AAs.
- Two models of implementation were largely determined by the scale of the management task facing project managers. In large pilot areas, project managers had a strategic role in overseeing the delivery of the pilot by operating through a network of local managers (Local Area Autonomy). In pilot areas which comprised a small number of local authority areas (Central Management), project managers had the capacity to retain responsibility for operational staffing and a standardised approach to the delivery of AA was more in evidence.
- The process of staff recruitment was quicker and more successful within AA pilot areas than Learning Agreement pilot areas. This was largely attributed to AA PA skills being similar to those required by mainstream Connexions PAs. Staff recruitment that had been managed by local authority personnel departments slowed down the implementation of the pilot, because of the time taken to have job descriptions approved and staff appointed.
- The appointment of dedicated AA PAs was the preferred model of delivery, in terms of both staff management and in enabling young people to access individual and concentrated levels of support and guidance.
- Pilot areas had increasingly moved towards 'tiered' staffing arrangements, which involved utilising the professional skills of PAs to offer intensive support and guidance to young people, while employing staff at lower grades either to assume the administrative tasks of setting up and managing provision or supporting and mentoring young people with more routine parts of their AA programmes. This example of good practice should be replicated within any national delivery model.
- In most areas, the piloting of AAs had strengthened links between Connexions and Jobcentre Plus. Joint working had facilitated staff secondments, the sharing of offices and improved communications. In particular, where AA PAs had worked alongside Jobcentre Plus Under 18s Advisers in order to encourage young people's participation in education and training, this had improved not only the links between the two agencies, but also 'the offer' to their clients.
- Pilot areas had developed positive links with many education and training providers, who were able to offer flexible and responsive provision to meet individual needs. However, providers would have welcomed a better inter-change with other organisations involved in AA delivery, both within and between pilot areas.
- The lack of a uniform and fully operationalised MI system across all pilot areas had weakened the management of the initiative, in terms of accessing accurate data across all pilot areas. Prior to the launch of any national initiative, a review of current arrangements needs to take place, so as to ensure that any national delivery of AA is fully supported by one MI system, which is able to deliver data which are timely, responsive, consistent and accurate.

4 Delivery of the Activity Agreement (AA) Pilots

This section reviews the issues that emerged during the evaluation team's three visits to the pilot areas, in relation to the delivery of AAs. In particular, it focuses on marketing and promotion of AAs, application and payment processes and identifying and procuring AA provision.

4.1 Marketing and Promotion

Pilot areas had been very active in terms of identifying the target population and raising awareness and informing potential applicants about the existence of the provision. A large proportion of young people who were eligible for AAs, ie young people who were at least 20 weeks NEET or approaching, had failed to engage positively with Connexions Services in the past and, for a variety of reasons, were not involved in any recognised form of education, employment or training. Examples of innovative practice in relation to how Connexions staff identified and established links with young people and their parents, in order to raise awareness of the AAs included:

- direct contact with young people and their parents through telephone calls including regular follow-up, visits to outreach centres and home visits
- the use of a wide range of publicity and marketing tools and events
- 'word of mouth' recommendation and referrals.

There was widespread consensus among Connexions personnel that while direct contact with young people was the most effective engagement tool, the value of various marketing and publicity materials and events was highly dependent upon pitching the approach to meet the requirements of local needs.

4.1.1 Use of MI

In all pilot areas, Connexions MI data was extensively and effectively used to identify the eligible population. At the early stages of the pilot, this involved identifying all young people who were 20 weeks NEET or approaching entitlement to AA from the Client Caseload Information System (CCIS). In addition, it entailed setting up systems which identified young people at 14/15+ weeks NEET, so that they could be briefed about the provision. In one area, the data was analysed in order to identify the characteristics of young people who were 20+ weeks NEET, in terms of their background, gender, ethnicity, educational qualifications and their post-16 education and training profiles. This information was subsequently used to target marketing activities more effectively at the eligible population for AAs. While NEET young people had been a priority target group for Connexions for some time, and many respondents were more confident about the accuracy of local data on the NEET population, tracking eligible young people remained a challenge. In particular, prior to the introduction of AAs, staffing levels did not offer the capacity to follow-up young people through extensive out-reach work, including home visits and to work closely with other local agencies to identify young people who were long-term NEET.

It was reported that initial estimates of the target population, which had been developed centrally to assist pilot areas to draw up their local delivery plans, had proved to be inaccurate. The size of the NEET populations had been over-estimated, since the figures included young people who were in receipt of JSA, Hardship Allowances and other benefits. Some respondents felt that the piloting of AAs had assisted local Connexions MI data to become more accurate, as young people who were in the NEET category were being followed up and their status checked on a more regular basis.

4.1.2 Direct contact

The most widely used and most effective method of raising awareness about the pilot was through PAs contacting young people or their parents by telephone and letter/postcard using local data on the estimated population. This was followed up by a request for the young person to visit their local office, to discuss the initiative in more detail with their AA PA. Those young people who declined were usually followed up at regular intervals. 'Drop in' sessions were also used in some areas, with varying degrees of success. Some young people lacked confidence in relation to visiting local offices and speaking to an adviser. In some areas, home visits were arranged to support young people and to encourage their engagement, sometimes in collaboration with other local support services.

It was widely believed that a proactive approach was needed in order to encourage young people who were long-term NEET, firstly to engage with Connexions and secondly to join a programme. In some areas, this had involved Connexions workers visiting outreach centres to make contact with the eligible population, since it was recognised that, for some young people, receiving a telephone call or letter of invitation to visit an office would fail to engage them. In addition, while awareness-raising mechanisms such as posters alerted some young people to the existence of AAs, it was felt that a one-to-one approach was often the key to success.

'Long-term NEET young people tend not to be the people who kind of walk through somewhere, see a poster and go "I'll ring".' AA Programme Manager

The extent of engagement with AAs was also highly dependent on the degree of trust and confidence that young people had built up with PAs, Connexions and the initiative itself. This trust was developed in the first instance through AA PAs and mainstream PAs establishing rapport with the client group. Referrals to AAs from mainstream PAs had increased. A limited number of referrals had also been received from school and college staff.

4.1.3 Marketing materials

A vast array of marketing and publicity materials and strategies was available to Personal Advisers to support their direct contact with young people. For example, in some cases, the material was developed by Connexions marketing managers / staff, while in other areas marketing consultants and agencies were employed to devise a local 'branding' for the pilot. Project managers in some areas designed local marketing and publicity materials and allowed local services to add their own logos etc. Promotional materials covered the range of activities included on the programme, as well as the financial incentive that was available.

Learning Point: *in one area, a marketing co-ordinator had been appointed to promote both pilots (AAs and LAPs) and in another pilot area, marketing and publicity was managed by a central team. Focus groups, youth champions and Youth Boards were also employed to elicit the views of young people about publicity design and materials.*

4.1.4 Awareness raising activities

A range of methods had been implemented in pilot areas for creating awareness and informing staff, local partners and potential applicants about the pilot, including:

- briefing sessions for local Connexions staff and management committees
- briefing sessions / visits to local stakeholders, including Youth Workers, voluntary groups
- poster campaigns (including buses and bus shelters)
- flyers
- PA visits to drop-in centres
- DVDs
- mailshots (mainly postcards) to young people and parents
- drop-in sessions / open evenings arranged for eligible young people
- telephone / text message contact with young people
- information sheets / leaflets for young people
- branded 'goody bags' for AA participants which included programme information, pens, a USB drive and an alarm clock
- media coverage including television and radio
- an e-learning briefing document, and
- publicity on Connexions website.

It was recognised by some programme managers and AA PAs, that there was a need to update and extend awareness about the pilot as it moved into its third year of operation. Some respondents felt that the promotion of the extended AA provision would be much more complex within pilot areas which were offering a number of AA variants. This would suggest that pilot areas will become more reliant on personal contact from PAs with young people, in order to explain the variations which were operating within the initiative.

In addition, evidence from interviews with education and training providers suggested that there was limited awareness among this group about the promotion and marketing activity of AAs. Many providers who were interviewed as part of the evaluation reported little awareness of promotional and marketing materials and would have welcomed greater involvement in local events in order to promote the initiative.

4.1.5 Word of Mouth

During second and third visits to pilot areas, it was reported that information about AAs was being made more widely known through 'word of mouth', most notably through young people and their parents. This suggested that the initiative was becoming embedded and more widely understood by young people, their parents and professional staff. Some areas reported that peer referrals had increased, although young people did not receive any form of incentive for recommending the initiative.

'Success stories' about young people who had successfully completed AAs were increasingly being used at a local level to promote the initiative. This included press and radio coverage of young people speaking about their experiences and the range of activities and opportunities available on the programme. Some pilot areas had also organised a 'celebration event' for AA graduates, which involved a formal dinner and the presentation of a certificate of achievement to each young person.

4.2 Eligibility and application processes

Eligibility for AAs required young people who were 16 or 17 years of age to have been NEET for 20 weeks or more. There was a consensus among respondents that this requirement had created a number of difficulties, since many young people were not eligible because they had spent brief periods of time in education, employment or training. The changes to eligibility requirements, which were introduced as part of the extension pilot phase, were broadly welcomed.

During the initial pilot phase, considerable effort was made by AA PAs to contact young people who were classified as being long-term NEET, only to find that a significant proportion were ineligible because of the 'continuous NEET' requirement. This raised expectations among young people who had been contacted, with some finding it difficult to understand why they should be excluded from participation in the AAs, as they had spent long periods NEET. The 20 week eligibility criterion had also been particularly difficult to apply to young people who were known not to have been in formal learning for several months or years before compulsory leaving age, and were expected to wait a further 20 weeks to reach the eligibility threshold for the AA.

Hard-to-reach benefit recipients

As identified in the first year report, one major issue surrounding the eligibility criteria during the first two years of the pilot was the exclusion from the programme of many young people who were in receipt of Hardship Benefit, JSA and / or Housing Benefit. AAs were largely targeted at young people who lived at home and were supported by parents and largely excluded the most 'hard to reach' and excluded groups of young people because of the negative impact of the AA allowance on benefit receipt and associated passported benefits.

Contradictions also existed with regard to entry on to AAs for different groups of young people claiming other benefits. For example, young people who lived in homeless hostels or lived independently were unable to receive the AA allowance because they were in receipt of JSA and in some cases, Housing Benefit and would lose these benefits if they participated. It was reported that young people who lived in households in receipt of a family care package also failed to participate, as it would affect their benefit entitlement. In contrast, care leavers and teenage parents who were in receipt of other allowances were able to receive the £20 allowance each week from their AA without disrupting other benefit claims.

It was reported that the entitlement arrangements for young people claiming JSA also varied both within and between pilot areas. In some cases this meant that, financially, JSA was a better offer than joining AA.

'In one of our boroughs, JSA just seems to be the culture amongst young people and, to a certain extent, they can get JSA without actually having to do much.' Connexions Local Manager

4.2.1 The AA population

AAs needed to be responsive to a diverse range of young people. Accordingly, those who were eligible to join AAs were not a homogeneous group and comprised:

- young people who had failed to attend school regularly and who had previously had little contact with support services such as Connexions
- young people with special needs
- young offenders
- care leavers
- teenage parents.

While many young people who were eligible to take part in AAs had acute needs, the cohort also included groups of young people who were living at home and wanted to participate in some form of learning, but usually lacked the self-confidence to do so. They required a minimum level of intervention and support to access further learning and training.

With young offenders, AAs sometimes offered an exit strategy for some young people who were leaving prison, with time spent in custody being counted towards the 20 week minimum NEET criteria for entry onto the AA. It was reported in some areas that the availability of the AA had strengthened links between the Youth Offending Service and the Connexions Service. A suggestion was made that young people who were undertaking Intensive Support and Surveillance Programmes in the community should be entitled to participate in the AA at the same time. They were prevented from doing so, because they were serving a community sentence of 25 hours each week. However, participation in AAs would have enabled young people to gain additional support and the acquisition of skills, which may have enhanced their employability or their transition into further learning.

4.2.2 Application processes

Two approaches to the AA application process were identified throughout the pilot. Some AA areas used forms which had been issued nationally, whilst other areas had adopted a more informal approach. The requirements for both the young person and the AA PA were set out in an Agreement. As part of the application procedure, an assessment of the young person's needs often included the use of the standard Assessment Performance Implementation Review (APIR) system. However, in final round visits to pilot areas, some respondents reported that using the APIR had proved to be a considerable administrative burden and they had moved towards a selective use of the system.

Before young people signed up to join AAs, benefit checks were undertaken to ascertain that applicants were not in receipt of other benefits. The process of checking eligibility had been better managed in areas where there were established links between the Connexions and Jobcentre Plus and where there was shared understanding about expectations.

Staff from Jobcentre Plus would have welcomed more guidance at national level about their role in the pilot. While the task of undertaking benefit checks was described as being fairly straightforward, it was perceived by Job Centre staff 'as another task do, within a prescribed timescale'. While Jobcentre Plus was receiving a small administrative resource for undertaking this task, young people under the age of 18 were not a priority group for the agency.

Learning Point: a weakness in the current system was that the checking of benefit claims only took place on entry to AAs. Since some young people may have reached the age of 18 during their 20 weeks on their AAs, and would therefore become able to make a claim for JSA, there was no ongoing formal system in place to check whether this had happened. Within any national roll-out of AAs, responsibilities for checking benefit claims would need to be clarified with JobCentre Plus.

For many young people, the initial stages of AAs focused on development activities, such as ensuring that the young person had set up a bank account and had established regular contact with their PA. Some pilot areas reported delays caused by young people experiencing local difficulties in opening bank accounts, whilst in other areas there were no reported problems. In areas where delays had occurred in making payments to young people, this was attributed to factors such as the requirement for the young person to have sufficient identification, usually in the form of a birth certificate or a passport. Where young people had difficulties producing relevant documentation to open bank accounts, some local Connexions managers had set up local agreements with banks and building societies, whereby a letter from Connexions acted as the identification a young person needed to open a bank account. Interim cash/cheque payment systems had been established to obviate problems in setting up bank accounts.

4.2.3 Caseload sizes

The scale of the task of identifying eligible young people and supporting them through the application process should not be understated. This was followed by a requirement, on the part of AA PAs, to identify suitable activities for each young person and to monitor their progress on a weekly basis. Due to the intensive support that was required to be given to young people on AAs, most AA PAs had a maximum caseload of between ten and 15 young people at any one time, although, in some areas, this was reported to be higher. Where the delivery of AAs was combined within the work undertaken by generic PAs, the AA caseloads averaged between three and six young people.

Final visits to the areas found evidence that, in some areas, caseload sizes had risen because of the pressure to reach local AA targets and / or because of staff turnover, due to the two-year pilot coming to an end. Rising caseloads had created concerns about PAs' time being spread too thinly between young people on the programme, which jeopardised the level of intensive support that could be offered. In addition, there was concern expressed about the extent to which the initiative had become increasingly target driven during the life of the pilot.

4.3 Identifying, procuring and managing provision

The piloting of AAs placed Connexions in the 'driving seat', in terms of procuring provision that met the needs of the young person. In some pilot areas, the task of setting up 'bespoke' provision with training providers in the area was initially met with some uncertainty and reticence. However, over the course of the pilot, Connexions managers and their staff reported increased confidence, in terms of managing this responsibility. It was acknowledged that there had been some lessons learnt, from mistakes such as the booking of courses which could not be filled and from the difficulties encountered in identifying providers who could meet the needs of AA clients. Nonetheless, the overall view of Connexions personnel and of the provider sample was that AA provision was now effectively managed.

Learning and training packages have traditionally been negotiated on the basis of volume and with fixed timetables, as opposed to being designed to meet an individual young person's needs. Therefore, the initial task was to identify providers who could be flexible and responsive, in order to meet the needs of the AA client group and the objectives of the programme. A great deal of provision was delivered by smaller learning and training providers, which had the capacity to respond to the individual needs of young people. Second and final visits to pilot areas found evidence of a vast array of provision which had been brokered with a range of training providers, including organisations from the voluntary sector, colleges and private training providers. In two pilot areas, provision was managed centrally, while in all other pilot areas it was organised at the local level. In some cases, the authorisation of the Project Manager was required before specific activities / courses were purchased.

'We're reacting much more to what young people are telling us that they want and it's very much individually tailored provision rather than, you know, moulds and slots.'
Connexions Local Manager

While one of the cornerstones of the initiative was to deliver provision which was targeted at meeting individual needs, it was reported that offering bespoke provision did not necessarily mean that this agenda was driven solely by young people. Negotiations between a young person and their PA, which resulted in an AA agreement being drawn up, should have constituted engagement activities that ensured that the young person had moved forward in terms of their progression towards EET (Education, Employment or Training). The Discretionary Fund, which enabled flexibility to be offered, in terms of funding provision, as well as meeting the costs of transport and equipment needs, was described as 'the essence' of the programme: 'that's the offer that young people really like' (Project Manager).

During the life of the pilot, Connexions staff had developed greater understanding about the 'peaks and troughs' within the delivery of the programme, in terms of the numbers of young people entering the programme and how this impacted on the nature and type of provision which could be brokered with providers. For example, it was cited that during the summer months, recruitment to the programme had fallen. As a consequence of this, commissioning courses which depended on groups of young people attending was avoided, since they had proved difficult to fill. Other lessons learnt included the need to research local training providers and the labour market before commissioning provision, in order to ascertain the extent to which the activities requested by young people and those provided by local suppliers, would lead to positive outcomes for young people. Some areas reported that their 'menu of choices' had been reduced over the course of the pilot, as staff had learnt more about the needs of the client group. However, despite the progress made in being able to offer provision which is much more flexible and responsive to individual needs, some respondents continued to report on-going difficulties with some mainstream providers, most notably colleges, in terms of their capacity and ability to respond to resourcing small groups of learners throughout an annual cycle.

Young people typically met their PA on a weekly basis, and, after completing the initial stages of the programme, they agreed a programme of activities, which may or may not have included sharing training or learning with other young people on the programme. Commitment, in terms of time spent on various tailored activities, usually progressively increased as the young person moved through their programme. However, the number of hours a young person spent on their AA was determined on an 'individual needs' basis. In one pilot area, the AAs were delivered to young people through either:

- a rolling programme, whereby young people started an individual programme of learning as soon as they wished to sign their activity agreement (which happened in all other pilot areas); or

- a cohort pattern of recruitment, in which groups of young people started the programme at a fixed point and moved through a prescribed programme of group activities and some individual learning packages.

4.3.1 Types of provision

The pilots had identified, or in some cases created, an impressively wide range of forms of provision, with the aim of enhancing the confidence, motivation and ability of young people, to enable them to progress from their current position of economic inactivity. There was no 'typical' AA package of learning. However, the activities tended to fall into one of three broad types and, over the course of the 20 week programme, a young person was able to undertake activities which could be seen as:

- developing their personal skills
- giving them experiences and an understanding of the workplace and how to behave safely in the workplace
- helping them gain vocational and other skills that may enhance their ability to get a job.

Personal development activities

Many of the young people involved in the pilots had personal issues which were either a result of, or a cause of, the position in which they had found themselves. Many lacked confidence in themselves and in the support agencies that could help them, so the AA PAs' initial task was often to redress this issue. In some cases, the Activity Agreement provided the young person with the motivation to start engaging in constructive activities that, in turn, helped them build their confidence. In other cases, the young person needed more specific confidence-building support. Other personal development activities which were provided included:

- Personal hygiene and fitness
- Anger management
- Outward-bound-type activities
- Presentation skills
- Communications skills
- Team building
- Healthy living.

Work-related experiences

A number of activities focused on giving the young person one or more of:

- a taste of what it was like to do a particular job/occupation
 - experience of a work environment
 - the basic health and safety or other knowledge they would need at work.
- Work taster and/or work experience programmes were very popular with young people.

Work experience placements were available as part of many young people's AA packages. In some cases, placements were sourced and vetted by AA PAs, while in other pilot areas the responsibility for managing work experience placements was outsourced to a third party.

Learning Point: *in one pilot area, young people on AAs were given work experience through the Learning Agreement Pilot (LAP). Some employers of young people on LAP were offering work placements to young people on AAs during periods of time when young people on the LAP were receiving their off-the-job training provision. Employers who were interviewed as part of the evaluation were motivated to offer work experience in order to support the development of young people on AA, as well as to address their own business needs.*

At the early stages of the pilot, concern was expressed by representatives from some voluntary organisations about young people undertaking volunteering activity as part of AAs, since they were in receipt of a weekly payment as part of the programme.

'... a lot of CVSs who we work with had a major issue with this because it was going against the ethos of volunteering, paying people to do voluntary work.' Manager, Voluntary Sector

The issue was resolved through the receipt of a letter from the National Volunteering Organisation which stated that work undertaken by young people as part of AA should be classified as 'volunteering opportunities' rather than 'volunteering', in order to make a distinction between paid and unpaid activities.

Other work-related experience activities included:

- Work taster courses
- Work experience
- Health and safety courses
- Armed forces residential courses
- First aid
- Manual handling (how to lift persons/objects safely)
- Customer services courses
- Setting up your own business
- Script writing courses
- Youth work training courses.

Skill development opportunities

The third type of activity was more vocationally oriented, often with the aim of developing the young person's skill set and ability to get a job.

There was widespread demand for basic skills provision, although in some areas it was difficult to find suitable venues or providers which would meet individual needs.

Learning Point: in one pilot area, the Connexions partnership had staff available to carry out basic skills assessments for AA entrants. Young people were usually referred by their AA PA after they had been on their AA for about three to four weeks. This provided sufficient time for the AA PA to identify the young person's needs and for the young person to have developed some self-confidence as a result of working with their AA PA for a short time. An interactive IT package was used to test the young person's level and aptitude and a PA sat alongside the young person to dispel the notion of 'testing'. However, while this had proved to be a highly effective strategy for identifying young people's needs, in terms of literacy and numeracy support, there was a lack of suitable provision.

Young people's reluctance to attend college courses was largely attributable to negative school experiences and it had proved difficult to find provision which offered young people one-to-one support or small group teaching within community settings. In addition, while there was a ready supply of basic skills/Skills for Life provision in the area, it was targeted at young people in full-time learning or on government supported training provision or young people over the age of 18 years of age. Therefore, it was considered that young people who were NEET were 'slipping through the net'. In order to address this shortfall, Connexions staff were awaiting approval from City and Guilds, so that they could deliver Level 1 and 2 Literacy and Numeracy courses.

Learning Point: in one pilot area, learndirect delivered basic skills provision to young people as part of their AA packages. This service was offered to Connexions free of charge. Examples were also found of provision being commissioned to support young people with dyslexia and ADHD.

There was considerable demand for construction skills training from young people, but an acute shortage of provision. This was attributed to cost and to providers of construction skills in many pilot areas being colleges, which were inflexible towards offering short roll-on roll-off courses. In some cases, this was resolved through AA PAs working across local authority areas to purchase shared provision. Discretionary funds were used to buy young people clothes and equipment and to buy Site Safety Cards, so that health and safety requirements could be fulfilled.

Other examples of vocational skill development included:

- Construction skills training
- Motor vehicle technology
- Driving test theory
- Music technology
- Dog training
- Nail art
- Fork lift truck driving instruction
- Foreign languages
- Swimming coaching/life guard training
- Football coaching
- Job seeking skills.

4.3.2 Types of providers

While AA PAs may deliver job readiness provision, such as preparation of CVs and job-seeking courses either on a one-to-one basis or with groups of young people, the majority of provision was 'bought in' from a wide range of providers. The length of individual course provision also varied widely, from one day courses, residential courses, work experience placements, which may have lasted several days or be completed over several weeks and programmes of learning which required a young person to attend one day each week over block periods of time. In some cases, places for young people on AAs were purchased on existing training programmes, in particular E2E and pre E2E courses.

Learning Point: *one pilot area had moved away from commissioning standard programmes and moved increasingly towards 'direct purchase activities', in order to construct personalised learning packages for young people. There was evidence of substantial differences in attendance rates between the two types of provision, with individually tailored courses attracting much higher rates of participation. Direct purchase activities accounted for 75 per cent of commissioned provision in the area. Examples of such direct purchase provision included anger management courses, dyslexia assessment and support, and work taster programmes.*

Provision was purchased from a wide range of private, voluntary and public sector agencies. There were many examples where AA PAs had researched and negotiated individual programmes of learning for young people. In other cases, AA PAs had worked together, sometimes within and between local authority areas, to start courses for groups of young people where a shared need for a specific course had been identified, and where group provision was needed in order to make the programme of learning viable, such as in construction skills. However, difficulties were encountered in securing provision for some young people who lived in rural areas, due to their unwillingness to leave their immediate area, which derived from transport difficulties and/or confidence issues.

4.4 Payment systems

The allowance paid to young people as part of the pilot was welcomed as an asset to the programme. While many pilot areas reported initial concerns over setting up payment systems, these had worked extremely well as the pilot progressed. Payment systems designed to deposit the AA allowance into young people's bank accounts had become established. In some pilot areas, Connexions had systems in place to manage payments, whereas in other areas, payments to young people had been transferred to a local authority BACs system. It was felt that payment systems were efficient and effective because they had been both developed and managed at a local level. This enabled staff to respond quickly to young people's needs, in particular with regard to both activating and withdrawing payments. The absence of requirements for either household income assessments or differential payments rates within AAs had assisted the operation and efficiency of local payment systems.

Some respondents expressed concern about any shift towards a national payment system, similar to that which exists for Education Maintenance allowances (EMA). It was felt that any national payment provider would lack the flexibility and responsiveness which was needed for young people in the AA client group. In addition, it was argued that any issues or delays related to making payments would take much longer to address and would inevitably result in some young people leaving the programme.

'But the fact that we're part of the same organisation and can contact each other quite easily, any issues or any new scenarios or situations that arise, we can work with them instantly. And everyone has an absolute understanding of who is supposed to do what and exactly what things are supposed to happen.' Connexions Local Area Manager

Part of the AA PA's role was to instigate the weekly payments and, if terms and conditions in the agreement had not been met, they also had the authority to withhold payment. At the outset of the pilot, concerns were expressed about the ways in which this responsibility may adversely affect a PA's relationship with young people. The traditional role of a PA was essentially to act as an advocate for the young person and it was felt that having the power to withdraw payments would threaten this role. However, AA PAs had successfully executed this responsibility without reporting any adverse effects on their relationships with young people. The responsibility for making or withdrawing payments was successfully managed through effective communication between AA PAs and AA recipients. At the early stages of the programme, when an Activity Agreement was signed, young people were made aware of their rights and responsibilities within the programme. These were reinforced on an on-going basis through the weekly contact that the young person had with their AA PA. Connexions staff felt that there was a need for clarity and consistency in the ways in which AA payments were made, to ensure that their relationship with young people was maintained and that the programme retained credibility.

Some concern was expressed about the impact on local payment systems resulting from the extended entitlements to AA, which were being introduced in the third year of the pilot. In one pilot area, it was estimated that the number of payments made to young people could treble, since eligibility would be significantly extended. It was also suggested that the volume of queries concerning the opening of bank accounts, in particular identification issues, would also increase in proportion with the extended eligible AA population.

4.5 Conclusions

- The CCIS database was an effective tool to identify the AA eligible population. Tracking young people who were NEET was reported to have improved as a result of the implementation of AAs.
- In any rolled out model of AAs, the entitlement by young people to benefits such as JSA, Carers' Allowances and the Leaving Care Allowance should be sustained alongside the payment of any AA allowance, in order to incentivise and secure the participation of young people in the 'hardest to reach' groups.
- The extensions to the eligibility criteria to AAs, which will be implemented during the third year of the pilot were broadly welcomed, in terms of meeting some initial concerns over programme eligibility.
- While there was evidence of a wide range of marketing and publicity activity, it was the one-to-one engagement between AA PAs and young people and increasing evidence of young people's awareness through 'word of mouth', which appeared to be the most effective strategies for entry into the initiative. Any future planning for the potential roll-out of the initiative may wish to review the added value of incurring large costs on marketing and publicity strategies and materials on likely take-up rates.
- With regard to the procurement and management of AA provision, there were many examples of innovative practice. Finding basic skills provision for young people outside of mainstream EET was a widespread issue. Wider sharing of good practice between pilot areas on the development and procurement of individual/group programmes of learning should be further developed and encouraged.
- As the pilot developed, Connexions staff increased their levels of expertise in identifying and working with an array of providers in their localities in order to procure bespoke provision that met individual needs. They also developed a greater understanding about how trends in the take-up of AAs within an annual cycle of delivery, impact on the contracting of provision. This expertise could be more widely used to inform national policy development.
- In some areas, there was an increasing tension between maintaining low PA caseload sizes, which ensured sufficient levels of support to young people, and meeting target numbers for the programme. There was concern that a national model of AAs would be able to retain sufficient levels of staffing in order to guarantee intensive PA support.
- The Discretionary Fund was perceived to be a critical success factor in the effective delivery of AAs. The Fund gave Project managers and their staff the autonomy, the capacity and the responsibility for commissioning individual or group packages of learning and training, and funding any associated costs.
- There was strong evidence to support the case for retaining local payments systems within any proposed national delivery model. Young people on AAs, and their advisers, require the support of an immediate, flexible and responsive payment system, which was been successfully delivered, during the pilot phase, at a local level.

5 The AA pilots, their Outcomes and Emerging Issues relating to RPA

This chapter examines the implementation of AAs, in terms of the relevance and capacity of the policy to encourage young people who are long-term NEET to engage in structured activities. The perceptions and views of local stakeholders were drawn upon to examine the appropriateness of the initiative in meeting its policy aims and to explore the success of AAs in moving young people into education, employment or training. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the emerging issues from the implementation of AAs which relate to the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) agenda.

5.1 The AA Triangle

During the course of the pilot, respondents were asked their views about AAs and, in particular, the capacity of the policy to encourage young people who were long-term NEET back into learning. The three component parts of the policy, ie the financial incentive, the intensive support and individualised packages of learning, were explored with respondents, in order to elicit views about which part(s) of the policy had the greatest 'pull'. It was consistently reported, that the AA pilot was an innovative policy initiative and was welcomed in all pilot areas as an additional tool to engage young people who were long-term NEET. While working with young people who were NEET had been a strategic priority for Connexions Partnerships for some time, and local initiatives to reduce the NEET population, such as the E2E (Entry into Employment), Positive Activities for Young People Programme (PAYP) and ESF (European Social Fund) supported activities were in place, AAs were a welcome addition, which brought a different and unique approach.

'I think it's a fantastic project, fantastic model, and it works, and it changes lives. I mean, it brings tears to your eyes, it's quite incredible. I think the things that the government intended in the AA pilot have worked – having a degree of financial incentive and the 'something for something' principle, and the fact there is structure and a bit of edge to it, you know, there's a penalty if you don't do your activity – all these things work and they work in fantastic ways.' AA Project Manager

5.1.1 The role of the incentive

The financial incentive of £20 or £30 payable to the young person was the 'hook' that initially attracted young people to the programme. The added perceived benefits of the AA allowance were, firstly, that it was not income assessed (unlike EMA), which avoided the need for young people to provide details about their household's income, and, secondly, that it did not affect their parents' entitlement to state benefits. In addition, it was not only the weekly payment that offered financial assistance to young people. The Discretionary Fund enabled Connexions staff to purchase clothes and equipment for young people and to offer financial support to meet transport costs where this was needed. This was particularly helpful in enabling young people to take part in activities (eg through providing transport in rural areas) and thereby secure their engagement with the programme.

There was some debate about the extent to which making weekly payments to young people sustained their interest in the programme. On the one hand, it was asserted that giving young people a weekly payment rewarded their participation and helped them to achieve financial independence. Also, the payment and withdrawal of the weekly allowance helped to demonstrate the importance of commitment to the programme. Conversely, it was argued that £20 or £30 each was an insufficient amount to sustain young people on a programme. It was the added cocktail of individual and intensive support, and the opportunity to access tailor made activities, which ultimately made the AA programme unique in terms of its offer.

Views about making AA payments to parents differed. It was asserted by some respondents that young people had been confused about why their parents should receive payments when it was the young person who was signing up to participate in AAs. In some areas, it was reported that parental payments were being passed on by parents to their son or daughter, so that the young person received £50 per week for participating in AA. In areas where parental payments were made, some AA PAs felt that the parental payment motivated parents to encourage young people to keep appointments with PAs and to attend activities. Final round visits to the pilot areas also exposed a concern that some households were heavily dependent on the parental payment and that the withdrawal of payments to parents in the third year of the pilot would severely affect some families in disadvantaged communities.

'I think it does make a difference (the parental payment). It makes a financial and strong financial difference in certain households. It makes an attitudinal difference in others: that it links young people into things that their parents can see as being valuable, more valuable than actually being at home.' Connexions Local Manager

5.1.2 The role of support and provision

While the financial incentive offered to young people to participate in AAs acted as the engagement tool, it was the combination of the intensive support package provided by PAs, together with the ability to offer young people bespoke provision that sustained participation in the programme. The ability of PAs to spend concentrated amounts of time with young people assessing their needs, together with having the funding available to offer flexible customised provision to respond directly to meeting individual needs, were reported to be the unique characteristics of the initiative. AAs had enabled AA PAs to reduced caseloads significantly, so that intensive support and follow-up could be established and sustained with young people throughout their participation on the programme. This finding was reinforced throughout the evaluation period.

The intensive support that young people received from AA PAs was the key to managing their commitment and responsibility to the programme. Most AA PAs had been actively involved in setting up specific provision to meet young people's needs and were acutely aware of the efforts and costs involved. It was argued that there needed to be mutual trust, understanding and responsibility between the AA PA and the young person in order for the programme to work. First, AA PAs needed to assess and understand the young person's abilities and requirements, so that placements onto activities and timetables which were beyond the young person's reach were avoided. Second, if this was achieved, a young person was expected to be responsive, by turning up, and to recognise that, if they failed to do so, they were denying an opportunity to another young person and were wasting time and money that had been expended on them. In addition, if a young person felt that the expectations in their activity agreement were too onerous or that they were not enjoying certain activities, there was the flexibility to review and amend the agreement.

'Young people know that there's been an investment in them and they take on board a little bit of the feeling that they owe something back for it.' Project Manager

AAs were the first initiative that had allowed service deliverers to work with young people to determine their own learning and training needs. This was perceived to be a major breakthrough in helping young people to engage (see section 4.3).

5.2 AAs and local and national NEET strategies

The interaction of AAs with other local and national initiatives targeted at young people who were NEET was commented on by some respondents. AA was described as *'quite specific and quite focused in terms of what it does'* (Project manager), and it was this which gave the programme 'an edge' over other initiatives targeted at disengaged young people.

'But sometimes you can get lost in the process and it can lose its edge, whereas what I'm finding with the AA project is that it's very short, it's very focused, very sharp, so that, you know, there is an end process so that when young people are engaged they know that this will not last forever and that there are opportunities to be had through engagement on the project... Because there is an end in sight it creates that sense of urgency... What is not being created is a dependency, because, again, we're coming into contact with vulnerable young people and the last thing you want to do is create a situation where they don't want to leave, because it's too comfortable, it's too safe.'
Project Manager

In areas where young people had received a maximum of £50 per week (ie where young people were receiving both their weekly payment and their parents' payment), some providers felt that this may be displacing some young people from local pre E2E and E2E provision, since the AA package was more attractive. In contrast to AAs, where all eligible young people were entitled to a weekly payment, intensive support and flexible hours of participation in activities, E2E participants received a means tested weekly payment of £30 and were required to attend for a minimum of 16 hours each week. However, some E2E providers who had expressed concern about the impact of AAs on E2E entry, also had a greater propensity to report that they had also expressed an interest in delivering AA provision but had not received the expected volume of young people on AAs. This could be attributed to the type and/or flexibility of the 'AA offer' made by some providers, which may not have been attractive to some young people who had been given a greater choice.

For young people who were NEET, some local areas had used their ESF budget to support the participation in activities of those who were ineligible for AAs. Furthermore, in order to reduce the costs of setting up courses and to share scheduled activities, some areas had developed joint funding through PAYP and AA resources.

There was no clear evidence to support the view that AAs were replicating or displacing other local or national initiatives which were targeted at reducing the NEET population. The impact of replacing the minimum training allowance with EMA payments to E2E participants had far greater consequences for E2E take-up rates. Significant numbers of young people were reported to be income ineligible for E2E provision and, in other instances, parents were refusing to be means tested for eligibility for government supported training provision.

5.2.1 The September Guarantee

During the final visits to the pilot areas, a number of respondents expressed concern about the impact of the introduction of the 'September Guarantee', as it was considered to be 'fishing in the same pond' as AAs for eligible young people. Unlike AAs, the September Guarantee is a national initiative and was an offer of a place in learning to all Year 11 leavers in the year in which they complete compulsory education. The offer maybe of full-time education, an apprenticeship/programme led apprenticeship or E2E. Although the offer must be made by September, a young person can take up their offer by the beginning of the Spring term. This initiative competed with AAs in the following ways:

- it is a national initiative and is therefore more widely marketed
- the offers which were made as part of the September Guarantee and when taken up by young people, constituted entries into EET and so were successful outcomes in terms of reducing NEET figures. In contrast, AAs participants remained classified as NEET or inactive throughout their participation in the programme and, therefore, this did not immediately lead to a reduction in NEET figures in the same way.

The relationship between the September Guarantee and AA participation will need to be addressed in any national roll-out of the pilot initiative. There was a strong recommendation from respondents that during participation in AAs, young people should be re-classified as 'NEET active' and removed from core statistics on NEET figures for local areas. This would prevent the offer of the September Guarantee being perceived as a quicker mechanism for reducing NEET targets.

5.3 Take-up rates and outcome measures

Recruitment of young people onto AAs was slower than had been anticipated at the initial stages of the pilot. This was largely attributed to the time it had taken to get the pilot 'up and running', in particular with regard to staff recruitment and making contact with the eligible population. It was reported during second and third round visits to the pilot areas that take-up rates had improved and, in some cases, had reached or exceeded expected targets. Staff turnover, due to temporary contracts coming to an end, was considered to have had a negative impact on take-up rates in some instances. It was asserted that earlier notification of the decision to extend the pilot for a further 18 months may have averted this situation.

The reasons given for young people not taking up AAs included:

- benefit receipt
- caring responsibilities
- pregnancy
- an unwillingness or inability to leave the immediate area, in particular in rural areas
- casual employment, and
- the unattractiveness of the AA financial offer.

5.3.1 Exit interviews and outcomes

Young people tended to leave the programme early (usually around 12 weeks), and in most areas around 50 per cent immediately progressed into some form of EET. A small proportion of young people were entering the LAP, which was a significant development and showed some emerging inter-relationship between the two pilots. Drop-out rates to NEET destinations were low and included a significant proportion of young people who had exceeded their suspension period. However, within pilot areas, there were also reported to be substantial differences in the proportion of EET outcomes and drop-outs from AAs between different local authority areas. This may have reflected variations in the range of social issues facing groups of young people, as well as differences in the structure of opportunities that exist for young people between localities. In some cases, young people were embarking on an AA for the second time, although this only applied to a small number. The process of preparing young people for leaving their AAs was approached in different ways across pilot areas. In some areas, negotiating transition started at the induction stage,

while in other areas PAs began to talk to young people about their next steps up to four weeks before the end of the programme. With the length of stay on the programme being fluid (up to maximum of 20 weeks), it was difficult to define 'hard and fast' approaches, since young people's programmes were defined on an individual basis.

However, some respondents did feel that because there had been such a strong emphasis on recruitment strategy to AAs, the issue of exit from the programme had often been left behind. Also, interviews with providers demonstrated that some organisations were actively engaged with preparing young people for their next steps and that there was much greater scope for both providers and PAs to work together.

A consistent message from the pilot areas was the extent to which young people became dependent on the support of their PAs and how those links were managed at the end of the programme. If a young person remained on their AA for 20 weeks, the most common practice was for them to be transferred back to a mainstream PA. However, there were numerous examples of how AA PAs were retaining links, mostly on an informal basis, with young people who had completed their AAs. Most typically, PAs had developed such positive links with young people that it was difficult for young people and or their PAs 'to let go'. In one area, additional funding had been secured to enable PAs to retain regular contact with young people until they reached the 13 week follow-up stage.

Those young people who completed 20 weeks on AAs tended to have the greatest support needs and were less likely to record an immediate transition into EET. However, many respondents asserted that the success of the programme should not be measured solely in terms of EET outcomes and that the acquisition of 'soft' outcomes, such as the development of self-confidence and other social skills, as well as young people's re-engagement with support services, such as Connexions, should also warrant some attention. Additionally, any potential roll-out of AAs should take account of a need for greater flexibility in determining young people's length of stay on the programme, especially where they required a longer period than 20 weeks. It was reported in some pilot areas that teenage parents constituted a specific group which required a longer-term intervention, because of the shortage of learning provision which was also able to offer child care facilities. Other groups which required a longer programme include care leavers, young offenders and young people with special educational needs.

'For the young people with the real hard, difficult issues and barriers and chaotic lifestyles and statements, sometimes, before you know it that time has gone, you've only just got them.' Connexions Assistant Team Manager

Evidence was provided by two pilot areas to suggest that AAs were successfully reducing NEET figure amongst 17-year olds.

'Broadly, the AA pilot group are now 17, some are 18 but the reduction in NEET amongst 17-year olds is much greater than among 16 and 18-year olds, so you can see a direct link between what the pilot's been able to do and outcomes and outputs for young people.' AA Project Manager

It was anticipated that positive outcomes would continue to rise, as a result of the introduction of greater flexibilities to the eligibility criteria, which will be operationalised during the third year of the pilot. However, in one pilot area it was reported that while AAs were reducing NEET figures among 16 and 17-year olds, there was an issue around the sustainability of EET destinations, in the light of evidence that the NEET churn was beginning to rise among the 18+ age group.

'So, while we have big impact on 16-18...it's pushed the problem further ahead.'
Connexions Local Area Manager

5.3.2 The 13 week follow-up

The introduction of the 13 week tracking rule was initially welcomed, as it enabled positive outcomes to be recorded among AA graduates up to three months after the completion of the programme. This was perceived to be particularly relevant to young people who had completed their AAs and were waiting to start full-time college courses or Apprenticeships. However, final round visits to the pilot areas found evidence that some respondents had found follow-up activities an onerous task. It was asserted that as no additional resources were offered by DCSF, the follow-up of young people rested on the capacity of individual PAs. In some areas, a 'tracking officer' had been appointed to manage the responsibility, and this appeared to work well. While it was reported that progression into positive outcomes increased to between 65-75 per cent after 13 weeks, entry rates into EET varied depending on the time of year that young people left their programmes. For example, they could access full-time education in September and January and some entry to employment was governed by seasonal demands for labour and training opportunities.

5.4 The AA pilot and emerging issues for RPA

The Education and Skills Act (2008) places a new requirement on young people to participate in education or training post -16. From 2013 young people will have to participate until their 17th birthday and from 2015 until the age of 18. If this target is to be achieved, strategies which ensure that education and training options are available and attractive to young people who are at risk of, or become NEET will need to be in place. The piloting of AAs, had provided the opportunity to test the effectiveness of using a combination of three measures, namely financial incentives, intensive support and individualised learning packages to re-engage young people who were classified as long-term NEET. Evidence from the process strand of the evaluation of the AA pilots would suggest that some key lessons have been learnt to inform policy development for the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA). These are:

- **Financial Incentives** were an effective tool for engaging young people and rewarding their participation. Since the withdrawal of Income Support in 1988, young people under the age of 18 who are not in education, employment or training (EET) are not entitled to financial support unless they can prove hardship and/or estrangement from their parents. AAs were the first financial incentive to be offered to young people outside EET since the 1980s and for the first time, payment is on a 'something for something' basis. In terms of national roll-out, a review of benefits paid to disadvantaged groups of young people (ie housing benefits, income support, leaving care allowances) needs to be carried out, so as to ensure that current benefit entitlement does not act as a disincentive to their engagement with a programme such as AAs. This would enable some 'added value', in terms additional financial support, to be offered, in return for their participation.
- **Intensive support** was instrumental in the delivery of AAs. Low case loads had enabled PAs to engage with young people on a regular basis and establish positive relationships, which had ensured young people's continued engagement with a support agency such as Connexions, as well as their sustained participation within the programme. The risk with a rolled out version of this model might be that financial constraints may result in a low caseload threshold becoming unsustainable and, consequently, the degree of support offered within a pilot phase would not be maintained. This would severely undermine the AA delivery model. Evidence from the evaluation would also suggest that PAs and/or their managers need to be given greater autonomy in determining the length of stay on a programme such as AAs (as well as the entry points to it) of young people, particularly those in 'hard to reach' groups.

- **Individualised learning programmes** were the most far-reaching strand of this policy development, in that they enabled young people, along with their advisers, to opt for bespoke packages of learning. While this approach ran the risk of allowing young people to choose inappropriate and expensive options, the evidence from the process evaluation would suggest that young people, with the guidance of their advisers, were able to identify practical, relevant and cost effective options. Subsequently, the most popular choices of provision under AAs were basic skills, work taster courses and personal development programmes. While AAs were based on one element of the Australian Youth Allowance (YA), they have successfully avoided some of the criticisms of that delivery model. Under the YA, the evaluation found that the flexibility to meet individual need was rarely applied. This was attributed to the lack of time advisers had to spend with young people, the inability of some staff to establish rapport with young people and the narrowness and limited range of options, in terms of provision. This, in turn, meant that some young people were inaccurately assessed and did not receive the most appropriate provision (Jope and Beaumont, 2003; Finn and Bronosky, 2004; Maguire and Thompson, 2007). In essence, unlike the piloting of AAs, the opportunity to develop flexible and responsive provision to meet the diverse needs of the NEET population largely remained unfulfilled.
- Another message from the AA pilots was that, in most cases, it was smaller providers from the voluntary and community sector who had the capacity and ability to meet the delivery needs of the programme. Mainstream education and training provision should to be adapted, following the flexible and responsive modes of practice which were adopted within AAs, in order to be able to respond to local and individual needs.

Finally, evidence from the process evaluation, would suggest that AAs were an effective tool in engaging young people who were long-term NEET into some form of EET. Around half of all young people who completed an AA moved into some form of EET at the end of their programme and the percentage increased to between 65-75 per cent at the 13 week follow-up stage. Engaging young people who are at risk of becoming NEET or who become NEET with some form of positive learning, is a key challenge to the RPA agenda. While successful outcomes from AAs were achieved, more needs to be known about:

- the reasons why young people return to NEET after participation in AAs; and
- the degree of sustainability in EET, among the cohort of young people who make successful transitions beyond AAs, which extends beyond the 13 week follow-up stage.

The extension phase of the pilots should enable some of these issues to be addressed.

5.5 Conclusions

- The three core elements of AAs, namely financial support, intensive support and individualised activities for young people, all had a significant role to play in engaging and retaining young people within the programme. While the offer of weekly payments acted as the initial 'hook' to engage young people, the intensive support offered by AA PAs, together with the opportunity for young people to determine and negotiate their learning needs, sustained their participation.
- Approximately 50 per cent of young people moved into positive outcomes, that is, some form of education, employment or training (EET) before completing their 20 weeks on the programme, with the average length of stay being around 12 weeks. This highlighted the impact of a short period of financial and intensive support on a young person's propensity to leave NEET group status. Young people who remained in the programme until the 20 week expiry date tended to have the greatest needs. Greater flexibility, which allows some young people with specific needs to have a longer length of stay on the programme, should be introduced.

- Fifty per cent of young people entered EET at the end of AAs and this proportion rose significantly at the 12 week follow-up stage. Some areas had recorded a reduction in their NEET figures, in particular among 17-year olds.
- While all areas had exit strategies in place for young people, there was a greater emphasis on recruitment to AAs. Exit and follow-up strategies warranted more resourcing. In addition, greater links could be developed between PAs and providers, in terms of coordinating young people's transitions.
- The AA model was universally applauded as a successful strategy to address the needs of young people who become NEET. There were key messages in the policy implementation, which might be taken forward within the RPA agenda. These key messages relate to: the importance of financial reward in attracting and retaining young people's engagement; the inclusion of guidance services which have staff with the necessary skills and capacity to engage with, and command the respect of young people; and the need to resource and to broker provision which is specific to individual needs.

6 Conclusions

This final section sets out our conclusions at the final stage of the process evaluation and some future considerations for the third year of the pilots, which will involve some extension to current delivery arrangements.

6.1 The AA pilots

The AA pilot was welcomed as an effective incentive to engage with young people who were classified as long-term NEET. Furthermore, the flexibilities which will be introduced to the programme during the third year of its operation were viewed positively, in particular with regard to widening access to the programme. Project managers were found to play a crucial role in the management and local implementation of AAs. The additional resources which the pilots brought to local areas, through offering extra posts to Connexions, as well as the incentive payments being offered to young people, were key factors in supporting local implementation. Education and training providers were also enthusiastic about the initiative

The piloting of AAs provided the opportunity for Connexions staff to develop further their existing strategies to support their work with young people who are NEET. The opportunity to manage and deliver AAs was welcomed. As well as extending staffing resources and building up existing skill bases, funding provided through AAs had enabled Connexions personnel, often for the first time, to become directly involved in both designing and commissioning provision to meet the needs of their target group. There were many examples of innovative practice in relation to the procurement of AA provision. AAs complemented existing initiatives which were targeted at reducing the NEET population.

In some cases, AAs failed to engage with some of the 'hardest to reach' groups, notably young people who were estranged from their parents and living independently. This was because there was a conflict of interest between the receipt of benefit and their ability to take up the AA offer. While the third year of the pilot will enable young people who are claiming benefits to enter into an 'agreement only' AA, the absence of any additional financial reward may discourage their participation. This arrangement may need to be reviewed when any future roll-out is being considered.

6.2 AA delivery

The staff of Connexions Services had the right mix of skills to work effectively with young people who were NEET, since AA PAs shared the same skills as mainstream PAs, in particular those engaged in community and outreach work who specialise in working with 'hard to reach' groups of young people. The appointment of dedicated AA PAs, as opposed to having generic PAs who each had a nominal responsibility for AA delivery, was the preferred model of delivery. There were two types of management structure, which had largely been determined through the profile of the pilot areas and which responded well to differing needs. The management and delivery of local payment systems, which were overseen by Connexion Services worked well. MI systems in some pilot areas failed to reach their operational requirements throughout the two-year evaluation period.

Pilot areas had increasingly moved towards 'tiered' staffing arrangements, that was utilising the professional skills of PAs, to offer intensive support and guidance to young people, while employing staff at lower grades either to assume the administrative tasks of setting up and managing provision or to support and mentor young people with more routine parts of their AA programmes. This example of good practice should be replicated in any national delivery model. In most areas, the piloting of AAs had strengthened links between Connexions and Jobcentre Plus.

While there was evidence of a wide range of marketing and publicity activity, it was the one-to-one engagement between AA PAs and young people, and increasing evidence of young people's awareness through 'word of mouth', which appeared to be the most effective strategies for entry into the initiative. Any future planning for the potential roll-out of the initiative may wish to review the added value of incurring large costs on marketing and publicity strategies and materials in relation to likely take-up rates.

There was on-going concern about the extent to which the movement of Connexions Services into local authority control, which was concluded in 2008, would affect the resourcing, operation and profile afforded to the initiative.

6.3 The AA offer

Young people on AAs were offered financial support (and in two areas, parental payments were also offered), intensive guidance and support and flexible packages of learning, which, in the vast majority of cases, were designed to meet individual needs and were not outcome-driven, in terms of qualification attainment. All three parts of the programme were important to its effective delivery. In addition, the Discretionary Fund gave Project Managers and their staff the autonomy, the capacity and the responsibility for commissioning individual or group packages of learning and training, and funding any associated costs. The pilots had identified, or in some cases created, an impressively wide range of different forms of provision, with the aim of improving young people's confidence, motivation and ability and enabling them to progress.

Connexions staff also developed a greater understanding about how trends in the take-up of AAs, within an annual cycle of delivery, impact on the contracting of provision. This expertise could be more widely used to inform national policy development.

6.4 Outcomes

Successful outcomes were achieved. Young people tended to leave the programme early (usually around 12 weeks) and in most areas around 50 per cent immediately progressed into some form of EET. Drop-out rates to NEET destinations were low and included a significant proportion of young people who had exceeded their suspension period. There was emerging evidence of progression between AAs and the Learning Agreement pilot (LAP), as well as a small number of young people entering AAs for the second time. Follow-up of young people, which took place up to 13 weeks after they left the programme, showed that progression into positive outcomes increased to between 65-75 per cent. Entry rates into EET varied, depending on the time of year that young people left their programmes.

While all areas had exit strategies in place for young people on AAs, there was a much greater emphasis on recruitment to the programme, in order to reach target numbers. Exit and follow-up strategies warranted more resourcing. In addition, greater links could have been developed between PAs and providers, in order to coordinate young people's transitions.

6.5 Implications for national roll-out

Emerging issues and recommendations from the three visits to the pilot areas as part of the process evaluation are outlined below.

- AAs were an asset to practitioners working with young people who were NEET. The initiative was unique in that it offered a financial incentive, intensive support and individualised learning, all of which had a role to play in successfully engaging young people. In final round visits to the pilot areas, it was asserted that take-up rates would be increased, in response to greater flexibility being applied to the eligibility criteria from April 2008.
- Staff recruitment which was managed by local authority personnel departments slowed down the implementation of the pilot, because of the time taken to have job descriptions approved and staff appointed. This could be an important issue for national roll-out, since, by 2008, all Connexions provision will be under the auspices of local government control.
- Connexions staff successfully managed the procurement and operation of provision. There were many examples of innovative provision and ways of working which should be shared more widely between pilot areas and evidenced as good practice for any national roll-out.
- A significant proportion of young people moved into positive outcomes before completing their 20 weeks on AAs, thus highlighting the effect of a short period of financial and intensive support on a young person's propensity to leave NEET group status.
- AAs were perceived as offering value for money, since they were successfully elevating some young people into EET and thus eliminating the negative consequences of long-term unemployment.

6.6 Future considerations

The three visits to the pilot areas constituted the key element of the two year process evaluation of the AA pilots. The data also provide evidence which should assist policy makers to prepare for the raised participation age (to 17 from 2013 and 18 in 2015), in particular with regard to the importance of the three key strands to AA policy - financial support, intensive support and individualised learning - in securing effective implementation of an initiative targeted at young people who are NEET. The evaluation of the extensions to the pilot, which will run from April 2008, should:

- Continue to monitor take-up rates, to determine the extent to which flexibilities to the eligibility criteria make a difference.
- Determine the extent to which flexibilities to the eligibility criteria affect intakes into other forms of government supported training provision, most notably E2E.
- Gather evidence to ascertain whether a change in status is needed for young people on AAs, so that AAs are assessed as making an immediate contribution to reducing NEET targets.
- Evaluate the impact of on-going organisational change on the delivery of the AA pilots, in particular the movement of all Connexions provision into Children's Trusts.

- Monitor the impact of increased take-up rates on the ability of Connexions Services to retain low PA caseloads and the capacity to broker individual engagement packages for young people.
- Identify examples of innovative practice with regard to the procurement and management of provision.
- Continue to monitor the relationship and interaction between AAs and other local and national initiatives, such as the September Guarantee.
- Evaluate consistencies between pilot areas in relation to their monitoring and exit strategy arrangements for young people engaged on the programmes.
- Monitor the perceived effectiveness of marketing and publicity strategies on take-up rates.
- Gather evidence on the sustainability of EET destinations, among young people who completed AAs.

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