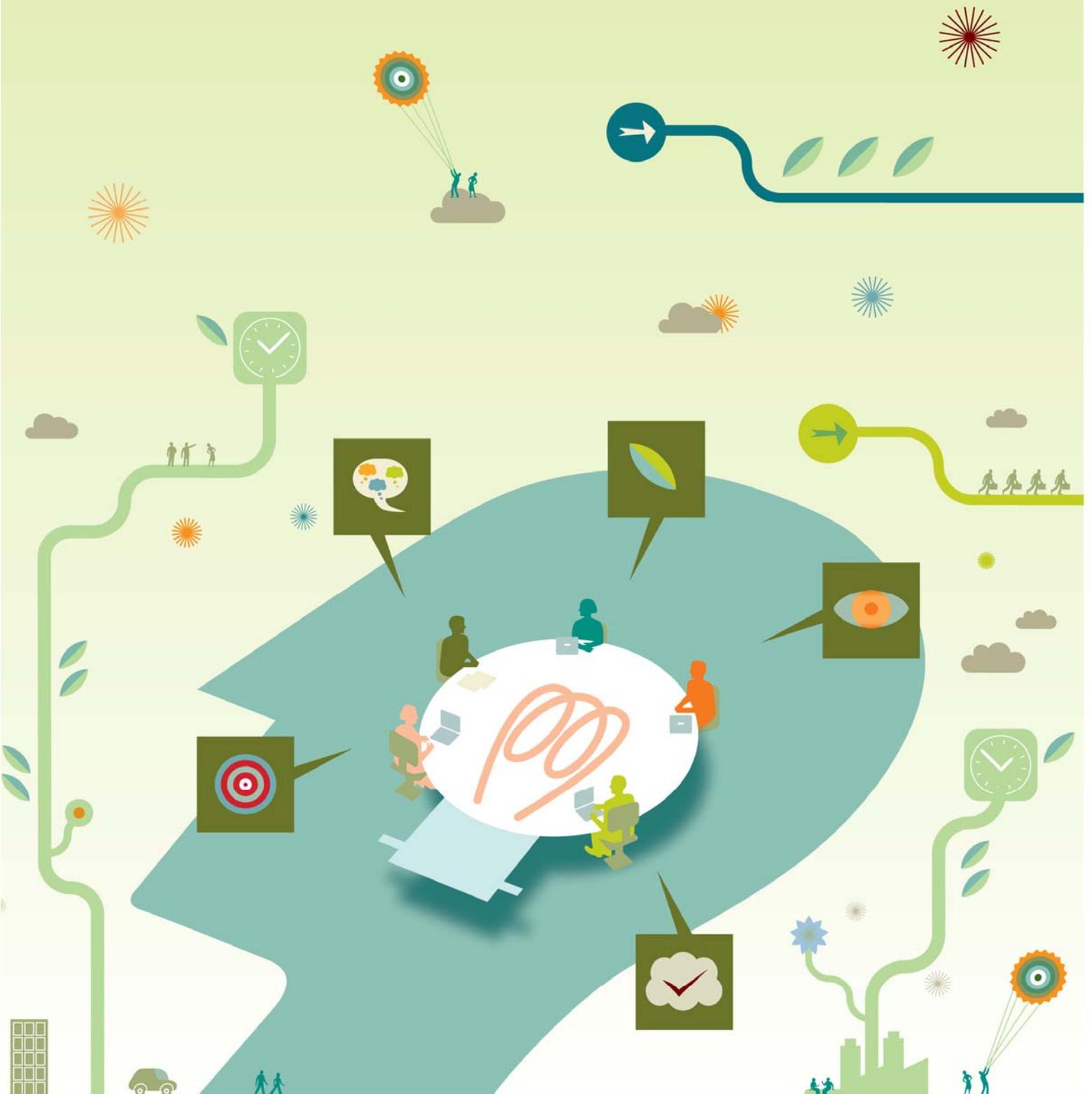


Working For Families: Challenges for the Future

An independent report from an Action Learning Set on Working for Families



Publishing Note

Although this report has been published as a result of an action learning set supported by the Community Regeneration and Tackling Poverty Learning Network the participants were working in a personal capacity. As such the views expressed may not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Government or their own individual organisations.

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INTRODUCTION

Between November 2010 and March 2011 the Community Regeneration and Tackling Poverty Learning Network (CRTPLN) supported an Action Learning Set (ALS) focussed on the Working for Families Programme. The Set was designed to bring together Network users facing similar challenges in their different organisations. The aim of the set was to examine issues in detail, and work in a practical way to deepen knowledge and skills, assist group members to apply their learning in their own work setting and then reflect on the results.

Participants of the set highly value the Working for Families model and see some of the key benefits of the programme being its flexibility and the key worker approach. However, the current economic climate means that organisations are facing a period of change and tough choices. In this context the objective through action learning, was to allow participants the time and the space to reflect on their practice in a supportive peer environment, learn from the experience of others and deliver new solutions to current problems and challenges. To find out more about the theory behind action learning [click here](#).

This report outlines the key issues and challenges identified by the practitioners in the set. Participants wanted to link these challenges to their current work and own locality. The report draws conclusions not only on the learning process and outcomes for those participating in the set but also on what the implications are for practitioners and the services they provide.

A key concern of participants was that time on the set was used not to reflect on practice in the past but to consider, in such difficult economic times, what the key challenges will be in the future for:

- Working for families type services
- Participants as service managers and practitioners
- Clients who use the services

Three key challenges were identified:

- Welfare reform
- Helping parent's overcome barriers to employment
- The changing nature of the labour market

BACKGROUND TO WORKING FOR FAMILIES

Working for Families was established in 2004 to develop initiatives to improve the employability of parents who have barriers to participating in the labour market. Specifically it was to help them move towards, into, or continue in employment, education or training. Working for Families was an entirely voluntary scheme on the part of clients who were primarily lone parents and parents/carers in low income households. The programme was administered through 20 local authorities and supported parents through helping them find sustainable childcare solutions and through providing or accessing other relevant employability-related support and services. In rural areas, support sought to

combat barriers created by poor transport, limited services and a lack of a critical mass of clients¹.

Funding was streamlined on 1 April 2008 in the Fairer Scotland Fund (FSF). The FSF replaced seven previous funding streams as part of the Scottish Government's budget concordat with local government.

The Scottish Government recently carried out a scoping exercise of Working for Families. The purpose of the exercise was to get a comprehensive picture of how Working for Families initiatives have developed since 2008. The report highlights that a great deal of work continues to support target group parents/carers with some services retaining the WFF brand and identity. The report also found that the most prevalent concern of lead officers was continuity of funding and service provision in the context of continuing demand for services. Challenges to services were given as uncertainty over the benefits landscape and the income threshold for benefits².

ACTION LEARNING – Agreeing the process

“Action Learning involves a group of people coming together regularly to help each other learn from their experiences. The group works together on problems in their community, workplace or project, in order to improve the problem”³

At the outset it was clear that there was limited knowledge amongst participants of action learning as a concept. In anticipation of this a presentation was given at the opening meeting which outlined the key principles of action learning. It was however made clear that this was only to be used as a guide. The ALS ‘belonged’ to participants and they had a key role in how learning took place. In the initial presentation it was suggested that participants take an aspect/problem from their practice and present this to the wider group who would then – through structured questioning – attempt to help them solve it.

Whilst participants were interested in this approach they felt that the challenges they were facing in their work as a result of the current economic crisis and the implications of this for clients meant a different approach would be more beneficial. In addition a comprehensive evaluation of Working for Families had already been carried out⁴. As such it was agreed that it would be more helpful to look ahead to the challenges they would face as practitioners and managers of services and what it meant for their services and for clients. As such welfare reform, helping parents to remove barriers to employment and the changing nature of the labour market were agreed as the key challenges. Participants wanted to hear from outside speakers, to draw on their expertise and take this back to their work place.

¹ McQuaid, R, Bond, S, Fuertes, V (2009) Evaluation of the Working for Families Fund (2004 – 2008)

² Cantwell, C (2011) Scottish Government Scoping Exercise of Working for Families

³ <http://www.evaluateit.org/glossary/>

⁴ McQuaid, R, Bond, S, Fuertes, V (2009) Evaluation of the Working for Families Fund (2004 – 2008)

THE LEARNING PROCESS – How learning was achieved

Learning took place in a variety of ways:

- **Discussion and debate:** participants were able to share the challenges they faced on a day to day basis in their workplace and draw from them the issues they wanted to look at in more detail. The ALS contained a mix of frontline Working for Families workers and service managers more involved in strategy and funding. In addition there was input on services more concerned with employability in a wider sense.
- **Presentations:** To support learning there were two presentations over the course of the ALS. Maggie Kelly, Policy and Campaigns Officer with the Poverty Alliance gave an input on welfare reform and Marion McLeod, Senior Policy and Parliamentary Officer with Children in Scotland gave an input on childcare.
- **Personal research:** Participants agreed to split into three working groups. Group members worked together to pull together information from their experience and workplace relevant to the challenge they were working on. Case studies, statistics and policy material were submitted and discussed at monthly meetings
- **Online Forum and information sharing:** Information was shared on the Communities of Practice online forum⁵. Debate and discussion was encouraged. A range of information and reports were posted and shared to inform debate and discussion. These are set out in further reading.
- **Informal Communication:** Participants shared information and engaged in discussion on an informal basis.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES: Welfare reform

Participants identified planned changes to the welfare system as a major challenge to how Working for Families and Working for Families type services will be able to deliver for clients in the future.

In his budget statement of June 2010, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a budget that he described as “tough but fair”, “rewarded work and protected the most vulnerable in society”⁶. Participants in the ALS are dealing with a client group particularly exposed to changes in welfare based on such an approach. This was of particular concern as between the June Budget Statement and the Spending Review in October 2010 the UK government announced that £18 Billion of savings would be made in the welfare budget.

In this context participants prepared a paper looking at

- specific changes to the welfare system
- the impact of changes on individuals
- the implications for services

This work was supported by a presentation from an outside expert and by drawing together a number of case studies from participants own area of practice. In addition

⁵ <http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do>

⁶ Rt Hon George Osborne MP Chancellor of the Exchequer(June 2010) June Budget Report Statement to the House of Commons

information on the impact of welfare reform in specific areas was gathered by all participants. Case studies are contained in Appendix 1.

Three main aspects of welfare reform were identified as having particular significance for individuals and families involved with Working for Families services and the services themselves. It concludes by looking at challenges in the future.

1. Childcare and Tax Credits

The availability of employment and childcare are central to the ability of practitioners and services to respond to clients needs. The Scottish Government scoping exercise of Working for Families found that a primary concern of lead officers was the uncertain benefits landscape and proposals to change the income threshold for benefits⁷. Participants in the set confirmed this and identified a number of concerns in relation to current welfare proposals:

- **The impact on lone parents with a child aged 5 or over moving to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) from Income Support.**
- **The reduction in the proportion of costs covered by the childcare element of working tax credit from 80 per cent to 70 per cent**
- **The drop in income thresholds in relation to child tax credits.**

.A key concern was about **the impact on lone parents with a child aged 5 or over moving to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) from Income Support**. In particular participants questioned whether there would be sufficient availability of affordable and suitable childcare for this client group. Moreover there is also concern that some employers have a pre-determined bias against employing this client group believing that that they are less reliable due to difficulties connected with childcare such as requiring, time off when children are unwell, childcare provision not being available, school holidays etc.

Concerns about the affordability of childcare were heightened by the proposal **to reduce the proportion of costs covered by the childcare element of working tax credit from 80 per cent to 70 per cent**. A lone parent with young children under five, working a 35 hour week is already proportionally paying up to £150 per month for an under 2 year old, based on the 20% rate of an average monthly nursery charge of £750. Increasing this to 30%, will see a monthly total of £225; the parent having to budget for a further £75 while on a low income is a significant disincentive towards the route back to work for a lone parent with a young child. Significantly, this will have implications for service providers if there is excess demand in specific age bands as the affordability of childcare for under 2s and 2-3 year olds proves to be too challenging for the Working for Families target group parents.

Example 1

In Fife the Working for Families services has helped and supported a number of individuals in the area to become registered childminders. These childcare providers have been able to provide support to Working for Families clients and parents have been able to access this registered childcare largely as a result of 80 per cent of the cost being met through working tax credits. Fife council estimate that the annual additional cost to a parent of the reduction in support will be £650⁸. This will have a significant impact on parents being able to access childcare and thus continue in employment or training. In addition, the increased cost to families of paying for out of school care such as breakfast clubs and school holiday support as a result of the reduction in the childcare element will, according to participants, have a significant impact on family budgets and on how much better off a parent is working.

Participants were also concerned about the **drop in income thresholds in relation to child tax credits**. From April 2011 the basic and 30 hour elements of the working tax credit will be frozen for three years.

This will increase the fall in the child tax credit (CTC) first income threshold (i.e. the point in the income scale at which CTC begins to be tapered away for CTC claimants only. This is offset to some extent by the increases in the child element of CTC in 2011/12 and again in 2012/13. However, eligibility to a number of passported benefits such as free school meals or healthy start are fixed by reference to the CTC income threshold, so, if it drops a number of people on or close to the poverty line will fall out of eligibility. In addition the child element additions are counted as income in full for the purposes of housing benefit.

Changes to the hours that people have to work to be entitled to working tax credits, the amount of time for which a tax credit claim and change in circumstances can be backdated and the use of PAYE information to inform tax credit calculations are leading to concerns that a working partner may have to give up work and that there is an increase in under and overpayments.

It is also unfortunate that parents/carers – lone parents and two parents in a low income household are not incentivised to consider mini jobs of less than 16 hours per week as this is often a valuable stepping stone for parents returning to the workplace and can also accommodate the families' childcare needs if the work for example can be achieved during school time hours.

2. Universal Credit

The proposed Universal Credit has been promoted by the UK Government as forming part of a 'contract with the unemployed' on the basis that "a life on benefits will no longer be an option".⁹ Participants felt that such an approach had significant implications for the client group they were involved with and for the service they provided. There will be more

⁸ Childcare Providers and Childcare Element: paper provided to ALS participants from Fife Council

⁹ Ian Duncan Smith (February 2011) [Speech in East London on welfare reform](#)

pressure for people to move into less flexible, low paid work and increased pressure on services to move increasing numbers of clients in this direction. In addition there is a concern that already burgeoning case loads will be increased.

The Universal Credit is designed to be an integrated work-age credit, consisting of a basic allowance with additional elements for children, disability, housing and caring. It will replace Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, housing Benefit, Income Support, Income based Jobseekers Allowance and Income based Employment Support Allowance. Working hour entitlements such as 16hours, 24 hours a week are to be abolished.

There was concern that for those in employment it is to be calculated and delivered electronically, automatically adjusting credit payments according to monthly income reported through an upgraded version of PAYE. Participants felt it was difficult to envisage how this 'updated system' will cope with break up in relationships i.e. going from single claims to joint claims within the same tax year or if the partner is self-employed and not on the PAYE system. Rather than providing a less complex system it was felt there was a danger that it would be unable to cope with the complex movements in people's lives, relationships and working patterns.

As a result of the introduction of a new IT system, Universal Credit will be paid to the main earner. At present payments are made specifically for children's needs and childcare and are paid to the parent with care, normally the mother. Participants were concerned that this would result in women not having a role in managing the household budget and have a negative impact on children's needs.

3. Housing Benefit

Caps on housing benefit were a cause of great concern for participants. In April 2011 the local housing allowance will be capped at £250 per week for a one bedroom property, £290 per week for a two bedroom property, £340 per week for a three bedroom property and £400 per week for four bedrooms or more. The implications are significant as there will be Working for Families clients who will be effectively trapped in private rented accommodation as they cannot afford to lose housing benefit to take up a low paid job. Reductions in the amount paid for non dependents could have a significant impact on families. Working for Families services have seen examples of young adults being told to leave the family home due to the impact of the current levels of deductions applied.

The extension of the single room rent restriction to those age 35 or below will discourage those under 35 years to live independently. According to the Scottish Government, the changes will make it harder to meet its targets for reducing homelessness and that as many as 7500 people aged between 25 and 34 could be forced into shared accommodation because of the limits on housing benefits¹⁰. In Dundee and Angus people in that age bracket who receive HB for a one-bedroom flat will see their allowance drop from £80.77 to £54.23, (- £26.54) In Fife the drop will be from £84.23 to £55.38, (- £28.85).

¹⁰ Scottish Government Housing Communities Analytical Services (January 2011).
Benefit changes: Scottish Impact Assessment

Challenges for the future

The economic climate and increasingly strict welfare regime are impacting on the work of Working for Families projects. The wider ranging reforms still to come, coupled with the continuing rise in unemployment, and living costs will undoubtedly have a marked impact on the client group. It is also clear that many of the reforms to tax credits and housing benefit will also impact on those already in low paid work.

A report compiled by the Scottish Local Government Forum Against Poverty and Rights Advice Scotland show the stark realities facing every local authority as a result of these reforms. The annual loss in benefit/tax credit income for an already poor client group is estimated for the whole of Scotland as £514,000,000 to £614,000,000, jeopardising 11,900 to 14,220 jobs¹¹.

What is also clear is that a culture of language where 'benefit cheats and scroungers' being routinely used by the media is prevalent once more. As a result exceptional cases of benefit fraud being reported as the norm. It is extremely important that the facts are presented in a realistic manner. Practitioners are all aware that this client group face enough difficulties with no real voice of their own to provide any balance to bias media representations of them. There is a general move away from income maximisation to trying to protect the already low levels of benefit and tax credit income from falling even further.

The strength of Working for Families services is that they are not restricted by limited qualifying regulations and eligibility criteria but have instead adopted more flexible practices particularly in their use of the Key Worker model to provide a holistic approach to client needs. There is a real need for this type of service to continue. Although there is uncertainty as to what the impact of welfare reforms will be it is safe to assume that the availability of a programme of support with the flexibility and resources of Working for Families will be crucial for increasing numbers of low paid individuals and families.

While the national government may be championing the 'Get Britain Working' programme the challenge for Working for Families type services will be first of all find these jobs, secondly, to ensure that they are actually a step out of poverty rather than just poverty hidden by another name and finally that they are sustainable and represent a career move.

The first test for clients and services will be the reduction in the assistance with childcare costs while at the same time expecting lone parents to be preparing to re-enter the workplace when their youngest child is 5 years old. The section of this report into childcare fully explores some of the main issues facing those trying to balance childcare and the workplace. The appendices of case studies also provide examples of these difficulties as well as examples of the impact of the reduction in childcare costs through the tax credit systems.

¹¹ Scottish Local Government Forum Against Poverty (2010) People, Councils, the Economy: a report on the impact of welfare reforms

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES: Helping parents remove barriers to employment

Participants identified the barriers to entering employment in a changing social and economic climate as a key challenge to how Working for Families and Working for Families type services will be able to deliver for clients in the future. It was felt that by examining these barriers and their impacts on clients and services much could be learnt on how to help parents gain employment.

This work was supported by a presentation from an outside expert and by drawing together a number of case studies from participants own area of practice. In addition information on work of the Young Parents Project in Glasgow was used by participants as examples of the barriers faced by parents.

Context

Clients of Working for Families type services are faced with a changing training, employment and welfare landscape. This also applies to the services that are designed to support them. There are a number of concerns:

- A lack of integrated childcare services and infrastructure to fully support the family and parent/carer to be able to manage smoothly the transition to work or training. This is particularly the case for families with more than one child.
- An environment where there is pressure to take low paid work, increasingly stringent welfare provisions and a reduced number of pre-school places for 3-4 year olds in local authority nurseries.
- Many clients of Working for Families have had limited work experience and have little or no qualifications. The scope for job progression where this is driven by economic and personal demands is also reliant on taking up jobs in care, retail and hospitality – all of which operate shifts and weekend working.
- Young parents, in particular, can be held back by poor access to skills training and education that accommodates caring responsibilities and suffer from the limitations of college childcare funding and grants.

The **service challenge** is to help direct clients to fully consider the consequences and demands that such options can place on the family, while being aware of the likelihood of finding appropriate, affordable and sustainable childcare. There are also the wider implications of whether it is good for family life if a parent is being pressurised into working unsocial shifts in the early evening. While a sitter service can be arranged to collect a child from school or nursery or be available to manage the hours of an early morning or evening shift, this does seem in some contexts, a desperate and unsustainable way to build up the economic well being of a disadvantaged household and may indeed contribute to the overall stress and well being of the family.

1. Barriers to childcare – accessing places

Cost and affordability are a significant factor in access to childcare. The previous section on welfare reform set out participants concerns on the impact of the changes in tax credits from April 2011. It was felt that these changes will restrict parent's ability to enter the job market or indeed participate in training to allow them to work. The experience of the Young Parent Project was that baby places are at a premium; costs are high; tax credits can be accessed but pay rates are low for young parents who lack qualifications and work experience and are competing against adults in the job market.

In addition there is evidence that the payment system is itself a barrier with processing difficulties causing arrears notices and threats of court proceedings causing a great deal of stress to parents already under pressure.. The flexibility of WFF initiatives has reduced this considerably with the payment of deposits, first month's childcare fees and childcare grants to support the transition from benefits to work or training. Private providers running a commercial business and self employed childminders are not able to accommodate parents who are not able to deliver the financial security of a regular income, a further challenge for a parent working on varied hours patterns and income.

There is a challenge in budgeting for periods of change in childcare payments when there is a transition, for example, when moving to pre-school or out of school childcare. Many difficulties arise when parents are unable to manage the processes and paperwork related to informing HMRC of changes that will impact on their childcare tax credits.

2. Barriers to Childcare: Further Education and Training

Participants recognised that to address the low skill level of many young parents it was essential that they had access to meaningful education and training. Practitioners identified a range of difficulties in achieving this that represent significant barriers to parents moving to employment.

The Scottish Government's "Get Ready for Work" programme for 16-18 year olds does not have childcare funding attached and young parents cannot access working tax credits to pay for childcare and therefore are excluded from accessing this training.

Participants highlighted the lack of flexibility in available childcare for young parents. The experience of the Young Parent's Project was that those at college who had been allocated a nursery place were required to use the full day place even if they felt it was too long for their child to be in nursery. In addition the inflexible nature of the provision meant that no account is taken for travel time and that some college courses will not allow students to arrive late to class. This in turn affects funding for childcare and bursary as it is counted as non-attendance – if attendance falls below 80% funding stops.

The lack of flexibility and integration between colleges and nurseries can have a significant impact on parents. Although funds for childcare are available to allow a parent to enter further education no account is taken of nurseries that ask for deposits to secure the place. It is necessary that the college knows the exact timetable for the course so that the nursery can allocate a place on the required days. Without this the nursery cannot agree a

place for the child unless full payment is made. Without agreement from the nursery the college cannot process the allocation of the childcare fund.

Even once the nursery place has been secured and childcare funding is in place, some courses change the timetable at short notice which can involve attendance on different days and jeopardise the nursery place.

Job Centre Plus - through New Deal for Lone Parents – can fund childcare for college courses but young parent's needs to be working with the Parent Advisor (PA) well in advance of the start of the course and have discussed college as a route in their work focussed interview.

If the young parent has already contacted the college and got a place the Job Centre won't fund childcare. The decision rests with the PA who presents a business case to secure funding. Concern here is that decision is based on funding rather than career aspirations so can lead to only funding one year of a 2 year hairdressing course. Or making the business case after the time when the application needs to be with the college resulting in the young person applying too late for the course and or the nursery.

Moving parents from income support to JSA was felt by participants to potentially create more barriers to employment for parents requiring childcare. There was concern that there was no clarity on who would fund childcare for lone parents who wanted to sign up for a course to increase their employability. In addition the compulsory move to a New Deal programme under JSA is likely to interfere with any career plans a parent might have had.

3. Employability

The range of experience represented on the ALS meant that employability more generally could be considered by participants. Employability services work with a broad range of clients with differing needs including mental and physical ill health. They also work with the Working for Families parent client group. Participants highlighted the role of employability services in taking a holistic approach to working with clients which begins with a comprehensive assessment of client needs, action planning, and dedicated and/or specialist support provided where required. It was felt that measuring success in overcoming barriers that included distance travelled by client in their employability journey is not always considered to be as valuable as hard outcomes. Again, a holistic approach that sees the whole journey from overcoming of barriers to sustained employment is essential.

Challenges for the future: Service impacts

Throughout the ALS a key aim was to consider how identified challenges impacted on practice and services. The removal of barriers to employment for parents is affected by how well services are integrated, the accessibility and affordability of childcare and the help and support available around employability more generally. Participants highlighted a number of issues that could impact on services

- Many of the disincentives created either by changes in welfare provision or because of a lack of integrated support and childcare will make it more difficult to help parents realise goals to improve their economic well-being .
- There is an increased emphasis on skills development
- There may be decreasing numbers/levels of positive outcomes at key transition: *Get Ready for Work* is seen as the main training route for young people aged 16-19; but due to no childcare funding young parents are unable to access the main training route to get them ready for work.
- The criteria for funding parents' childcare through Working for Families and other employability key worker modeled programmes may need to be reviewed: lack of childcare funding to support issues such as deposits, paying for extra childcare to enable parents to carry out extra study for completion of courses and exams, are just a few examples of where current anomalies exist
- There is a danger that there will be reduction in childcare availability if demand reduces and small scale or less financially viable services close. There may be less requests for afterschool/breakfast club places for example which results in shrinking or consolidation of provision in a particular neighbourhood. In addition current out of hours childcare is too expensive for parents to fund if they are working varying shifts and have more than one child to care for or those who have other childcare caring responsibilities.

Inevitably participants had a number of concerns about cuts in funding and what this would mean for Working for Families and employability services.

- Threats to viability of the voluntary sector and social childcare sector –have meant some childcare provision has had to be closed e.g college nurseries forcing parents to give up employment or college courses.
- Short term funding of employability support services may lead to a 'churning' of staff as they move from one short term contract to another and from one delivery agency to another causing further barriers to clients with whom new relationships of trust have to be developed by new staff members.
- Reducing budgets for employability support services means that clients will have a longer wait to access support with a more limited choice of where that support can be provided.
- Economic downturn and recovery forecasts reduce the number of job vacancies and clients with multiple barriers are further disadvantaged since those who are closer to the labour market are more able to secure employment before them.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES: The changing nature of employment

Discussion in the ALS focussed on how the current economic situation was impacting on the labour market and the implications of this for Working for Families services and clients.

1. From Public to Private?

The public sector accounts for 24% of total employment in Scotland. Nevertheless there has been an overall reduction in the number of public sector jobs in Scotland. At the end of 2010 there were 595,800 people employed in the Public Sector, a decrease of 18,000 (2.9%) since 2009.¹² As local authorities seek to make further savings there is a likelihood that this decrease will continue.

Many of the parents supported by Working for Families into employment have taken up opportunities in the public sector as there have been more flexible employment conditions including flexible working hours and options for unpaid leave over holiday periods; all of which are more able to support parents/carers with young children. The context of reduced opportunities for public sector employment and increasing reliance on the private sector is a further concern for the progression and sustainability for clients.

In January Prime Minister David Cameron said:

“Across a whole range of areas you’re going to see the most pro-business, pro-growth, pro-jobs agenda ever unleashed by a government. Its time we looked forward to a positive, strong, confident Britain. By developing the right skills and jobs I am determined that the many not the few will share in the country’s prosperity.”¹³

Participants were concerned about the emphasis on private sector jobs that were traditionally low paid and focussed in retail and hospitality. It was felt that many of the jobs that could have offered apprenticeships and career progression in construction and manufacturing were simply not there. There was recognition that it was important to find the balance between meeting employer’s needs and meeting the needs of clients. In general the feeling was that an over reliance on low paid, low skilled work in the private sector tipped the balance away from Working for Families clients. Participants questioned whether jobs were meeting client’s needs. In their experience it was common that jobs:

- Were under 16 hours (and subsequently impact on benefits and tax credits)
- Had widely varying shift patterns unsuitable for parents
- Lacked family friendly policies;
- Were temporary posts and zero hour contracts;
- Lacked opportunities for progression

¹² Scottish Government (Feb 2011) Estimates of employment in the public sector up to Q4 2010

¹³ Number 10 (January 2011) Rebalancing the Economy: Private Sector Jobs and Growth

2. Increased Competition

There was a feeling that Working for Families clients with relatively low levels of skills and education will be disadvantaged by jobs being taken by people who have lost their job and been forced to take a less skilled job. In this environment it was felt that the keyworker role is crucial to give clients every chance of finding a job. An reduction of this service could result in clients simply being unable to access the labour market.

3. The Impact on other Services

There was anecdotal evidence from participants that services such as Job Centre plus were being overwhelmed by the number of clients they were having to deal with. As a result this was having an impact on other services that then have to pick up clients for CV, Interview skills, application form filling.

The limited resources (training rooms, computers, staff) in various support projects means that the quality of service a client receives is adversely affected. An example given was that it is easier and quicker to write an application/CV for someone rather than show them how to do it.

Challenges for the Future

It is not only the availability of jobs that will impact on Working for Families and employability services in the current economic environment. The type of jobs available to clients will have a crucial role in determining whether they are successful in moving onto employment. Less flexible, low paid work will only act as a disincentive to clients and make the job of a keyworker more challenging. In addition if pressure on upstream services such as Job Centre Plus increases the consequences for Working for Families services could be significant. If these services have to pick up increasing numbers of clients – referred by other services – the quality of the service to already vulnerable clients will suffer.

REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING

Participants were asked to reflect on their learning throughout the set. As an aid to these reflections they were specifically asked:

- What have you learned?
- How have you learned?
- What have you taken from your Action Learning Set back to your workplace?
- What impact has the process had on you, your practice and your colleagues understanding?
- What have been the main barriers to learning?

It was agreed that participants would post their reflections on the online forum. A separate anonymous evaluation was carried out using survey monkey.

The following is a summary of participant's reflections:

What have you learned?

A key aspect of learning for participants was finding out what was happening in other areas and in particular how Working for Families type services had continued and evolved:

"I found the discussions during the initial meetings of the set very useful in terms of finding out what was being delivered in other areas including the continuation of the Working for Families project more or less as it was when it was introduced by the Scottish Executive and how, in some areas, (projects) had been built upon to deliver employability services to a wider client group"

And

"I learned that Working for Families is alive and well and operating in some shape or form elsewhere."

In addition participants learnt that the current economic difficulties were having a similar impact on services across the country

"I have learned that from area to area in Scotland, the situation regarding the welfare reforms and the economic climate are not unique to my area. At the same time I have found it reassuring that we seem to be all facing the same problems and issues".

It seemed that sharing knowledge and experience added to the experience on the set and supported practice:

“One of the biggest and best lessons has been that there are like minded people working in the same field and encountering similar difficulties and challenges to overcome. I had missed the regular meetings with other Working for Families workers and actually hadn’t realised that a lot of similar work had continued throughout Scotland under different names”.

Participants found the presentations useful and applicable to their area of work:

“the presentation on welfare reform was very useful given the major implications for our client group of these changes”.

How have you learned?

Listening, discussion, debate and presentations were all given as ways in which learning was supported:

“The discussions and presentations have been excellent. I really enjoyed the mix of people in the group and found the Key Worker input especially helpful. It was also good to have a specific topic to try and research as it forced me to do more reading which you tend to skip at work due to time constraints”.

There were concerns initially that having a mix of policy and practice professionals would mean that learning would be inhibited for some individuals but participants felt this was not the case in the end. Participants appreciated the input of other group members and enjoyed the group ‘dynamic’ which they feel contributed to learning:

“Everyone in the group was very friendly and welcoming and not at all ‘precious’ about sharing their experiences and information. I enjoyed the mix of policy and practice. I found the speakers most informative and wished I could put them in my pocket to take back to my workplace to shine their light further.”

And

“ I also believe it has been good to have the mix of policy and client facing workers expertise around the table to share views”.

The online forum and sharing of information and written materials supported participants learning:

“written information from other members (through sharing on the forum and in writing the report) has been great learning”.

What have you taken from your Action Learning Set back to your workplace?

Participants felt that they were able to take learning from the set back to their workplace and in put that learning into action:

“I took a lot from the presentations and in particular the implications of welfare reform and the impact this will have on clients. I was able to share information with my colleagues and managers. I presented with a colleague to a group of school pupils that doing a project on low income and a lot of what I have learned from the set I was able to use in the presentation”.

Sharing information with colleagues and using it to inspire and inform were other ways in which the work on the set was taken back to the workplace:

“I have discussed the presentation topics with the Key Workers and also distributed some examples of the case studies to show them they are not alone! The team were also pleased to hear of the work in other authorities that was similar to their experiences”.

Learning also contributed to the consideration of strategy at the local level:

“I use my learning to look at the service and practice being provided in Fife and how this will impact on the objectives of the Opportunities Fife Employability pathway”.

What impact has the process had on you, your practice and your colleagues understanding?

Participants felt that learning through the ALS process helped with strategic discussions and decision making. It also highlighted that whether a participant was involved in policy or practice the overall aim was the same:

“I found it interesting that, sometimes when you are at the “coal face”, you think that people that “matter” or people who are in a position to make change don’t understand and don’t see what is happening with the clients. Now I feel that isn’t true and that people are fighting to get what we want for them at a high level”.

Some found that the impact on them had been very practical:

“I have been able to think about the future for WfF and the impacts of welfare reform for the clients I work with and how best to inform of the proposed changes. In addition, I have been able to share information with colleagues to help them become better informed. Being able to discuss welfare reform changes confidently with Job Centre Plus to find solutions in order to assist clients move forward has been helpful”.

Colleagues in the workplace have assisted some participants in putting together material, including local statistics. In this way learning has been 'rolled out' from the set:

"One of my colleagues has assisted me with information to input to the report and has found this to be a good learning experience for her also"

In many respects learning helped participants realise the depth of the service they provided and, in the face of the current economic challenges, cemented their belief that what was needed was comprehensive keyworker support not simply signposting. The Young Parent Project was thought to be an example:

"We move our clients towards appropriate education, employment and training whatever their starting point and help them access childcare and childcare funds. To get them ready we deliver group work. No-one in Glasgow is offering this comprehensive service and in this respect we are unique. We are at capacity and cannot develop further due to our caseloads and our funding is under review. We are not ready to give up on this client group and become merely effective signposters".

A great deal of discussion, sharing information and learning has centred on the key worker model and the implications this has for practice:

I've felt more confident in putting the case forward for greater support of a key worker/link worker model within the wider employability programme work that is going on in my area.

I have been able to share my views on this model with a wide local audience which on the whole have been well received. The model is already in use in my area and I would expect my practice will be impacted by my involvement in the implementation of the model on a wider scale.

Overall participants felt that work on the ALS had given them a broader view of what was going on:

"It has really just widened my focus. It is easy to become a bit bunkered and focus only on your own particular area of work so it's been very helpful in broadening the way I look at how our service fits in and has relevance with others".

What have been the main barriers to learning?

The overriding constraint for all participants was time:

"Time is a big issue for me. From the beginning, I was very committed to attending and participating in every learning set meeting and the subsequent work that generated but pressure of work has meant that I have not always been able to do so as fully as I would have liked to".

And

“Time has been an issue for me and I have found that most of my preparatory work has had to be in my own time due to increasing workload/caseload within the project. In addition, to attend the set it is all but 2 hours out of a working day, therefore, I have to catch up with other issues upon return. Overall, I have thoroughly enjoyed the learning and working with the others in the group and feel the time has been very well spent”.

Despite this there was a view that the ALS model did help with time constraints:

“Similar to everyone else, time is always a constraint. However, I think the short time frames between meetings helped me in that I tended to try and get the work/research done shortly after a meeting when it was fresh in my mind, otherwise I know I would have been full of good intentions but would leave it to the last minute. The community and forum e-mails were also a good reminder tool. The presentations were also extremely helpful in getting you to think about issues that may not have been obvious at the start or during our discussions”.

CONCLUSION AND ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Participants in the Working for Families Action Learning Set wanted to draw conclusions from the work they had carried out on challenges facing them as practitioners, clients and Working for Families services more generally. At the same time it is important to reflect on the aims of the ALS and consider how far they were met.

Action Learning: meeting the aims?

It was clear from the outset that the aim of bringing people together facing different challenges in their organisations was an essential element of the ALS.

As a result of current economic difficulties all participants were facing major challenges to them as practitioners or managers, to the services they provided and to the clients who used those services. It was the scale of these challenges that meant that participants were very keen to use the time on the ALS to look at the major challenges that lay ahead. Participants were encouraged to identify their challenges, construct their learning methodology and decide on the final output. In this case it was felt a report of activity and issues would be the most practical way to work.

An interpretation of participants reflections on learning shows that there was an appreciation of having the time and space to reflect on practice and the challenges they all faced. In addition it would seem that participants found the ALS a supportive environment in which to work and were able to use learning to influence activity in their own work setting.

Presentations from outside speakers and the use of an online forum were particularly useful.

Challenges

It is clear that valuable Working for Families services and other similar services will be under increasing pressure in the months and years to come. The three challenges identified by participants all have implications for how services are delivered but importantly what the outcome will be for those clients who need the support of such services. The challenges are set out in detail in the report. As such participants were keen to conclude with positive ways in which these challenges could be met and have set these out as issues for further consideration. The set participants will also be contacted again within 6 months for an update on their progress tackling the challenges set out in this report.

Issues for further consideration

- Current childcare provision needs to be simplified. At present it is so complex that many clients will not bother to pursue it.
- There is an essential need for the keyworker role: offer independent advice, act as an advocate, offer guidance and build support and confidence. They should be able to look at the person holistically and avoid support just being a tick box exercise. There is a danger that if keyworkers are overwhelmed it will dilute the service.
- There needs to be a closer working relationship between Working for Families type services and Job Centre Plus
- There needs to be recognition that there are expectations on service providers to still hit targets but learn new processes at the same time. Welfare reform is a good example of this. With this recognition comes the need to support frontline staff to adapt.
- Colleges should invest more with local partners. There is a need to understand the impact of provision on clients e.g. not enough childcare places and those that are there lack flexibility. At the same time it should be recognised that it takes time for Further Education to respond to a changing labour market.
- Working for Families Services should be mainstreamed. This is the best model available. It is flexible, relatively low cost and there is strong evidence that it works.

Further Reading

Scottish Local Government Forum Against Poverty (2010) People, Councils, the Economy: a report on the impact of welfare reforms

<http://www.ghn.org.uk/sites/default/files/Scottish%20Poverty%20Forum%20Impact%20Report%20Sept%202010.pdf>

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010) How can Parents Escape from Recurrent Poverty

www.jrf.org.uk/publications/how-parents-escape-recurrent-poverty

OECD (2010) Putting in Place Jobs that Last: A guide to rebuilding quality employment at local level

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/12/6/44418145.pdf>

Appendix – Case Studies

The following are a small selection of case studies used by the Action Learning Set to highlight how identified challenges had an impact on clients.

The Issue: Welfare reform

Moving clients from income support to Job Seekers Allowance can act as a barrier to employment when rules are so inflexible that they cannot take account of individual circumstance.

Case study

Lone parent client was accepted for a 2 year course in hairdressing starting in January 11. Her youngest child would become 7 years of age in Sept 11 and benefit would change from income support to job seekers in the middle of her course. This would mean that she would not be able to complete her course as JSA states that you must be looking for work. The job centre was unable to offer any other solution as they could not and would not fund the course for the first part of the year. Therefore the client would be unable to start the course as she could not sustain it. The client was very disappointed and is now at a crossroads as she wanted to do hairdressing. Client remains on benefit.

Case Study

Lone parent client spent 2 years at college to achieve an HNC in social care and is unable to get a job as she needs to be able to drive and this is holding her back. Whilst at college the client completed a work placement that she really enjoyed and a post has become available recently again she needs to be able to drive. The difficulty is the client has never had a driving lesson before and Working for Families could fund up to 10 lessons for her but it was doubtful if would she be able to sustain her lessons after our funding ceased. This is particularly frustrating for the client as she knows she would be an excellent worker and asset to any organisation and she is struggling to find the job. At present she is about to change over to JSA and the pressure is on her now to take a job...any job. Her feeling is that she has not studied for 2 years in Social Care to take just any job, however, she does feel the passionate about getting a job but it must be the right job or she is unlikely to sustain employment and plunge her further into debt and depression.

The Issue: Housing

Parents who are living in privately rented accommodation find it scary to contemplate taking a job when paying a high rent. Social housing is limited throughout Scotland and this is holding many parents back from working as they cannot afford the rent even with assistance.

Case Study

Client is a lone parent with a 2 year old, she currently lives with her brother and they rent a 3 bedroom flat, the landlord has given them notice to quit therefore she is now on the homeless list. The client has been offered 2 properties that are unsuitable for the following reasons; high rise flats that depend on the lift working, client suffers from chronic back pain and feels this would be unmanageable with a buggy should she have to use the stairs in the event of the lift not working. The second property is on the fifth floor and the stairway is unhygienic and several drug users live in the flats. The client was taken aback that the local authority have said they have made 'fair and reasonable' offers of housing as she is or about to be homeless, therefore she should consider these or she is back to the bottom of the list. The client is desperate to get back to work and has a very good work history as a Personal Assistant, she is confident that she will get part-time work, however, she said her life is on hold because of her housing situation. An appeal has now been lodged with the Local Authority to look at another offer of housing. Advisers asked if they could take into account employability and the high chance of this client coming off benefit and being able to pay her own rent, this unfortunately will not be taken into consideration.

The Issue: Lack of affordable childcare

Affordability and accessibility of childcare have significant impacts on the ability to work.

Case Study

Client who is a lone parent wants to accept a job as a customer service advisor shift 5pm till 10pm, she has been looking for a job that will fit around school hours. Client is on JSA so the expectation is that this client should be looking for work

The issues that the client will experience are:

- Pay an additional premium for childcare as it is outside normal hours, if available.
- The impact on the child being picked up from childcare provider at 10.30pm in the evening that will create disruptive sleep patterns for the child, and possibly unable to cope with school or nursery next day

Case Study

Client is on JSA and would like a part-time job in retail

The issues the client will experience are:

- Pay an additional premium for weekend childcare as that is when the business needs her to work, if available.

- May be unable to provide **exact** work patterns to childcare provider (employers often give a maximum of 1 weeks' notice for rota's). Therefore keeping a childcare place may be incurring additional childcare costs unnecessarily ie: childcare when she doesn't need it or the childcare provider will be unable to provide the service as they cannot be flexible unlike employers that require their employees to be flexible.

Case Study

Client has the opportunity to take a job that means they are working until 6pm in the evening. Has two children aged 12 and 14.

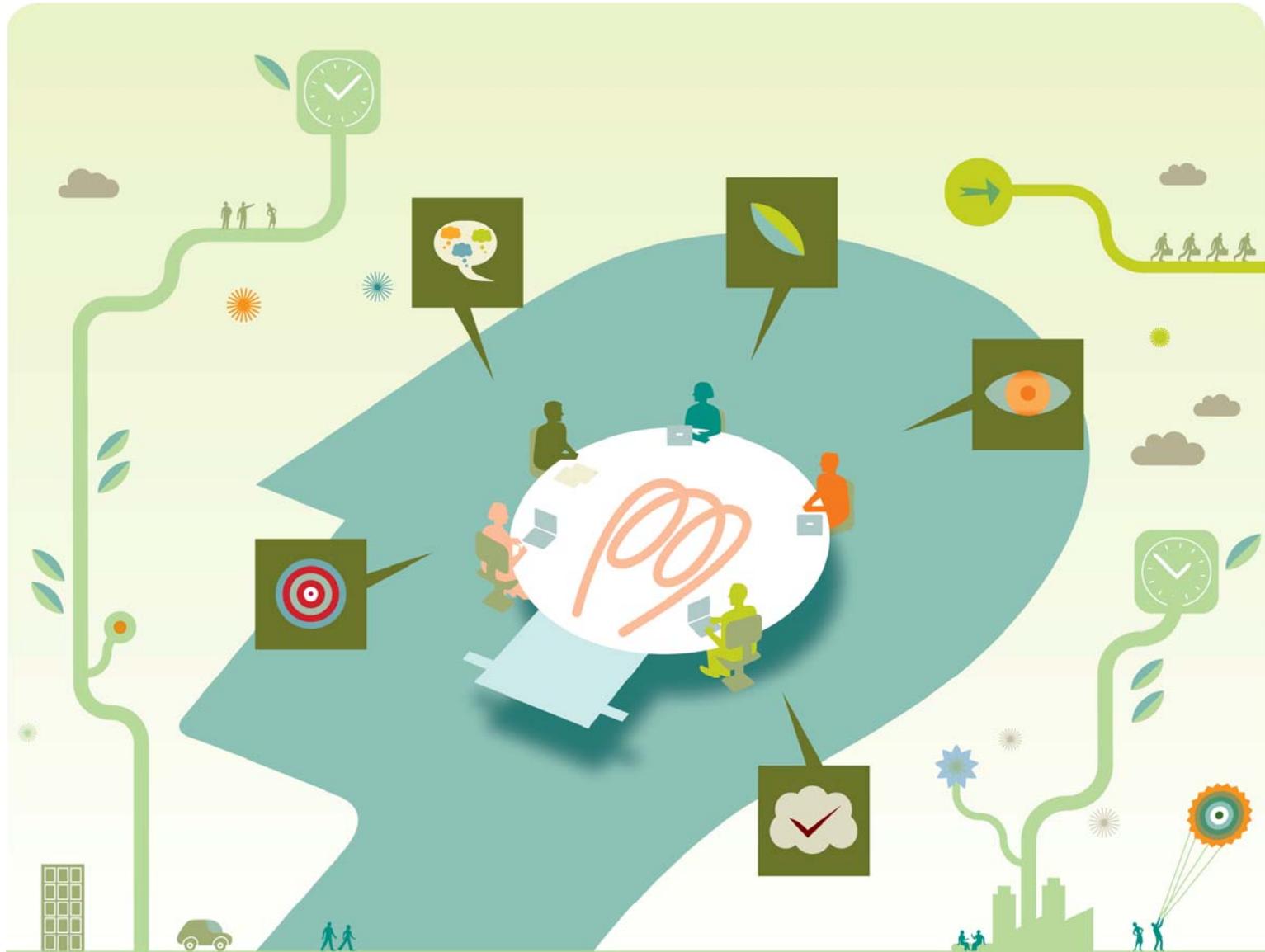
Issues the client will experience are:

- No childcare available for this age group, children are too old for childminder and out of hours school club and often childcare provision finishes at 6.00pm
- Unable to stay in the house on their own until parent comes home, the reasons for this are they are too young and not responsible enough to be left

Parents have to decide if their children are responsible to be left at the age of 14 although there is no definitive age. It would appear to leave a child at the age of 14 is at the discretion of the parent to decide if they can leave the child and not worry that issues may arise from this. As long as the child is not cooking a meal or lighting a fire. It must be noted that should there be any incident where the child is left then the police will contact the parent to investigate.

Case Study

Client has a part-time cleaning job, Working for Families are paying childcare for 5 weeks to allow the client to settle into her job without worry. The childcare she has chosen is near to home. WFF are paying a non-refundable £50.00 deposit, but the provider is still asking the client to pay an additional deposit of £200 that she is having to find quickly as there is a time limit to this. Despite the inherent unfairness in this if this is the policy of the provider the client has no choice but to pay.



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