



*CEDAR*  
Centre for Educational Development  
Appraisal and Research

## **PARENT EARLY INTERVENTION PATHFINDERS**

### **1<sup>ST</sup> INTERIM REPORT**

**MARCH 2007**

**Geoff Lindsay  
Sue Band  
Mairi-Ann Cullen  
Stephen Cullen**

**Research Team:  
Professor Geoff Lindsay  
Professor Hilton Davis  
Professor Sarah Stewart-Brown  
Dr Ray Evans  
Susan Band  
Mairi-Ann Cullen  
Dr Stephen Cullen  
Christopher Hasluck**

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WARWICK**

## Summary

The main elements of this first stage of the evaluation has been the interviewing of lead officers from the local authorities. Some key findings are as follows:

- The setting up of the Pathfinder was carried out in a short period at a difficult time, which limited LAs' ability to consult and deliver a bid based on work with relevant parties. However, LAs accepted that working with these constraints was common practice.
- LAs generally were able to use the programme they chose although some would have liked access to more than one programme to address different needs.
- LAs' preferences were informed by previous experience and their understandings of the foci of each of the programmes.
- LAs' plans for implementation took account of several different factors reflecting local needs including specific communities (geography and ethnicity), specific needs (e.g. drug abuse, crime or early pregnancy) and past experience of programmes.
- LAs welcomed a focus on early intervention and considered there was a gap in provision which the Pathfinder, with a focus on children aged 8-13 years, would fill.
- While initial time pressures were seen as problematic, LAs were positive about the responses of the DfES to issues to optimize delivery and, where appropriate, take note of the LAs' concerns.
- Finance, including the timing of initial payments and limitations on carry over, were a concern for LAs.
- Recruitment has generally been delayed and the final number of facilitators is not clear.

- LAs are undertaking recruitment across a wide range of professional backgrounds, favouring a focus on personal characteristics such as empathy and listening rather than professional qualifications.
- Programmes differ in their willingness to use parents or non-professionals as facilitators.
- Training facilitators is a major challenge in terms of
  - The logistics of a limited number of trainers
  - The time taken to undertake recruitment
- Support post-training is built into programmes and is intended, by LAs, to be made available.
- The number of parents likely to be trained is unclear but is intended to be about 100-300 per LA.
- LAs are positive, enthusiastic and optimistic that the Pathfinder will be a success and that its benefits can be sustained.

## **1. Introduction**

The Parent Early Intervention Pathfinder is an initiative to fund local authorities (LAs) to implement one of three selected parenting programmes: Triple P, Webster-Stratton Incredible Years and Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities. The three programmes were selected by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) following a review of available programmes.

The Pathfinder funds 15 LAs (5 per programme) as the core group. In addition, three funded and three (now two) non-funded comparison LAs are in the study. These are spread across England. The programme started in the summer of 2006 and is due to end by 31 March 2008. This evaluation started in September 2006 and the final report is due by the end of March, 2008. The Pathfinder is designed to provide parenting programmes but underlying the rationale is the need to influence positively the behaviour of the children. The Pathfinder is designed to focus on children aged 8-13 years, although it is recognized that the benefits of improved parenting may influence younger and older siblings in the family. The severity of the children's problems, and whether parents voluntarily seek the support of the programme or are required to attend, are potentially key elements in how the programmes operate.

This 1<sup>st</sup> Interim Report covers the period from September 2006 to February 2007. It focuses mainly on interviews with LA lead officers. In addition, reference is also made to other relevant matters of importance, including the development of the national evaluation.

## **2. The views of Local Authority lead officers**

Interviews were held with the lead officers in all 20 LAs in the study. Each interview was recorded, with the permission of the interviewee, and transcribed. Each interview was conducted using a common semi-structured format with key topics supplemented by more specific probes. This method complements the need for maximum consistency of coverage with the need to optimize the interview process which may flow across a number of topics. This report summarises the main findings according to the principal topics.

### **2.1 The setting up of the Pathfinder**

As is often the case with DfES initiatives, the early stages were characterized by urgency to secure the setting up of the Pathfinder. This included the decision on which programmes to

support; which LAs should be in the main and comparison samples; arrangements for appointment and training of staff, in particular those who would be group facilitators; the financial arrangements including contracts; and the selection of the team to conduct the national evaluation.

The time constraints were significant.

### 2.1.1 Choice of programme

The DfES determined which programmes would be supported in the Pathfinder for each LA. Overall, LAs were content with the programme allocated. In a number of cases this was already well established in the LA and so allowed the Pathfinder to build upon existing experience and practice. Some LAs had had experience of more than one of the programmes and had taken a view of which they preferred. This reflected either their own or partner's experience. Some LAs wished to use more than one programme, considering that each had a particular focus/set of strengths and they sought a broad range of options. However, as this possibility was not allowed, LAs might choose to seek alternative funding for additional programmes.

Decisions regarding which programme was preferred, therefore, reflected the LA being actively in favour, and/or actively against one of those available, in contrast to one or both of the other options. In addition, some LAs were interested in principle in a programme of which they had little direct knowledge but which seemed to meet a need or extend choice.

“With Webster-Stratton, those who were trained on it were also trained in Triple P and (we) felt that the core was similar, but preferred working with Triple P because it took it to that next level. With SFSC we looked at because we thought it might help some particular communities.”

Overall, most LAs did not have to amend their proposals significantly, if at all. Those that did included a minority that did not receive their preferred programme and those that were not able to continue with parents as co-trainers/facilitators as this was not acceptable to the programme. However, not being allocated their preferred programme was not necessarily problematic.

“I don't think that's been a big problem. I think the issue has been more us getting to know and feel comfortable with Triple P, rather than letting go of Webster-Stratton.”

### 2.1.2 Previous experience and local priorities

It is also important to note that the LAs had identified where the Pathfinder fitted with their overall policy on parenting. This in turn reflected the experience to date with such parenting programmes, as noted above, and local circumstances including specific areas of need, whether by area within the LA, specific group in terms of ethnicity, or particular types of need, for example levels of crime or drug abuse, e.g.:

“The main thing that keeps coming up is about the high levels of youth crime and anti-social behaviour.”

In all cases the LAs were building upon a range of historical or recent initiatives and services addressing the needs of parents. This experience had raised the issue fundamental to the Pathfinder namely *early intervention*. This was conceptualized also as a preventative strategy: intervening at a time when children were relatively young would, it was hoped, prevent later, more problematic anti-social behaviour. Earlier projects (e.g. Sure Start) were in this tradition, and indeed this is a long-standing policy orientation in health and education, but it is grounded in the requirement that the intervention is effective. By using three programmes for which evidence of effectiveness already existed the LAs hoped to have positive outcomes.

This raised the issue of the status of the children in the potential cohort, in particular their place on a continuum of increasingly problematic behaviour. In some cases the LAs were able to select different variants of the programme in order to address different children. Some LAs noted that the 8-13 age group had received less coverage in the past and so welcomed this initiative, while others argued that the focus should be on children younger than 8 years.

The local circumstances seen as important by interviewees varied widely. Urban or rural poverty and disadvantage; pockets of drug and alcohol abuse and early pregnancy; and specific minority ethnic populations all reflected the wide variety of LA locations and characteristics. In some LAs, Travellers were identified as a particular focus while in others a minority ethnic population might raise important issues for delivery of language or particular cultural factors, including those relating to gender. Experience of delivery in other languages (e.g. Mandarin) were reported.

### 2.1.3. Management of the project

There was a general concern about the speed of the setting up of the initiative. However, as these were experienced LA officers, this was not new or a surprise even if aspects were unwelcome.

“The timescales were slightly unrealistic given that it was to be a partnership and we have extraordinarily effective partnerships across the board, including a Parenting Education Strategy with three specific task groups and we struggled to get a partnership bid in, because no time to meet with people, only two weeks to consult with them and come up with what we were being asked to do. And just coming up to the school holidays.”

A slightly less negative, although possibly more jaundiced view, was expressed by another interviewee:

“OK. It wasn't the worst I've experienced of central government.”

These concerns, however, must be set against the LAs' experiences of the other aspects of the management of the initiative by the DfES. Here there were many positive comments regarding accessibility, willingness to listen and to be prepared to be flexible on occasions. For example, modifications to the Incredible Years programme to make it relevant to the 8-13 age group were needed and the DfES held discussions with Carolyn Webster-Stratton to facilitate this process. Also our own view is that the holding of a conference for all LAs in September 2006 was a very helpful event. It allowed information to be presented and discussed, for LA lead officers to meet each other, the DfES and members of the national evaluation team, and to receive information about each of the programmes.

However, finance was a concern in the early stages, both securing the initial funds and concerns about inability to carry over funding.

“We knew we were successful in September, but the money was only transferred in November.”

“(I) think the DfES should have allowed us to roll over more than 5% - we can't roll more than this over, nor are we allowed to roll over at the end of the project.”

## 2.2. Recruitment of facilitators

The key staff are those delivering the training. We asked lead officers to explain their approach to recruitment, including the qualities sought and where they recruited from.

### 2.2.1 The staff

The Pathfinder is on a large scale. For example, one LA expected to train 40 facilitators. Others mentioned fewer (e.g. 20). It will be important to examine how many staff were trained as a result of the Pathfinder as it appears likely to be about 200-400, so adding substantially to the pool of facilitators.

The major distinction between programmes concerns the use of non-professionals. Whereas the Incredible Years and Triple P focus on professionals such as psychologists to act as facilitators, Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities has a clear policy to train and use a broader range of people, especially from the community. This had implications also for organization of the Pathfinder in different LAs. In one case the use of Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities was associated with the LA seeking proposals from a wide range of community organizations to run groups and to identify facilitators. In LAs using this programme, the use of parents is not only under consideration but actively welcomed, although one LA had decided not to include parents in the first round but to delay until a second round of training in the hope that some parents would be recruited.

Where professionals are to act as facilitators a wide range is likely. For example, one LA reported that learning mentors, social workers, Youth Offending Teams, Family Support Teams, YISP, and members of CAMHS would be used.

Given the variation in the background of potential facilitators, this raises the issue of the qualities seen as necessary by LAs in staff whom they would wish to use. LAs tended to stress qualities such as being keen on group work, relating well to families of different backgrounds, having an ability to empathise, listening skills, being non-judgmental, 'not jumping in and telling people what to do', ability to get to know parents, being approachable, and awareness about the communities from which parents might come. Within the range of professionals a distinction may be made between those from different types of background, for example from a pastoral/support background or one more focused on the Respect agenda.

Hence, the LAs were focusing on interpersonal skills and qualities rather than specific professional qualifications and experience. This approach also left open, or reflected a positive desire to seize the opportunity to involve parents as facilitators. Some LAs were convinced that the use of parents was essentially beneficial.

An issue for the Pathfinder but also subsequent sustainability concerns the effective drop out of potential facilitators. It will be important to examine how many are in fact recruited, how many undertake the specified training and also how many groups each trained facilitator runs. There was a view that, from past experience, a number of facilitators run no more than one or two groups (or even none) and this would represent two potential difficulties. Firstly, being a facilitator is a skilled activity and skills may be expected to develop with running groups. Limited experience may therefore limit both fidelity and effectiveness. Secondly, a failure to maintain a high percentage of the trained facilitators undermines sustainability as well as limiting cost effectiveness.

### *2.2.2 Training*

The training of this cohort of facilitators was a major logistical challenge. Each programme has only a small number of persons considered appropriate to run training for facilitators and this placed limits on the availability of training courses. However, the need to appoint facilitators, and in some cases to determine the organizations that would employ facilitators, meant that training is still being delivered at the time of this report (March, 2007).

All these programmes put a high premium on the importance of training in the relevant programme and also on fidelity of delivery. It may be that the latter is stronger in Triple P and the Incredible Years as Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities appears to have a greater degree of flexibility. Nevertheless, fidelity of programme delivery, and understanding the basis, aims and approach to facilitation in each are central factors.

Support for the facilitators beyond the initial training is likely to be important also. This is recognized by each programme, which have systems for support. It will be important to examine whether, how and to what degree support is available and taken up. The opportunity of project managers (titles may differ) include this remit in some cases. This support may also have another benefit:

“Part of that post will be having regular meetings with the trained facilitators because there will be long periods when they will be doing nothing..... The learning will

dissipate unless we make clear efforts to keep people engaged in the process and reinforce training.”

Where training had occurred there were very positive comments. These LAs often had a longer history of engagement with a trainer they valued. The timescales, as indicated above, suggest that some training will not take place until the summer term, or even the autumn.

## 2.3 Future development

### 2.3.1 Number of parents

We asked LAs to provide estimates of the number of parents to be engaged with a group.. These figures were problematic – LAs recognized that the take up was uncertain, although those with more experience could have a great degree of certainty. Where estimates or intentions were mentioned these were substantial, e.g.

“Aiming for 320 – 8 courses per term over 4 terms, with an average of 10 parents attending each course.”

“600 families in 10 schools, possibly more schools taken on in Autumn 2007.”

“120 – 192”.

Others had lower expectations one LA was estimating 80 but this had not been finalized.

Others did not offer estimates.

“Will offer a place to any family who expresses an interest and will do some marketing to ensure people are aware of it”.

### 2.3.2 Expectations

There was general optimism for the likely benefit of the Pathfinder, including spin off effects.

“Very effective! (We) anticipate that involved members of staff will feel a lot more confident about how they support families and intervene earlier..... The same approach can be adapted for individual casework.”

However, the LA leads were also realistic and recognized that success would depend on many factors and that trying to measure effectiveness attributable to the Pathfinder was very problematic.

“Effectiveness will depend on a number of things, so many changes and developments going on at the same time.”

There was also recognition that the engagement of parents was central. Although this was a key issue for the group facilitators, this could only take effect once parents had been recruited. The process(es) whereby each LA sought parents would also be central. In some cases there was the possibility of a degree of coercion through the youth offending system, for example. Schools, voluntary and community organizations could have important roles, but word of mouth was also seen as important in some cases.

“(There is) a delicate balancing act between targeting the parents you really want on the programmes – because all parents at some time need support with parenting courses.....”

Finally, we also asked those lead officers for their own views of parenting. Interestingly, this indicated that often there was a lack of a clear definition of parenting at this level, or at least our interviewees were not able to produce one earlier. References were often made to the LA’s parenting strategy but also to there being no ‘neat definition’. In one case the interviewee stated that the LA had no definition or guidelines as to what constitutes good or effective parenting while in another this issue was under discussion as part of the development of the LA’s parenting strategy.

### 3. National evaluation

In this section the key aspects of the national evaluation, and its interaction with the LAs and programmes, will be summarized.

The national evaluation comprises both qualitative and quantitative elements. The former will draw largely on interviews, and is the phase now underway. We are currently interviewing group facilitators; later we plan to interview parents and, hopefully, observe group sessions. The quantitative dimension includes the collection of data from group participants as well as LA data on recruitment, and any impact analyses they might carry out.

As the three programmes all regularly include measures we met with each to seek to minimize any additional demands on parents, in particular, we well as facilitators and LAs. As a result, we have produced a booklet of four measures which was approved by the Steering Group ( ) see Appendix.

Two issues have arisen. Firstly, one of the trainers involved with one programme (Incredible Years) wanted to undertake an evaluation as the programme to be used was to be developed for this Pathfinder. In this case, the evidential base was not that for the programme to be implemented. However, the DfES decided that this was not appropriate as it could interfere with the national evaluation, particularly by overloading parents.

Secondly, the DfES allowed LAs to include the possibility of a local evaluation in their bid. This appears not to have been taken up by many LAs, but where it has there is the possibility for some tension. Again, the key issue is potential overload on parents.

We have sought to reconcile the competing demands by selecting measures for the parent booklet which were typically used by two programmes and limiting our study to the parents – evidence of changes in the behaviour of the child will be gathered by the parents completed Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire before and after the training.

This allows LAs to organize local evaluations including child-based data from schools, if they wish.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The evidence to date has been gathered from interviews with LA lead officers. It has covered the initial phase of setting up the Pathfinder and their views on its progression. What is apparent is that, although the start was rushed and demanding, the LAs are all now well underway. However, there has been a considerable delay in starting the groupwork in most LAs: the Pathfinder lasts for five terms and, towards the end of Term 2, most LAs are just starting groups or will start in Term 3. Nevertheless, there is clearly a high level of enthusiasm and commitment.

A number of issues have been identified in this report which will require follow up. Some are a function of the Pathfinder's initiative (time taken, allocation of programme to each LA, financing); others reflect the programmes themselves (e.g. the background of facilitators,

use, or not, of parents) while others reflect LA systems (e.g. the commissioning of agencies to run the groups).

In the next phase, which has just begun, we shall explore how the training was experienced and the early implementation of the group training.