

Making it Work Learning and Evaluation Briefing 1

Engaging lone parents

July 2015



Making It Work Learning and Evaluation Briefing 1

Engaging lone parents

Sarah Pearson

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

Colin Lindsay

Scottish Centre for Employment Research, University of Strathclyde

July 2015

Good practice in engaging lone parents

This Briefing

This Briefing contains evidence and learning from five Making it Work (MIW) partnerships. It is intended to provide MIW partnerships, and funders and policy makers with useful examples of practice from the programme and to support the sharing of best practice across organisations working with lone parents and supporting vulnerable groups into employment.

Making It Work

Making it Work (MIW) is a Big Lottery Fund (BIG) in Scotland programme designed to support lone parents living in complex circumstances. It is being delivered from 2013 to 2017 in five local authority areas where there are concentrations of lone parent families: Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire.

MIW is supporting lone parents who are living in complex circumstances and who are furthest from the labour market or need additional assistance to access or maintain work. Many of these lone parents are not in contact with mainstream support services, or have infrequent or minimal contact via statutory services. So finding ways to engage lone parents who would not otherwise be reached was an important early target for activity.

Local practice in engagement

The MIW partnerships have therefore sought to adopt innovative and effective methods to identify and engage lone parents to the programme. Across the five partnerships different engagement strategies have been adopted.

In **Edinburgh** information-sharing with Jobcentre Plus has led to referrals from lone parent advisers. Central to the MIW Edinburgh model is the work of a dispersed delivery team of four development workers based in host organisations in disadvantaged areas of Edinburgh.

In **Fife** the community-based work of Fife Gingerbread's support workers is a central focus of client recruitment. Clients have also been referred from range of organisations, including Jobcentre Plus, third sector partners, childcare providers, colleges, Fife Council CAT mainstream employability services, and other local authority services.

In **Glasgow** close links with Jobcentre Plus have generated a large number of referrals to the programme. Outreach and community-based activities have also been important in engaging lone parents, and offer an informal and supportive environment in which lone parents can access advice and guidance (particularly in relation to benefits and finance) and meet with their peers.

In **North Lanarkshire**, the approach to engaging lone parents emphasises a time-limited rolling programme of outreach and community presence, alongside an intensive marketing campaign, which focuses on making links with local groups and services. This approach has been developed specifically to address the challenges faced in this area where geographic communities are not well connected in terms of infrastructure (e.g. public transport) or cultural links (lone parents' social 'worlds' tend to be focused on the community/town that they live in).

In **South Lanarkshire**, there has been a particular emphasis on building networks to support engagement, for instance through working closely with community organisations embedded in target areas. A strong relationship with Jobcentre Plus has generated referrals. Additionally, key workers have been active in connecting with local stakeholders in the health, learning and early years sectors.

Benefits of effective engagement

In Edinburgh, key stakeholders interviewed for the MIW evaluation highlighted the value of development workers being based in local communities. Those development workers hosted in childcare and family

centres have been able to disseminate information about MIW and sometimes directly engage parents. As importantly, basing development workers in local community hubs has helped to establish a sense of trust and credibility with lone parents in target communities.



This locally-embedded approach, and the local knowledge of MIW development workers, has allowed the programme to develop a strong presence and strategy for engaging clients in target communities. However, those involved in the delivery of MIW were also clear that development workers had worked hard – and would be required to continue to target effort – in order to reach out to a client group that was not being engaged by other mainstream services. The MIW project manager commented:

“It means our teams getting out there and engaging with people who certainly aren’t engaged with any employability service, but will often be engaged through a children and families service, and are expressing an interest in doing something.”

To this end, development workers described an extensive and ongoing process of engagement and relationship-building, with childcare providers, mainstream employability services, Jobcentre Plus, health professionals and other community organisations.

In terms of communicating the values and benefits of MIW, key stakeholders emphasised the importance of distinguishing the programme from the compulsory activity often mandated by Jobcentre Plus or Work Programme Providers. The distinctiveness of the offer

was also clear from our interviews with MIW clients.

“I got involved cos it wasn’t just about getting back to work. They explained there was loads of things they could help with, like rent arrears, putting in for my PiP. So it wasn’t just about training for work, it was about everything I needed, confidence and everything. My development worker has helped me a lot with my kids, with my lifestyle, helping clear my arrears, improve my confidence.”

In Fife, the proactive engagement of clients through the work of Fife Gingerbread’s support workers is clearly vital to MIW’s engagement strategy. Support workers have worked hard to establish a presence in communities as a means of recruiting clients. The commitment of the MIW team to engaging clients through home visits, drop-in events and networking with local community has been key. As the MIW project manager noted, Gingerbread is well placed to take forward grassroots engagement.

“Fife Gingerbread have always been a grassroots organisation, and have always been working with people in their own homes, and going out to the community rather than telling people to come to them. So that has worked really well. A lot of the cases that we’re working with are very complex, and many of the parents do not feel confident on an initial engagement to be coming along to a job club, or to a corporate, office-type environment. So the fact that support workers are going to actually visit them in their homes has been really successful.”

In Glasgow, an important aspect of the programme has been engagement with lone parents who are not benefitting from mainstream provision. Early support provided by community learning providers such as Rosemount Lifelong Learning has focused on developing confidence, while access to the area hubs supported by OPFS has been

important for clients who are socially isolated. The clients who we spoke to valued the opportunity to share experiences.

“You feel kind of isolated and in a bubble when you’re a lone parent at times so when you meet people in the same situation it makes you feel better about yourself”

The innovative model pursued by North Lanarkshire’s Action Lone Parents project has delivered benefits by targeting resources on engaging clients across multiple disadvantaged areas. The Action Lone Parents team’s time-limited, rolling programme has allowed for resources to be concentrated on embedding a presence, and gaining trust and credibility, in target communities.

Colleagues in South Lanarkshire have not followed the ‘rolling’ approach, but have established a consistent presence across multiple communities, with key workers vital to building engagement. Key workers described an extensive and ongoing process of engagement and relationship-building, with childcare providers, mainstream employability services, Jobcentre Plus, health professionals and other community organisations. Collaboration with SCMA and OPFS to reach target clients has also remained a priority. As one MIW stakeholder noted:

“What we’ve done is gone out and built those relationships from everything from health visitors, community learning development teams, health and wellbeing services, social work departments - everything that we possibly can do to get ourselves integrated into the communities.”

Such a proactive and dynamic approach to raising awareness and building relationships is clearly a distinctive feature of MIW.

Critical success factors for client engagement

As in all aspects of MIW practice, there is no ‘one best way’ that emerges from the approaches of the five partnerships.

Rather, local partnerships have had the freedom to develop flexible approaches following consultation with community stakeholders. Nevertheless, some consistent elements appear to be present where engagement activities have worked well:

- MIW teams deployed considerable energy and resources (for example, the time of key workers) in establishing a wide range of relationships with key stakeholders at the outset of the programme;
- A range of different approaches were used, all of which focused reaching beyond mainstream employability services;
- While the aims and ethos of MIW are distinct from Jobcentre Plus, maintaining a solid working relationship with Jobcentre staff has helped to raise awareness and access lone parents.

Key lessons

- Effective client and community engagement is central to the success of programmes like MIW.
- Proactive and well-resourced community outreach is key to establishing networks to recruit and support MIW users.
- MIW partnerships have successfully engaged new clients by developing strategies that reach beyond mainstream employability services, targeting the places, service hubs and communities where key workers can directly engage with lone parents.