Early Help
Learning Sets

A series of discussions on the most pressing issues around Early Help for children, young people & families

Introduction

In September 2014 iMPOWER and a select group of invited councils met for our first Early Help Learning Set. The idea was to bring together a group of professionals working on the front line of early intervention and prevention to work through some of the big issues facing the public sector in supporting children and families.

We chose Early Help for three reasons. Firstly, it is an area we work in extensively. Secondly, it seemed to be an area where most councils had similar problems but were facing these in isolation. Thirdly, we strongly believe that by getting Early Help right, the public sector could address the huge costs associated with taking children into care.

Over the next 12 months we ran five sessions attended by nine councils covering subjects as diverse as organisational structures, partnership working and extremism.

Attendees were able to gain insight into good practice and the latest thinking, had the opportunity to share experiences and ask advice, test ideas in a safe environment, take time out of the office to think through issues and solutions, and develop a network of people in similar roles.

Attendees told us that the sessions provided "some great insight both from other Councils and from iMPOWER; Material that wouldn't be available from elsewhere" and created "a very useful space to test thinking and solutions, and have dialogue with knowledgeable colleagues".

With the sessions now complete, I reflected on what could be applied to Early Help projects from the Learning Sets. The one thing I repeatedly came back to was that the only way to deliver Early Help is collectively – whether with other parts of your local authority, with other agencies, or by problem solving with other councils. The children and families lives that Early Help services interact with are so complex that the only way to successfully change is by drawing on the skills, expertise and knowledge that can be found across the public sector – from family support workers to schools to the police; everyone has a role to play.

The following articles originally appeared as blogs on our website and tell the story of the Early Help Learning Sets. If you would like to discuss any of the ideas and issues raised, please get in touch.

- David Colbear, iMPOWER

Early Help Learning Set #1

Introductions and sharing challenges

Despite the range of authorities represented at the first Early Help Learning Set – including London boroughs, unitaries and county councils – the opportunities and challenges were remarkably similar. These ranged from which type of Early Help model works best, through to how to effectively commission, to how to make sure partner organisations are playing their part in delivering early help. Acknowledgment that many councils face similar challenges should encourage closer working and sharing of learning.

Despite the similarities in the nature of the challenges all councils are facing, the attendees recognised that there will have to be a diverse range of responses to fully address need. This is not just different from one council to another, but within council boundaries, from urban to rural, from community to community; they all point to the complexities and contradictions (as well as the opportunities) in delivering Early Help.

iMPOWER colleagues had expected a wide ranging discussion but would lead to four or five neat topics that could be dissected separately at future sessions. However, it was soon apparent that the issues we had identified were so intrinsically linked that breaking the sessions into discrete parts would be impossible.

Much like the necessity to get local partners working together in concert, you also need to tackle each challenge presented by early help in conjunction with the others. The big message is:

'You can't deliver early help effectively in isolation from other parts of your local system'

http://www.impower.co.uk/insights/early-help-early-observations

Early Help Learning Set #2
Models of delivery

QUESTION 1 – DESIGN THE PERFECT MODEL, OR JUST GET GOING?

Inefficient Early Help expenditure is a problem; money is too often being spent on the wrong people at the wrong time. One response to this is to undertake a detailed needs analysis, review the existing services and complex commissioning processes and blend this analysis together to create a perfect model.

Whilst these activities have value in their own right they do take time. Can families wait that long? Also, does the council have the spare capacity to do this? It became clear from our participating councils that they would rather get going as soon as possible and learn by doing. However, the challenge this poses is: how big do you bet that your approach will work from the off?

QUESTION 2 – START SMALL OR START BIG?

Many attendees talked about using multi-agency meetings to discuss specific cases as a way of kick-starting their early help programmes. This makes sense – it provides an opportunity to test an approach whilst having an impact on lives, it does not need a huge commitment of resources and it can be scaled up.

However, as one attendee noted from experience, it can create a perception that early help is focussed on fixing individual cases and does not have the strategic vision to identify emerging trends and reduce demand on a large scale. The lesson seems to be that getting people round the table to work on tangible outcomes is important, but it needs to be set as part of a wider programme of change.

QUESTION 3 – LOCALITIES, COUNCIL-WIDE SERVICES OR BOTH?

The final question is about how to organise services. The consensus view was that locality work is the most effective approach. However there are some risks; how do you ensure consistency across localities? How do you ensure specialisms aren't diluted? How do you manage small specialist services that do not have the capacity to be in every area? The consensus was a blend of locality based and centralised council wide services although such a blend would need to reflect local circumstances. As is always the case, local authorities are very often similar, but never the same.

http://www.impower.co.uk/insights/early-help-learning-sessions-part-2

Early Help Learning Set #3

Commissioning services & managing budgets

It is common knowledge that an effective Early Help offer is necessary to managing demand and providing community support. However a primary area of discussion amongst the group was the service's ability to evidence that their interventions are making a difference.

Making the case for increased funding in Early Help is simple in theory but the attending authorities shared their concerns that with ever decreasing budgets, larger pools of funds are being allocated to those services that are able to prove with data that their interventions are valuable for the council.

It can often be hard to prove this using data in early help as the service is designed around principles of prevention. The question the group came to was; is it worth allocating funds, time and resources to collect the necessary data or is it best to think innovatively about how money can be obtained elsewhere?

In the current economic climate, innovative, cost effective solutions are rare and valuable. We would suggest that local authorities need to look at engaging alternative providers in discussions.

In Birmingham for example they were able to encourage the housing department to provide them with funding by encouraging their participation in elements of their Early Help programme.

Another interesting idea that we explored was that children's services should look to design alternative budget models based on successful healthcare and adult social care models. For example, personal health budgets – social workers would be given a small budget and could choose how to best spend the money to meet the needs of the child under their supervision.

http://www.impower.co.uk/insights/early-help-learning-sessions-part-3

Early Help Learning Set #4
Working with schools

We know schools are a critical partner but we also know – from iMPOWER's experience on projects and feedback from our clients – that they can be the hardest to engage with. (Don't get us wrong – there are some schools who really engage with the Early Help agenda and we all have experience of great teachers who go above and beyond to help children).

Why are schools critical? Two main reasons: Firstly, they have the greatest contact with children, and if they can access Early Help services at the right time then they are the best route to effectively dealing with a number of issues. Secondly, with more evidence emerging of shrinking budgets in Early Help services (a recent news story a fall in spending of 26% since 2010), engaging with partners – including schools – is more important than ever.

So what's the issue? It seems to us that schools are a fairly independent bunch who prefer to do things on their own terms. There are lots of different types of schools (maintained, academies, special schools, independent schools). As a result there are differing incentives and interests that need to be addressed.

The collective wisdom and experience at the Early Help Learning Set talked about what can be done. Our conclusion was that successful partnership working with schools is about understanding their behaviours and motivations; what is in it for them, and what they will respond to. Behaviours for positive engagement – some ideas:

- Work collaboratively – don't tell them what to do but offer them services and support to choose from, and invite schools to contribute to your strategy so that they feel a sense of co-ownership.
- Keep them in the loop – make sure they are up-to-date, and consulted on any changes or new initiatives.
- Understand the network – who are the key influencers in the local schools and teacher community?
- Understanding motivations (slightly more complex) – some ideas:

Understand motivations (slightly more complex) - some ideas:

- Link objectives to education - for example, attendance levels
- Evidence the impact
- Prioritise services against schools - for example by linking Tier Three to Secondary, Tier Two to Primary

The final question raised was 'how do we get schools to do more themselves?' The key to this is to move away from a referral culture. You can do this by bringing Early Help directly to schools; either through staff visits or even basing staff in schools to work with teachers and children. Children's services could also tap into existing school groups to provide them with a forum to discuss issues and concerns.

The final point is about language. Schools work with children on a day-to-day basis, dealing with all the challenges that come with that. In a very real way they feel like they are doing Early Help, so referring to your own 'Early Help' service doesn't make sense. Instead, Councils need to publicly acknowledge the role of schools as part of the wider Early Help system.

There is no silver bullet that will fix working with schools, but there are a number of ways Early Help and schools can work together more effectively. Given that it is in Early Help's interest to work with schools, and that schools are on the frontline of working with children and their families, anything that helps both parties make the most of each other is worth pursuing.

The collective wisdom and experience at the Early Help Learning Set talked about what can be done. Our conclusion was that successful partnership working with schools is about understanding their behaviours and motivations; what is in it for them, and what they will respond to. Behaviours for positive engagement – some ideas:

http://www.impower.co.uk/insights/early-help-learning-set-working-with-schools

Early Help Learning Set #5
Conclusions

We reflected on the five sessions we have run over the last 12 months and captured the key pieces of advice we would give to someone taking the reins of an Early Help team. In no particular order these included:

- Partners are critical, but you need to be clear about what the Early Help service delivers and what it enables others to do. Early Help teams can't do everything and internal and external partners – especially schools – are often better placed to provide support.
- Where the council is delivering services – make sure you keep the people within the organisation to deliver. An obvious point, but an important one!
- Where other partners are delivering services, find ways of making sure their approach is consistent. There are many ways of doing this but training and clear communication about expectations is critical.
- Quality Assurance is important for consistency and improving outcomes – internally and externally – but this needs to be proportionate. Managers need to balance review with managing and taking time to address the ever-changing demands put on their service.

- Make sure Early Help has its own brand and ensure people realise that it is not the same as social care. An Early Help service is not a substitute or add-on to social care; it should have a clear offer and purpose and should be very clear about what that is to service users and partners.
- Know your data, and in particular your demand; evidence is critical for getting resources and for keeping them by using them effectively.
- Being in the community is the most effective place to build trust and relationships. Locality models and working in the places where people are is critical to the success of Early Help.
- The role of the Local Safeguarding Children Board is important to motivate and support partners – make sure it understands its role and you understand what it can offer to you, your team and partners.
- Never forget the voice of the child.

http://www.impower.co.uk/insights/early-help-learning-set-final-reflections

There was a clear message coming out of the sessions: ultimately, Early Help is all our responsibility. It cannot and should not be delivered by the council alone. Working effectively with partners is the best way to deliver the service.

Finally I would like to thank the local authorities who attended the sessions – particularly those who had to travel some distance to join us – and my colleagues who helped create some stimulating and insightful content and conversations. As one of our attendees put it:

Many thanks to the following councils who attended the Early Help Learning Sets:

- Birmingham
- Haringey
- Sandwell
- Ealing
- Tower Hamlets
- Hertfordshire
- Gloucestershire
- Kirklees
- Harrow

"These sessions were excellent [with] great insights that you just can't get elsewhere."

Amanda Kelly
akelly@impower.co.uk

David Colbear
dcolbear@impower.co.uk