HILLINGDON CHANGE PROJECT: DEVOLVED BUDGETS

INTERIM REPORT
AUGUST 2019

What Works for Children's Social Care

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY · PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

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About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

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The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University is concerned with all aspects of community responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in need services, child protection, looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In Hillingdon, devolved budgets are being piloted to help reduce risks to young people so that they can remain safely at home. Devolved budgets are designed to be used to find creative solutions to family problems that might not be amenable to 'off the shelf' service-led solutions. Decision making around the budgets is devolved to frontline social workers and their managers, who work collaboratively with children and families to decide how to spend them. In Hillingdon, the intervention is being delivered within the adolescents team, which works with children and families where there are significant contextual risks. The project began on 1 February 2019 and the first devolved budget was agreed on 25 March 2019.

This interim report is part of an evaluation by Cardiff University for What Works for Children's Social Care. In it we explore the progress of the pilot to date, focussing on its feasibility and evidence of promise during the set up and initial implementation period. A final report, in March 2020, will examine the remainder of the pilot and consider its short to medium term impact.

Methodology

We are taking a realist approach to understanding the nature and feasibility of the intervention. This report includes administrative data from the local authority, case questionnaires submitted by social workers, formal and informal interviews and observations with professionals, children and families, and focus groups with social workers and managers. It includes some basic quantitative reporting and a thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Key findings to date

The analysis to date has delivered several key findings. There have been 14 case questionnaires returned and these illustrate the kinds of issues the team are working with:

- Criminal exploitation (n=4) and sexual exploitation (n=3) are the main reasons for involvement in half of these cases; the remainder fitting under the category of neglect.

- Social workers felt that most young people were unlikely to enter care imminently, but five were thought to be quite likely (n=2) or very likely (n=3) to enter care in the next three months.

Practitioners were broadly positive about the processes that supported decision-making and administration, which only require minimal managerial approval for spends over £1000. To date, budgets have been used for a range of purposes, including;

- Practical help, obtaining items such as a drill, a tablet computer, and cleaning and decluttering of rooms in the young people's homes

- Sending a young person abroad for a period, to stay with relatives, to remove him from a risky local context

- Small spends on food and drinks, as a means of creating space to engage young people over coffee or lunch at a restaurant of their choice

- Therapeutic help

The speed of the decision-making process was thought to benefit workers and families. Nonetheless, lower than expected throughput and spend is notable;

- Social workers have been reluctant to spend the budgets, and the number of families involved, and the amounts spent to date are lower than expected

- Nearly all families have only had one expenditure to date

- The minimum spend to date is £9.40 on a single expenditure and the maximum was £1,854.19, with a median of £113.75 per family

Managers view this as a process and expect workers to gain more confidence in using budgets. It was noted that the funds available in the pilot were significantly greater than existing provision, and that a cultural shift in thinking was required from workers. Other factors were identified as facilitators and barriers to implementation. For example,

giving workers small caseloads and more time to do direct work was thought to help them use devolved budgets effectively, while a broader culture of working within tight financial constraints seems to have stifled implementation.

Discussion

The evaluation is beginning to show how the project is being implemented in the context of the adolescents team. We have identified aspects of this context that appear to facilitate the use of devolved budgets, for example smaller caseloads and an ethos of collaboration and partnership. On the other hand, the culture of tight budgetary constraints appears to be a factor in workers' reluctance to spend the budgets more fully. To date, families have not been included to the extent that was intended, both in terms of numbers of young people and the amounts being spent, but managers were confident that this challenge was surmountable and that the rate of usage would increase in the remaining ten months of the pilot.

Feedback on the intervention to date is broadly positive. The intervention appears to be acceptable to professionals and families in Hillingdon, particularly regarding the possibility for swifter and less managerial decision making. There is early evidence that aspects of the draft logic model are materialising, most notably around relationship building and, related to this, increasing understanding of the issues young people face. As the number of families and young people in receipt of devolved budgets increases, we will explore the ways they are used in more detail in order to understand how best to maximise their impact.

Conclusions and next steps

The pilot has a great deal of initial momentum and those involved are very enthusiastic. Devolved budgets present a different way of working and adopting such an approach takes time and effort. Hillingdon are taking a proactive approach to implementation and working on understanding and shaping the intervention along the way.

This phase of fieldwork raises questions that will demand attention in the next phase. These include the amount and purpose of budgets – ascertaining what an appropriate level of spend might be, and what limits might be placed upon their usage. We will also explore their role in reducing the need for care entry, and the extent to which they are used (and the impact they have) in cases where the risk of this is low. In our final report we will refine and develop the logic model based on these findings and present a realist programme theory based on it.

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INTRODUCTION

Rationale for devolved budgets project

The intervention being evaluated is part of a programme of three projects where 'devolved budgets' are assigned to social workers for the purpose of supporting children and families. It is predicated on the idea that social workers and families are best placed to know what help they need to create real change and keep children safely at home, and because finances are a problem for many families involved with Children's Services.

In Hillingdon, significant funds are being used to help adolescent young people remain safely at home by reducing the level of contextual risk. Decision-making is devolved to frontline social workers and their managers, and the funds are designed to be used to find creative solutions to family problems.

Similar approaches have been used elsewhere to reduce care entry and increase reunification (e.g. Huebner et al., 2012; Shinn et al., 2017; Walker, 2008). This evidence suggests devolving budgets can reduce the likelihood of abuse and neglect, and consequently the numbers of children entering care. However, much of this evidence comes from studies conducted in the USA, and we do not yet know whether this is also the case in the UK.

Background to the project in Hillingdon

Hillingdon London Borough Council designed an intervention based on devolved budgets, and were successful in their bid to receive funding from What Works for Children's Social Care. Hillingdon Council's intervention aims to help the significant number of young people at moderate to high contextual risk, particularly child sexual exploitation (CSE), criminal exploitation, youth violence, and those experiencing missing episodes. During the course of the project they plan to use devolved budgets with around 100 young people, and the budgets are being administered by social workers in a new team set up to work specifically with this group of young people.

The pilot evaluation

The project is a pilot of a new intervention and a feasibility study to explore data collection and the potential for evaluating devolved budgets at scale. Details of the design are available in the evaluation protocol, which was published prior to the start of the project in March 2019 (Westlake, Corliss and Forrester, 2019). The pilot evaluation will focus primarily on the process of implementation, but it will also explore evidence of promise and indicators of success.

This pilot report focusses on emerging evidence around implementation and feasibility during the early stages of the project. The final report, due for publication in March 2020, will build on these interim findings. It will provide a more detailed exploration of how and why the project was implemented as it was, including an analysis of any barriers and opportunities. It will also consider evidence of the impact of the pilot.

METHODS

Summary of pilot evaluation design

We are taking a realist approach to understanding the nature and feasibility of the intervention. We aim to have a clear description of it, in the form of a detailed logic model that will be developed from the initial logic model included as Appendix 1 in the evaluation protocol (Westlake, Corliss and Forrester, 2019). We will also use qualitative and quantitative data to describe the ways the intervention has been applied, and the indications of its impact that are available. The evaluation is structured as three phases; initial theory development, implementation, and progress in relation to short term outcomes.

The focus of this interim report is on implementation (described as Phase 2 in the evaluation protocol). The way the project is implemented is an important aspect of our evaluation for several reasons. It will be a key point of comparison between this project and two similar projects underway in other local authorities, as each one has designed a different intervention based on local circumstances. It also has clear implications for policymakers and other local authorities who might be interested in commissioning similar interventions, because seemingly minor details of implementation can have significant impacts on overall effectiveness. And, finally, implementation issues are at the heart of the realist approach we are adopting in order to understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances (Pawson, 2013). The final report will further examine implementation and progress in terms of outcomes, in order to develop and consolidate the programme theory.

Data used in this report

This report is based on data collected between March and June 2019. It includes administrative data from the local authority, case questionnaires submitted by social workers, formal and informal interviews and observations with professionals, children and families involved with the intervention, and focus groups involving social workers and managers delivering the intervention. The details of data collected to date can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Data collection March 2019 – June 2019

Data collection type	Number
Case questionnaire completed by social worker	14
Focus Groups with social workers and managers (n=13)	2
Interview with Assistant Director Safeguarding	1
Interview with Head of Service	1
Interview with Advanced Practitioner (Adolescents team)	1
Interview with Team Manager (Adolescents team)	1
Interview with Senior Social Worker (Adolescents team)	2
Interview with Social Worker (Adolescents team)	3
Observation with Advanced Practitioner (meeting at library involving mother and child)	2
Observation with Senior Social Worker (meeting at civic centre with young person, meeting at school)	3
Observation with Social Worker (home visit with mother and child; school visit with young person)	3

In this report we draw on the data above, as well as our learning from two meetings and ongoing communication with service leaders in Hillingdon.

Research questions addressed in this report

At this stage in the project our focus is on early evidence of feasibility and promise, as set out in the evaluation protocol (p. 3-4). In terms of feasibility, we consider aspects of initial set up and implementation, specifically:

- Was the scheme implemented as intended (according to the logic model)?
- What processes support delivery and governance; how are decisions made and who is involved?
- To what extent were families included as planned?
- How acceptable is the intervention to social workers and families?
- What are the barriers and facilitators for delivery?

In terms of early evidence of promise, we explore the following questions:

- What potential benefits do stakeholders (e.g. social workers, children, and families) identify?
- Do there appear to be any unintended consequences or negative effects?
- Is there evidence to support the intervention logic model?

Analysis underpinning in this report

Interim findings to date, presented below, were generated through thematic analysis which incorporated the data described above. Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were reviewed by a second researcher (i.e. not the researcher who conducted the interview). They completed a basic thematic coding framework, noting down key themes and transcribing direct quotes that were deemed illustrative of these themes. The framework was then

shared with the researcher who conducted the interview, and the analysis was discussed and refined in light of their input.

Overarching themes were brought together by the lead author and, in a final stage of analysis, these were discussed and agreed by the whole research team. The discussion incorporated our learning from wider data collection activities, including observations and other informal discussions. The resulting themes described below give robust early indications of how the devolved budgets project is progressing. We will revisit these in the second phase of data collection in order to refine and develop.

INTERIM FINDINGS

Project launch and initial implementation

Devolved budgets were implemented in an existing (but recently established) team within Hillingdon Council. The team had started accepting cases in November 2018, and the devolved budgets project got underway on 1st February 2019, as intended in the project plan. The first devolved budget was agreed on 25th March 2019. The initial logic model was reviewed during focus groups with practitioners in the team and there was a broad agreement that it accurately reflected the setup of the project. Practitioners felt at this stage that the level of specificity in relation to mechanisms was appropriate, and that as the project progresses it would be possible to specify further based on experiences of casework.

The adolescents team was selected for devolved budgets largely because of the needs of this cohort, though the culture within the team also provides a supporting rationale. The team is made up of the head of service, one advanced practitioner, one team manager, four senior social workers, and three social workers, and administrative support. The team takes an explicitly collaborative approach with children and families and this is designed to underpin all the work they do. For example, young people are given a choice about their allocated worker, with 'profile' cards detailing personal characteristics of each available worker being given to young people to help them decide. This ethos is consistent with that of devolved budgets, so conceptually the intervention appears to fit well within the team.

Processes and decision making

The administration of the intervention is relatively simple. All families allocated within the team are deemed eligible for a devolved budget, and no other eligibility criteria are applied. Social workers in the team all have a pre-paid credit card, which they can use for purchases up to £1,000 without seeking approval. A relatively 'light touch' process of approval operates for higher amounts, where social workers consult the team manager informally. This allows the social worker to reflect on the decision and obtain secondary support. At the time of the evaluation fieldwork, all requests for additional funding over £1,000 had been approved. Training has been mostly informal and based around team discussions. Advanced practitioners also give support and guidance in relation to budget decision making.
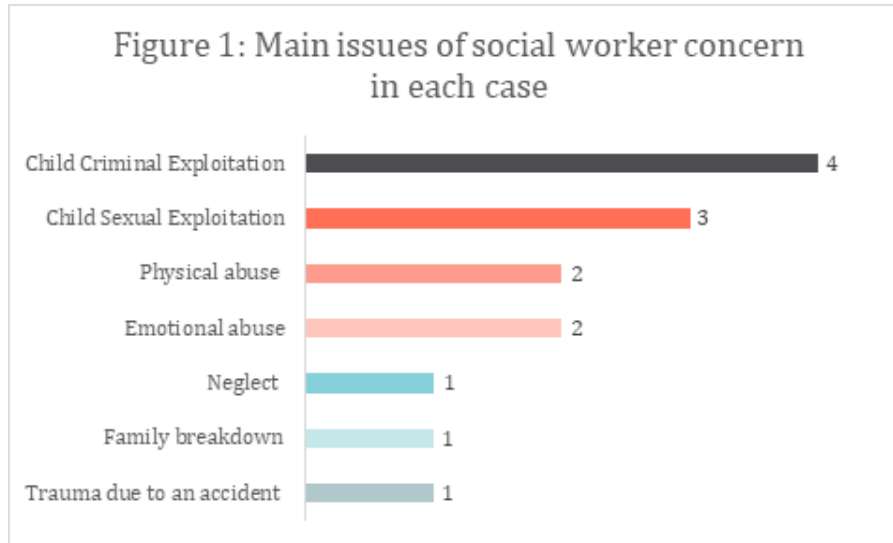
Throughput to date

At the time of our fieldwork (May 2019), devolved budgets had been agreed and delivered for fourteen young people. Nine young people were designated as Children in Need, three had Child Protection plans, and two were looked after children - one under the auspices of s.20 and one under a legal order (Children Act 1989). Ten of the young people live at home with their birth parents, and the remaining four live with friend and family carers, foster carers, or in residential care.

Case questionnaires completed by social workers give an indication of the types and levels of risk for each young person, prior to the budget being delivered. The numbers at this stage are too small to draw any conclusions about the type and nature of issues the intervention will cover, and we will explore this further when more data is available. However, for indicative purposes, social workers felt that most young people not already in care were unlikely to enter care imminently. However, five of the young people were thought to be quite likely (n=2) or very likely (n=3) to enter care in the next three months. Figure 1 displays the main issues of concern noted by the social worker in each case.

Figure 1: Main issues of social worker concern in each case

Child Criminal Exploitation — 4
Child Sexual Exploitation — 3
Physical abuse — 2
Emotional abuse — 2
Neglect — 1
Family breakdown — 1
Trauma due to an accident — 1

Budgets were used for a wide range of activities. The smallest spend to date was £9.40 and the largest was £1854.19, with a median of £113.75 per family. Figure 2 lists the amount and purpose of spends to date.

Figure 2: Budget spending – Amount and purpose of spend

Case	1st instalment	Purpose	2nd instalment	Purpose
1	159.00	Tablet computer		
2	1854.19	Virtual school educational support		
3	30.00	Decluttering room		
4	14.53	Meal to help engagement		
5	68.50	Taxi fare and meal		
6	98.40	Tickets for sporting event	760	Private educational psychologist consultation
7	1250.00	Air travel to stay with relatives in different country		
8	24.30	Meal to help engagement		
9	13.75	Reward		
10	264.95	Gym membership and boxing materials		
11	196.00	Transportation to and from hospital to visit child		
12	30.00	Decluttering room		
13	9.40	Creative activity		
14	455.57	Refurbishment of bedroom		

Themes identified to date

1. Purpose and function of budgets

The purpose of budgets and the range of issues involved has to date been varied, and we expect this to be the case for the remainder of the pilot. One of the highest spends to date is perhaps the clearest example of a budget being used for a something that would not otherwise have been possible. The young person was becoming involved in

gang-related criminal activity, and the budget was used to fund flights to visit and stay with family in a different country for a three-month period. The purpose was to remove the young person from the local contextual risks, while at the same time ensuring that he remained cared for within his extended family, and to enable work with other family members who remained at home in preparation for the young person's return.

Smaller spends were more common, and these were often justified by social workers in terms of relationship building. In many of these cases, the budgets were designed to build trust between the social worker and the young person – for example by paying for gym equipment or boxing lessons to help a young person pursue an activity. There are of course other potential benefits, including developing new skills and diverting from other less productive or harmful activities, but according to interviewees the main aim was to change the way young people perceived social services. One worker in a focus group contrasted this with "going to meet a young person and just talking about safeguarding, safeguarding, safeguarding without being able to give something tangible [or] practical to them". The intervention was also conceived of as a way of incentivising and rewarding good behaviour, again as a method of building and maintaining good relationships.

The goal of improving relationships is evident in other examples too. In several cases, social workers said they used them to "create space for engagement", often through buying food or drinks, and the time spent eating lunch or drinking coffee used as a setting for direct work. One worker noted that "even if it's just a meal, the amount of information you get out of them compared to a home visit – it's significant". This topic also arose in one of the focus groups, where a social worker explained;

> "One thing I think has been a message throughout has been that we've managed to use the devolved budgets around positive engagement. So instead of just going in and just trying to speak to the child in a room … we can actually take them out, and do a game, or go and play pool, or bowling, something a little bit more interactive … so you start finding out more in an interactive way." (Social worker, focus group)

Finally, in some cases the budgets are being used to provide practical help, from relatively inexpensive items to more significant purchases. Lower cost items included a drill, gym equipment, a tablet, and decluttering a room. The most notable example to date was in the process of being agreed in May 2019[1], as part of Case 1 (listed above in Figure 2). This was the purchase of a car –described by a manager as initially "raising eyebrows" but ultimately proving appropriate. The young person in this case had severe health needs following an accident, and could not travel to his various health appointments safely by public transport. His mother's car broke down, and the purchase of a new car was deemed the most cost-effective way of providing practical help to the family.

2. Decision making

Aspects of decision making differed from normal service significantly. Devolving decision making removed often lengthy application processes and form filling that are common in most local authorities, and meant that decisions could be made very quickly. The social worker who agreed the purchase of the car in the example above outlined to the parent;

> "Today is Wednesday, if you go home - do your homework - you shortlist three cars, I'm prepared to go with you this Friday, to check out the cars … I can say, within a week, we could be looking at purchasing a car." (Social worker, observation recording)

Professionals explained how this contrasted sharply with typical practice, which would involve a long process with an uncertain outcome. Some of the purchases, such as the air fares or the car, would not be possible under existing provision. Others might be obtained through existing s.17 funding, typically securing this would take time and resources, and requests may be rejected by the decision-making panel anyway. One practitioner noted that "a lot of families did not receive a service because the social worker just felt that it's just too long a process to go through". Another added that making an application to the panel often involved extra work on the case file because other aspects of their work could come under scrutiny – creating a further unintended disincentive to apply.

Nonetheless, there has been a tentativeness around making spending decisions in this initial stage. Several practitioners we interviewed described a "reticence" around spending the budgets. One explained that "It is difficult for us to really use this budget because we are coming from a culture where you have to be very careful about how you spend". The funding available is significantly more than what was previously available – although determining the exact portion of the overall £495K budget was difficult. With the devolved budgets intervention, the estimate would be around £4,000 per family.

3. Conditions needed for implementation

The team has a reduced caseload of fifty per cent compared to other social work teams in Hillingdon, and this means more time is available for direct work. As one worker put it, this "gives you time to do what social workers are

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1   This does not appear in Figure 2 because a case questionnaire would only be completed once the purchase had gone ahead.

supposed to do." This may be a key facilitator for the engagement and relationship building described above, and a prerequisite in the logic model underpinning this aspect of the intervention.

There was a sense among interviewees that bold leadership is necessary, with an approach that trusts workers but also supports them to make decisions. One senior manager noted that the physical configuration of the service helped because it put senior staff in the vicinity of the team, allowing them to be curious about practice in an informal way.

> *"The message throughout the service, so it's quite clear even when we're at legal and finance to let the money go out, that myself, [and] Heads of Service who touches it, you know, do not comment, unless you think something's breaking the law and we're going to put a child at risk, do not say 'no, are you mad!', don't do that."*
> *(Senior manager, interview)*

Challenges encountered

The main challenge to date appears to be whether workers have the confidence to use the budgets as intended. As a senior interviewee noted, "It's a bit of a journey for them … they acknowledge that, so I don't see it as being a longer-term barrier". Nonetheless, overcoming this challenge may require a significant cultural shift in practice. As one senior manager noted "we have a cultural perception that social workers can't be responsible with that amount of money – that's why they're not".

In the remainder of the evaluation we will explore the extent to which workers in the adolescents team adapt to the new intervention and overcome what, for many, may be a longstanding norm of operating within narrow financial restraints.

Another challenge noted widely was the short term nature of the pilot and the uncertain longer term picture for devolved budgets. Practitioners described working to ensure the intervention had a lasting impact, but they also raised concerns about providing financial assistance that could not be sustained in the longer term.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation is beginning to show how the project is being implemented in the context of the adolescents team. It is clear that the devolved budget component is part of a broader change within Hillingdon Council, and this has implications for our understanding of how it works. Some elements of the wider context appear to facilitate the use of devolved budgets, for example smaller caseloads and an ethos of collaboration and partnership. The qualitative data gathered so far suggests these factors need to sit within the "pre-requisites and contexts" in the logic model. Others, such as the engrained practice of working within very tight financial constraints, may prove challenging for the project because they differ so significantly from this approach. We will continue to explore these throughout the evaluation, and aim to understand how they operate as mechanisms and moderators.

A key early finding is the lower than expected numbers of families involved. To date, families have not been included to the extent intended, both in terms of numbers of young people and in terms of amounts spent. Hillingdon have not stipulated a maximum spend per family, but with a total budget of £400,000 projected across 100 families, the average spend per family or young person would be £4,000. So far, spending levels have been far less, ranging from £9.40 to £1854.19 across the 14 families. Extrapolating the rate at which families have been assigned to date across the duration of the project would suggest a significant under-implementation: at the three month point we might have expected around 23 families to have been involved.

There are few caveats that apply here. Hillingdon expect further funding to be agreed for the families who have received the intervention to date, which will increase the average spend per family. So far only one family has received more than one instalment of funds (see Figure 2, above). They also expect to increase the number of families receiving budgets as the project progresses. Senior managers felt this is to be expected in the early stages of such a project and saw it as an ongoing implementation challenge. They were confident that the rate of usage would increase in the remainder of the pilot.

Notwithstanding the slow start, several findings paint a broadly positive picture. The intervention appears to be acceptable to professionals in Hillingdon, and the small number of families we met during observations were also very positive about it. Observations were selected by social workers, so they are not necessarily representative of the wider group of families involved, but there was a general sense among social workers and managers that families were positive about devolved budgets.

There is early evidence that aspects of the draft logic model are materialising, particularly around relationship building and, related to this, increasing knowledge about the young people. Workers in Hillingdon Council echoed a view that will be familiar to many in the sector: building good relationships, and engaging parents and young people are the keys to achieving change. It is therefore no surprise that workers report using the budgets as a vehicle to do this. This raises an interesting question around the mechanisms at play, and the role of direct and indirect methods to achieve the stated outcomes. We will explore this further in the next phase.

There was broad approval from social workers about the swifter and less onerous decision making. While many workers acknowledged some anxiety around making decisions in a way that was so different from typical practice, there was also a general sense that this was a positive development and – with time and support from the organisation – one they were keen to embrace.

As we gather more data on the way budgets are used, their role alongside other forms of support will become clearer. It is clearly possible that they are used for services that may be available through other means – either from other budgets within the local authority or other services, or to provide things that were previously covered by other sources. The speed at which they allow purchases to be made could provide a rationale for using devolved budgets to subvert long waiting lists or avoid negotiations with other services about which has the responsibility for provision. In the remainder of the evaluation we will unpick the complexities of using devolved budgets in this way in order to provide recommendations to the sector.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The early stages of a new intervention often throw up unexpected challenges and require a determined and measured approach to problem solving. There was a great deal of enthusiasm among workers who took part, and the project clearly has a great deal of initial momentum. Devolved budgets present a very different way of working, and adopting such an approach takes time and effort on the part of individuals and groups within an organisation. There may be further scope for training workers in how to use the budgets, and the evaluation may be able to make recommendations about how training could aid implementation and increase early throughput.

Hillingdon Council is taking a proactive approach to implementation and is working on understanding and shaping the intervention along the way. The message that we heard expressed in different ways during our fieldwork, was one that encouraged workers to take responsibility and try new things. At this stage in the pilot, taking such a position seems wholly appropriate.

The pilot is already generating useful insights around how social workers incorporate devolved budgets into their work with adolescents and families, and as the pilot matures, we expect the learning opportunities to increase. There are some questions raised that we will explore further during the next phase;

- To what extent are the budgets being used in cases where there is a real risk of care entry, and how far do they reduce this risk?

- How much should the budget for the average family be?

- What proportion of cases are deemed not requiring a devolved budget, and why?

- How are devolved budgets conceived to reduce the risk of care entry, and what direct and indirect mechanisms can be theorised for this?

- Can we identify a typology of devolved budgets, i.e. a range of types of uses that broadly fit the families included, and delineate mechanisms for each one?

- What things are devolved budgets being used for that could be purchased from other sources, and what are the benefits for using budgets rather than other sources?

In our final report we will refine and develop the logic model based on these findings and present a realist programme theory based on it.

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