WIGAN CHANGE PROJECT: DEVOLVED BUDGETS

INTERIM REPORT
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Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In Wigan, devolved budgets are being piloted to help reduce risks to children and 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 Wigan they are used across two cohorts: in a team which is focussed on reunification from care, and among a group of families where children are deemed to be at risk of entering care. 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.

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 during its first four months, 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 with professionals, and a focus group with social workers and managers. It includes some descriptive quantitative reporting and a thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Key findings to date

At the time of our fieldwork (May 2019), devolved budgets have been agreed and delivered for ten families in the reunification team and 11 families via the 'edging away from care' strand. According to case questionnaires which have been returned, the first devolved budget was agreed in the reunification strand on 1 March and in the 'edging away from care' strand on 16 May. The maximum threshold for spend per family is £4,000 over the course of a year, and the degree of autonomy given to workers varies between strands.

Devolved budgets have been used for a range of purposes. Examples of uses to date include therapy, childcare costs, cooking lessons, nursery provision, redecoration and small items such as lunch and cinema tickets. As well as providing practical help, devolved budgets served a role in helping to engage families and build relationships. However, the intervention marks a clear departure from usual service, and during our fieldwork it was clear that in the early stages of implementation the organisation was getting used to this new way of doing things.

The responsibility felt by workers and managers proved challenging and anxiety provoking, but there were early indications that devolved budgets were having a sustainable impact on families. Workers felt it was important that families felt empowered to make changes themselves and not become dependent on the budgets. This included being conscious of the need to manage families' expectations, and cautious to avoid the impression that they could rely on the assistance provided by the budgets in the longer term. There has been some reticence about accepting help in the form of devolved budgets, particularly in the reunification team – where social workers perceived that families want to give the impression they are able to cope on their own. One social worker noted that some families would tell them "oh, we don't need anything, we don't need your involvement".

The way workers presented the budgets to families varies, but in most cases they seem to find it easier to couch the intervention in general terms – saying they are going to be "working differently" and that there is a project that "gives me access to resources I wouldn't necessarily be usually able to access". Fairness is clearly part of social workers' thinking when deliberating how to talk to families about the intervention. Yet keeping families in the dark about the extent and nature of the help available may have some unintended consequences. One is that it may prove to be a barrier to collaboration in making the spending decisions, potentially feeling unfair to families and limiting the level of support they feel they can ask for.

Devolved budgets have been perceived by some workers who have not been involved in delivering them as a form of special treatment. More significantly, the pilot raised the issue of wider local authority funding not being adequate. A pertinent example, offered by a team manager, is that social workers did not have enough locking cabinets to store confidential documents. This sense that the basics are not being sufficiently attended to caused understandable frustration among staff.

Discussion

The evaluation is beginning to show how the project is being implemented in the context of the two distinct strands in Wigan. Despite some important differences between the reunification and edging away from care strands they share many of the challenges and opportunities of working with devolved budgets.

To date, the number of families included, and the amounts spent on those families has been lower than expected. Workers and managers are not used to having such resources and feel somewhat intimidated by the amounts of money involved. They are getting used to the intervention, but changes in the practice culture may be necessary for the pilot is to meet its objectives in terms of numbers of families. The culture of many local authorities is shaped by a reliance on process and procedure and a reluctance to trust individuals (Munro, 2011). Prior to this pilot, the amounts of money social workers and managers could spend were small. The pilot requires the organisation and its managers to have higher levels of trust in front line workers and managers to use the funds fairly and effectively.

The budgets have been described as a way of empowering families and improving relationships with workers, and there are already promising examples of excellent practice in this area. An example of this that is well illustrated by the pilot is the care and effort workers put into ensuring they helped families in a sustainable and empowering way. However, there is also some nervousness about how much to tell families about devolved budgets. The level of transparency is the subject of ongoing debates among staff in Wigan, and alongside concerns about fairness and dependency, this may be partly driven by a sense of mistrust of some families. At this stage, and based on the data we have collected to date, it would not be possible to draw firm conclusions based on these inferences. Therefore, we will continue to explore the concept of trust and how it shapes practice and feed this into the development of the programme theory.

Conclusions and next steps

There was a great deal of enthusiasm among workers who took part, and the project clearly has a great deal of initial momentum. The pilot is already generating useful insights around how social workers incorporate devolved budgets into their work with families. We will explore the following questions further during the next phase;

- Are the right families being included in the right way?

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

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

- 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?

Now that the intervention is established, Wigan Council should consider ways of increasing the use of budgets. The number of families involved and the spending on each family should be increased. In order to do this, changes might be necessary to the way budget decisions are made and how families are involved.

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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 change and keep children safely at home, and because finances are a problem for many families involved with Children's Services.

In Wigan, devolved budgets are being used across two cohorts: in a team which is focussed on reunification from care and among a group of families where children are deemed to be at risk of entering care. 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. Wigan has an unusually high number of children placed at home under care orders (around 70 children), and they felt the intervention would help these families.

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 Wigan

Wigan 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. Wigan Council's intervention is focussed on two areas, or 'strands' of work with families;

1. **Reunification**
   The Reunification team was set up in January 2019 and works intensively with families whose have had a child taken into care or have a child placed at home under a Care Order. The aim here is to create a safe environment for the child to return permanently and for the order to be discharged. All families in this team are eligible for a devolved budget.

2. **'Edging away from care'**
   Across the service, budgets are being used to work intensively with families where children are at high risk of entering care. Social workers bring cases to an 'edging away from care' panel, which decides whether they qualify for a budget, based on the likelihood of a child entering care. Five social workers across several locality teams are currently working with these cases, but as the pilot progresses a larger number are likely to hold budgets.

During the course of the project, up to the end of March 2020, Wigan Council plans to use devolved budgets with around 50 families in the reunification team, and in these cases budgets are being administered by the social workers in that team. In the 'edging away from care' cohort they expect to work with 50 families, and five social workers from across the locality teams are currently administering the budgets. Wigan Council expects the two strands to develop side-by-side, with the reunification team reaching capacity sooner because the cohort of families have already been identified. The 'edging away from care' cohort will gradually build to capacity over six months.

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, Wallace and Forrester, 2019). The pilot evaluation will focus primarily on 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, Wallace 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 with professionals involved with the intervention, and a focus group 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	TBC
Focus groups with social workers and managers (involving 11 staff in total)	1
Interview with Head of Service	1
Interview with Senior Social Worker	1
Interview with Social Worker	6
Interview with Team Manager	2

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

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

Based on the information provided in the case questionnaires which have been returned, the first devolved budget was agreed in the reunification strand on 1 March and in the 'edging away from care' strand on 16 May. There was a general sense of excitement among workers about having a budget, and we were told that it fits with Wigan Council's intention to work more intensively with families to create change. A social worker in the reunification team said, during an interview, "I feel like we are actually helping families as opposed to just putting plasters on things".

The perceived advantage of having budgets initially caused some tensions between the reunification team and other teams in the service, who felt frustrated that they were not able to access the budgets for their own families. However, the roll out of devolved budgets across these teams through the 'edging away from care' cohort seems to have resolved this.

Identification of cases

As noted above, each strand has a different approach to identifying cases. For the 'edging away from care' cohort, social workers are asked to approach an 'edging away from care panel', comprised of senior managers, with cases that they felt would benefit from a devolved budget. The panel approves the family as being eligible, and the social worker can use the intervention with that family without having to return to the panel. In the reunification team the caseload had already been identified, so families working with this team were eligible automatically.

Overall, the two approaches seem to be working well. One manager noted that they felt some families who had been approved by the panel would benefit less from a devolved budget than other families in the service (who were not eligible). However, there was general agreement that the project was right to target the intervention at families where there the likelihood of a child entering care.

Processes and decision making

In terms of levels of spend, the degree of autonomy given to workers varies between strands, with the greatest autonomy evident in the reunification team where they can spend up to £500 without approval. In teams involved in the edging away from care strand, the threshold for approval is significantly less, at £50. A tiered system of approvals follows the managerial hierarchy;

"Anything over a certain amount I can't sign off, so I have to kind of agree in principal, and then it goes to my next line-manager to see whether they can, and depending on the manager depends how high it goes up with regards to what you're asking for. So I think, depending who you speak it to it kind of changes all the time but the senior admin told me that my budget is £250 so anything over that I have to get my next line manager, so that's why when we're talking like measured amounts, I know that deputy managers are only able to sign up to £50, so that's quite small.' (Locality team manager, interview (commenting on the edging away from care strand)

The maximum threshold for spend per family over the course of a year is £4,000.

Throughput to date

At the time of our fieldwork (May 2019), devolved budgets have been agreed and delivered for ten families in the reunification team and 11 families via the 'edging away from care' strand. In the reunification team all were looked after children, nine under legal orders and one voluntarily, under Section 20 of the Children Act (Children Act 1989). However, most were placed with birth parents with the aim of the intervention being to discharge the order.

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. Neglect was the most prevalent type of risk among the small number of families in the reunification cohort to date. This data has not yet been available for the 'Edging away from care' strand, but we will give a detailed analysis of this in the final report.

Budgets were used for a wide range of activities. The smallest spend to date in the reunification team was £10 and the largest was £1332. Detailed information on the amount of spending and purpose of devolved budgets has not been available on a case by case basis. However, we are working with Wigan Council to obtain this data and plan to give a more detailed picture in the final report.

THEMES IDENTIFIED TO DATE

1.   Purpose and function of budgets

As with all the devolved budget projects, they have been used for a range of purposes. Examples of uses in the reunification team to date include;

- Therapy for adults and children
- Childcare costs
- Psychological assessments
- Cooking lessons for a parent who only ate takeaway food, and food shopping for him to cook meals
- Food vouchers for a picnic
- Nursery provision
- Safety equipment for the home
- Improvement of home conditions
- Redecorating a house following a fire, to provide a safe environment for children
- Taking a young person to McDonalds or the cinema as a reward for good behaviour

Devolved budgets have enabled workers to help families in ways that would otherwise not be possible. Interestingly, there is evidence of budgets being used to counteract the effect of reductions to local authority finances. Some of the things that they have been used for were previously (but no longer) available via local authority funding;

"A lot of what I have used for the money so far, near enough everything, I wouldn't have been able to do ... we'd be stuck. We used to be able to get funding for a skip but that funding no longer available so wouldn't have been able to get that either. So none of this would have happened if it wasn't for the budget" (social worker, interview)

We expect the range of things devolved budgets are used for to continue to expand and we will examine how these might be categorised and understood in the remainder of the pilot. At this relatively early stage, it is therefore difficult to make clear links between the reasons for the spending and the ultimate aims of the intervention. In Phase 2 we will make use of the growing dataset to explore this taking a particular interest in the ways in which

different types of spend are thought to improve outcomes for families.

2. Responsibility, decisions, and boundaries of delivery

Devolving decisions to social workers marks a clear departure from usual service, and during our fieldwork it was clear that in the early stages of implementation the organisation was getting used to this new way of doing things. A range of people were reported to be involved in decision making, including social workers, their managers, parents, children and other family members.

The devolved nature of the intervention, and particularly the responsibility workers and managers felt as a result, proved challenging and anxiety provoking. It was clear that the nature of the pilot is an uneasy fit in a setting that is typical of local authorities - where extensive processes and procedures have been built to ration very limited resources and provide accountability for how they are distributed.

The relatively large amounts of money available in the pilot contrasted with this, and made decision-making feel like a big responsibility. Deciding what to spend the money on (and what not to spend it on) weighed on workers. One manager summed up the challenges of taking on this responsibility in a culture of accountability;

> "It's a massive responsibility, it's not their money, and if anything went wrong, so I'm constantly, you know, nagging them about receipts and things because that is a massive responsibility, say if you lose a penny you've got to account for it, and that's how it should be. For me it's really alien" (Manager, focus group)

It was also evident that caution was being exercised around the boundaries of the intervention, with care being taken to ensure that the devolved budgets are not used to cover gaps that are left by other services (with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and private landlords being mentioned).

In one case a senior manager vetoed the use of a devolved budget for rent arrears, which seemed to divide opinion among the team. Some supported this decision while others felt that it would be a legitimate use for the budget.

3. Administration and workload

Although not everyone agreed with the decision not to support spending on rent arrears, they did seem to appreciate the lack of bureaucracy attached to it. We heard several experienced workers making a link to social work before the impact of budget cuts, where;

> "we'd have to go through our managers, but there was always something we could argue about - and get - at the end of the day. But then all that stopped you couldn't even get a bag of nappies, without filling in 10 forms, and that's what my team like about [devolved budgets] more than anything" (Manager, interview)

On the other hand, some workers noted that the pilot generates extra work for them, and suggested more administrative support was needed;

> "You've got to keep a spreadsheet and then there's the system, so when we spend money on the credit card it comes through as a transaction and you've got to approve it, and there's tax code stuff, it's difficult, it's hard to get your head around ... I think an admin person could support with that, but we don't have anyone that's able to support us with it" (Social worker, interview)

Workers in the reunification team expressed concerns about their workload more generally, with reference to the number of families they were working with. One worker noted that their current caseload of six families was manageable but questioned whether they would be "able to do the meaningful work" when this increases to ten families as planned.

4. Speed

As well as a reduction in managerial decision-making, a feature identified across all three projects is the speed at which devolved budgets can be delivered. This was a strong theme in Wigan. The lighter managerial decision-making process expedites help given to families. One worker in Wigan spoke about spending small amounts on a mattress protector and new sheets for a family straight after a review meeting where bedwetting was discussed, noting that "it needed to be instant for them". More widely, the timeliness of devolved budget decisions was widely appreciated by social workers, albeit with the acknowledgement that the change takes time to adapt to;

> "It's the speed in which you can that as well, it's not having to go through the layers, you know to get ... agreement and fill in the paperwork and that so that's quite freeing and it feels really weird actually going out

and being able to use your card to pay for things, and that does take some getting used to" (Social worker, focus group)

5. Mechanism to improve engagement and build better relationships

As well as providing practical help, devolved budgets served a role in helping to engage families and build relationships. Indeed, this is another reason that the speed of delivery is so important. One worker noted that relationships are improved because they are enabled to follow through on what is discussed much quicker than normal. Another voiced similar views, adding that the collaborative element also helps to reinforce this;

"We've been able to spend time with the family and giving them the autonomy, it's the way that you work with them that's enabled it to be different and not say 'oh no we can't do that' or 'I'd have to check with my manager' – that puts a lot of things on hold, it allows you to work freely with them and get things quickly that you do need' (SW, reunification, interview)

The discussion between social workers and families that devolved budgets generate seems an important facilitator of improved relationships. Perhaps families observe a contrast between the fiscally constrained Children's Services they are used to, and this new way of working. The message this communicates – that there is help available - may itself be enough to improve engagement, as one worker suggests;

"...you're having that better relationship and you're having that better understanding, even by saying there is opportunity to, it helps with your relationship a lot and you don't necessarily have to spend the money, its maybe just knowing that that's available if they do need it". (SW, reunification team, interview)

Nonetheless, in some cases difficulties in engaging families were described as a barrier to delivering the intervention. For example, if families are refusing to meet or accept home visits. This illustrates that it can act as a catalyst for families who may be partially or intermittently engaged, but not as a magic wand for families who are disengaged.

6. Empowering families and avoiding dependency

There was evidence that devolved budgets were having an impact on families in ways that seem sustainable. One worker gave the example of a family who she felt had been empowered by the process and had cleaned the kitchen after the budget was used for new flooring and new furnishings. This worker explained how the parent had started "making the home a home ...taking pride in it, and it's becoming a safer place for the children".

Workers saw this kind of empowering use of the budgets as a way of avoiding families becoming dependent on the budgets. The issue of dependency arose from the perspective of social workers and of families. Social workers were conscious of the need to manage families' expectations, and cautious to avoid the impression that they could rely on the assistance provided by the budgets in the longer term.

"I think we have to be careful about how we manage these families' expectations and very clear that this pot of money is for a year and then we don't know after that because I do think it would be wrong of us to create an expectation in families that we have got lots of money..." (Social worker, focus group)

A team manager expanded on this when making a broader point about the importance of empowering families in all the work social workers do;

"I think with all social work intervention we need to make sure that we're enabling families, we're empowering families rather than them becoming dependent on what we're doing. So I think that's down to the social worker ensuring that the way that [the devolved budget] is utilised, that it's done that way, rather than what was kind of an example that given yesterday where if the social worker is paying for a top [up] of gas all the time everyweek in week out and is using that as part of the budget then they need to really think 'well what's going to happen when that's no longer there?'" (Team manager, interview)

Perceptions of devolved budgets – how they are conceived of by workers and families - are important here. Families were also keen to avoid the perception that they would depend on the budgets, and we were told about how some families had been reticent in accepting help in the form of devolved budgets, particularly in the reunification team – where they were thought to be wanting to give the impression of being able to cope on their own. One social worker described how the overall reception from families had been "a bit mixed" because some would tell them "oh, we don't need anything, we don't need your involvement".

7. How devolved budgets are introduced to families

The way workers presented the budgets to families varies, but in most cases they seem to find it easier to couch the intervention in general terms – saying they are going to be "working differently" and that there is a project that

"gives me access to resources I wouldn't necessarily be usually able to access". This language seems to allow them to gloss over the fact that there is a significant or set amount of money available;

> *"I've not told this family that I have a budget, because I think there are a lot of our families that would hold you to the penny" (Social worker, interview)*

Some interesting contrasts can be drawn here between families who want to give the impression they can cope without help, and a perception from social workers that some families will exploit the opportunity to obtain as much as possible. The following quotation, from a social worker in the focus group illustrates this dilemma;

> *"Another major thing for us is what we say to families about it. Because we've had debates about, whether we should be open and transparent, and other debates that it's hard for families to hear, that we've got that money, and it would be quite bizarre for them to hear those sums ... we have had a few families where, you know, they're cottoning onto it" (Social worker, focus group)*

This is clearly a difficult issue, and with many families not eligible, fairness is also at the forefront of social workers' thinking when deliberating these issues. Yet keeping families in the dark about the extent and nature of the help available may have some unintended consequences. One is that it may prove to be a barrier to collaboration in making the spending decisions, potentially feeling unfair to families and limiting the level of support they feel they can ask for.

8.   Support for implementation

The issue of support for the pilot came up in our data collection. In particular, there was a view that practical support may prove more useful to social workers implementing the pilot than formal training or other types of assistance. One consequence of this being a new way of working is that social workers have found it difficult to source some of the things that they want to use budgets for. As the project progresses, Wigan Council plans to create a directory containing details of suppliers for the items and services that budgets are used to purchase, in order to support social workers as they source these things.

Another function of such a directory might be to generate ideas for using budgets. Workers felt they needed support to be creative, with one noting that an idea (to spend the budget on a psychological assessment that a family had been requesting for some time) came from their manager – "it didn't even cross my mind that that would be a possibility". The same worker noted that it could be difficult for families to think of higher cost uses – "we are asking families and sometimes they can't even think beyond the cost of [small items]".

9.   Perception of devolved budgets

Devolved budgets have been perceived by some workers who have not been involved in delivering them as a form of special treatment. The reunification team initially faced some jealousy from workers in locality teams, because they were perceived to be privileged;

> *"the other challenge has been convincing the rest of our colleagues that we weren't getting £4,000 to spend on ourselves or even just to spend willy-nilly" (Social worker, interview)*

The roll out of devolved budgets in locality teams through the edging away from care strand has helped to alleviate this somewhat, but there remains some resentment that this is not available to other families who workers fell might benefit but who do not meet the criteria. There is also some general resentment that the local authority is not funded properly. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that a resource of up to £4,000 per family for a selected group of families is viewed in this way. A pertinent example, offered by a team manager, is that social workers did not have enough locking cabinets to store confidential documents. This sense that the basics are not being sufficiently attended to caused understandable frustration among staff.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation is beginning to show how the project is being implemented in the context of the two distinct strands in Wigan. The reunification and 'edging away from care' strands differ considerably in terms of their approval and identification processes, and support for delivery and governance – and to some extent in the work that they do with families. Yet, they also share many of the challenges and opportunities of working with devolved budgets, and together they highlight some aspects that we will explore in more depth in the remainder of the pilot. We have discussed a range of challenges and opportunities associated with the pilot so far, and some of the barriers and facilitators that have been identified. A range of potential benefits have been identified, and as the evalua-

tion progresses we will focus more sharply on how these factors contribute to the logic model and our developing understanding of the programme theory.

Listening to some workers describing how and why devolved budgets might prove effective for some families brings to mind Maslow's hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1943). This illustrates how basic needs (physiological needs, such as food and warmth, and safety needs, such as security) need to be met before psychological needs can be attended to. For some families, not having a warm home or food to eat may prove to be a barrier to obtaining other kinds of help. Therefore, investing in these basic needs – either through devolved budgets or through other funding – seems an appropriate social work response. The way social workers in Wigan are exploring how devolved budgets can feature in a wider social work intervention is impressive and will help develop the theory underpinning it.

To date, the number of families included, and the amounts spent on those families has been lower than expected. This is a theme across all three devolved budget change projects, and one that we will explore further in the final report. One question that arises from this is whether the teams and families that have been chosen are the best focus for this intervention. It may be that other families, or other routes of involvement may be more appropriate.

Another factor that seems important here is the context of budget constraints in Children's Services. The pilot is a stark reminder that opportunities to provide financial help are limited for local authorities. Unused to having access to such resources, social workers and managers feel somewhat intimidated by the amounts of money involved. They are not used to having money to spend with families and not experienced in working with families to make decisions about how to spend. The consensus among staff in Wigan is that the pilot is "bedding in" and that the intervention will gather pace in the coming months. It will be interesting to see how much this develops.

For this 'bedding in' process to be successful, significant changes in the practice culture may also be necessary. The culture these teams operate within seems, like that of many other local authorities, to be shaped by a reliance on process and procedure and a reluctance to trust individuals (Munro, 2011). Prior to this pilot, the amounts of money social workers and managers could spend were extremely small. For local authorities, it may make sense to restrict access to tight budgets through the infrastructure of panel decisions, strict eligibility criteria, and approval frameworks. Indeed, it is an effective way to manage scant resources. But arguably an unintended consequence of this is that social workers and managers do not feel trusted to make decisions.

The suspicion that some families may be viewed with might be a corollary of this. Across both strands, the budgets have been described as a way of empowering families and improving relationships with workers, and there are already promising examples of excellent practice in this area. However, there is also some nervousness about how much to tell families about devolved budgets. The level of transparency is the subject of ongoing debates among staff in Wigan, and alongside concerns about fairness and dependency, it may be partly driven by a sense of mistrust of some families. At this stage, based on the data we have collected to date, it would not be possible to draw firm conclusions based on these inferences. Therefore, we will continue to explore the concept of trust and how it shapes practice and feed this into the development of the programme theory.

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.

Recommendations and further questions

Our findings so far provide a basis for some recommendations that might enhance the way the pilot is being implemented and maximise its chances of success. The use of budgets should be increased, both by expanding the number of families involved and spending more on each family. In order to do this, changes might be necessary to the way budget decisions are made and how families are involved. Revisiting processes of decision-making and managerial oversight might be worthwhile; this may uncover ways of reducing bureaucracy and increasing social worker confidence in spending devolved budgets. Additionally, involving families more in the process and being more transparent about what is available may also yield benefits.

The pilot is already generating useful insights around how social workers incorporate devolved budgets into their work with 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;

- Are the right families being included in the right way?

    o   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?

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

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

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

- 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?

    o   Can we identify a typology of devolved budgets, i.e. a range of types of uses that broadly fit the families included, and describe mechanisms that relate to each?

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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