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Evaluation of the Disadvantage Subsidy Scheme in Wiltshire and Somerset



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Summary

This briefing describes the findings of an evaluation of the disadvantage subsidy scheme in Somerset and Wiltshire. Staff experienced a number of successes such as better partnership working, and extending choice for children and young people, and had to confront several challenges such as how to ensure safety, deciding on entitlement, and undertaking effective consultation. In all, the impact of the subsidy was positive. Evidence suggests that school attendance and readiness to learn was increased for the children and young people taking part, and that staff found it easier to foster parental engagement and a sense of inclusion. Family life was enhanced, and children and young people appreciated having the opportunities they were offered. The findings of this study will be of use to all those working in schools who are planning, or currently operating, the disadvantage subsidy in their school.

Background

The Government expects all children to have access to extended provision through their schools (DfES, 2005). This commitment complements the Every Child Matters and national childcare agendas, and follows from the Full Service Extended Schools (FSES) initiative. A core offer of provision is required:

- Childcare (in primary schools, a safe place to be in secondary schools);
- A varied menu of activities;
- Parenting support;
- Swift and easy access (to other agencies and providers);
- Community access to ICT and other facilities.

Schools either offer this provision on their own premises or work in clusters with other schools and in collaboration with other providers, so that families can be signposted to local provision, preventing overlaps. The previous government committed significant investment (over £1bn) in extended services between 2005 and 2011. This included over £200million to enable extended schools specifically to support disadvantaged children and young people. This additional funding is intended to ensure that economically disadvantaged children and young people can access the full range of activities offered in extended schools. Although the Extended Schools strategy is aimed at all schools and all pupils, it has always been part of an overall policy to make an impact on disadvantage.

Research objectives

Newcastle University was commissioned by Somerset and Wiltshire Local Authorities in order to evaluate the operation of the disadvantage subsidy. The objectives were to;

- describe the implementation and operation of the Disadvantage Subsidy in both Wiltshire and Somerset
- identify successes and challenges
- demonstrate the impact of the subsidy for year 6 and 7 students

Methods

The research was carried out between May and September 2010. In Wiltshire, the study was conducted in Trowbridge, and in Somerset, the study took place in Glastonbury and Bridgewater. These were pathfinder areas that received funding for the subsidy from 2008. Data was collected about the activities that children and young people entitled to the subsidy took part in, and their school attendance rates. Year 6 and 7 pupils took part in discussion groups or individual interviews and were asked about:

- their choice of action: what was wanted, what was on offer, what was secured
- their perceptions of the subsidy scheme
- the impacts on them and expectations for the future
- satisfaction with the subsidy scheme
- any unmet needs and difficulties

Discussion groups were also held with parents, and interviews were conducted with key staff, such as extended services co-ordinators, family support workers and headteachers.

How the disadvantage subsidy works

The disadvantage subsidy funding has now been devolved into schools in both authorities, although it was previously held by the local authority in Somerset. Both LAs have launched branded schemes whereby disadvantaged

children and young people can access activities offered by local providers and participate in school based activities that would normally incur a charge, for free. Disadvantage is predominantly defined as those young people entitled to free school meals or who are in care. In addition, Wiltshire LA have broadened their criteria to respond to individual circumstances in order to provide support through the subsidy, and have included the receipt of certain benefits among their criteria.

Free Time: Wiltshire

The subsidy in Wiltshire was packaged as a scheme called Free Time entitling eligible children and young people to vouchers for any activity they chose in their local area. Alternatively providers could be paid directly from schools. Disadvantaged young people were identified by schools and given an information pack containing suggested activities, as well as a book of vouchers that could be used as payment. Providers could also invoice schools directly if they were unable to accept the vouchers (and particularly for primary aged children). Each young person was entitled to approximately £200 per year. Activities available included craft, dance, music, sport and exercise, theatre, cookery, outdoor pursuits, and more unusual activities such as archaeology and capoeira. Young people can also source their own activities and have them paid for by the subsidy if they wish. In that sense, the opportunities are unlimited, ranging from a trip to the theatre, to music lessons, gym membership, or holidays.

Give it a Go: Somerset

Disadvantaged children and young people aged 5-16 are entitled to up to 2 hours of out of school activities per week (rising to 30 hours in school holidays). A wide variety of activities are available through schools and local providers, such as drama, sports and music, as well as established activities such

as Scouts or Brownies, and young people can also use their entitlement for activities such as residential school trips and breakfast clubs. Young people are referred by their school or a support worker, and payment is made directly to the provider from the LA. Recently, schools have held the budget and have been making payments to providers. The funding equates to approximately £300 per child, per year. Packs were distributed to schools and local partners to raise awareness of the subsidy and explain the referral process.

Successes and challenges

Implementing any new scheme generates knowledge about what works well, and what is more challenging. Implementing the disadvantage subsidy in Somerset and Wiltshire is no exception. However, what comes out strongly from the views of all of those involved (schools, parents and young people), is how worthwhile and positive the scheme has been. Extended services staff have appreciated the opportunity to help families in need, and relished the increased opportunities for collaboration with partners, and parental engagement that access to the subsidy has created. Parents have found the scheme, on the whole, easy to use and lacking in stigma. Young people have not experienced any problems with using the schemes, or experienced any barriers to participation due to the way the scheme has been administered. The following are some themes that have emerged from the data collected, about the various benefits and challenges that have been experienced along the way.

Partnership working

The success of the subsidy scheme has relied heavily on the commitment of partners to co-operate (particularly in Wiltshire) and continue to provide the level of provision that is needed to meet the needs of the students. Major partners have been local leisure centres. In Wiltshire a leisure centre representative sits on the steering group. In many cases, schools and providers have found working together to be mutually beneficial. On the whole, schools have found it easy to work with

external providers and this has been facilitated in large part by the ES co-ordinators. Providing capacity through the use of local providers has meant that extended services co-ordinators and Parent Support Advisors have had an important role to play in auditing existing community provision, and making links with potential partners.

Working in partnership with local

There's hidden benefits to the whole thing as well. Because we've had to make contact, we've had to make friends with all of these people that do all sorts of weird things, it actually makes it easier. It makes us feel like we're better linked in with them. So it does feel like partnership, or community, perhaps more so. (Extended Services Co-ordinator)

providers has meant that schools have not had to vastly increase their capacity to provide activities to meet the demand generated by the subsidy. Some local providers have expanded their provision and employed new staff, and this is seen by schools to be a more sustainable solution than trying to provide all activities in school. Schools have had to work closely together too, for example in jointly funding family activities (such as a family swimming pass) where children attend different schools. Many schools have been able to provide a wider variety of activities for young people, and these have proved to be more manageable when assisted by subsidy funding.

Consultation

Consultation was an important feature of the implementation of the subsidy in both authorities. A variety of methods were used from surveys of young people to individual conversations. Young people did not feel that questionnaires were an adequate method of consultation, and preferred face to face contact, or peer consultation. Involving young people is important in order to engage young people and ensure that the right services are available.

Young people stressed the need for ongoing, effective consultation. It is always difficult to involve everyone in consultation, and some young people could not remember being consulted, yet expressed a wish to be involved. It is not enough, according to them, to conduct consultation at the start of a scheme, but an effort needs to be made to involve them in deciding what needs to be provided.

Extending choice

It is clear that by offering activities funded by the subsidy, more choices have been available for disadvantaged young people. The activities they have taken part in, for the large part, have been ones that they would not have been able to do otherwise. Young people have had a wide variety of activities to choose from. There is evidence that both schools and local partners have been able to provide more, and better quality activities for young people to choose from.

Ensuring safety

Because schools are paying for an activity, they feel some sense of responsibility for that. CRB checking can take time. Activities at the beginning have therefore centred around larger providers, but over time other providers providing the 'funky little things' come on board. Administrative time is needed to ensure that agencies meet required standards, or there is a risk that opportunities for young people will be restricted.

School v local authority control

For a lot of children, it probably is the difference between being able to do something and not being able to do something. Because even though a lot of parents would sacrifice something for their kids to still go ahead and do it anyway, others aren't even in a position to do that. (Parent)

In Somerset, the LA has been administering the budget and making payments to providers. More recently, this function has been devolved to schools. Although schools have taken on an extra administrative burden,

parents feel that this is more convenient for them. The work is manageable when there are small numbers of children eligible for the subsidy, but if there are large numbers of eligible children in a school, thought needs to be given to the extra workload this will create, and who is to undertake this work.

The entitlement

There are mixed views from ES staff about whether parents and young people should be told how much they are entitled to. Children and/or parents were not always told how much they were entitled to as some schools did not want to limit those who needed more, on the understanding that some children would use less.

It was evident that many young people were aware of the limit and this worried some of them. Some young people had been deterred from starting a new activity for fear they would run out of money, and have to stop. This was seen as worse than not taking part in the activity at all. Some young people showed a keen awareness of the need to budget, and demonstrated how they had made choices about which activities to undertake, in the knowledge that the funding would not entitle them to participate in everything they wanted to do. Some families had 'saved up' the entitlement to pay for more expensive activities such as residential trips, and continued to pay weekly for less expensive activities. Both parents and young people expressed a desire to be kept more informed about their entitlements to avoid having to end activities, or feel pressured into continuing them when the household budget would not stretch that far, thus getting into debt.

The impact of the subsidy

It is expected that by taking part in out of school activities, young people will gain confidence and self-esteem and be in a better place to be able to enjoy school and achieve their potential. Enhancing wellbeing has been an important focus of ensuring that deprived young people have access to the same opportunities that their peers enjoy. A number of impacts were identified from the

scheme in Somerset and Wiltshire, and it was evident that young people had benefited in many ways. Due to the timescale of the research, and difficulties in data collection, we were not able to measure any impacts on attainment using hard data, but this kind of evidence often takes years to emerge in any event. We did, however, note reported improvements in young people's readiness to learn, and in their general wellbeing, which is an important pre-requisite to achievement. Some of the impacts noted are presented here, along with case studies of the impact that the subsidy has had on individual young people and families.



Uptake

We selected a secondary school in each of Wiltshire and Somerset to look in some detail at entitlement and uptake. At the Wiltshire school, sixty two year 7 pupils were entitled to the subsidy from four feeder schools. Of those, two thirds of young people had accessed activities using the funding either in year 6, year 7 or both.

Of the 25 young people in year 7 eligible for the subsidy in the Somerset school, 16% had accessed it in year 6, and 16% had accessed it in year 7. No young people had accessed it in both years. In both authorities, efforts had been made to promote the subsidy, including letters, information packs, direct face to face approaches and word of mouth. Direct face to face approaches via trusted workers seemed to work best in

encouraging young people to participate, and the uptake of activities was something that took time to establish and grow.

School attendance

The feeder primary schools in Wiltshire were able to supply data about attendance for current year 7 pupils whilst they were in year 6. For those young people who had participated in activities funded by Free Time in both years 6 and 7, average attendance had risen by one percentage point from 96.1% to 97.1%. For those young people who had only accessed activities in year 6, average attendance had risen by two percentage points, from 94.3% to 96.7%. The average attendance in year 7 for those children who had not participated was 94.0%. We cannot say with certainty from these figures that participation had increased attendance, as many other factors may be involved, but there is much anecdotal evidence to back up these figures. The following comment from a family support worker illustrates the views of professionals and parents that young people are more keen to be at school if they are taking part in activities:

It's positive within education because their brains are recharged, and this, that and the other. They're doing something they enjoy. Especially if it's an after school club or before school club, it does help with attendance, because they want to get to school that day.

In addition to increasing attendance rates, participation in activities has the potential to enhance learning, or at the least, tackle some of the barriers to learning such as low self-esteem.

Readiness to learn

Parents and workers we spoke to were keen to stress that they had seen positive differences in the young people that were participating in activities using the

subsidy. The general consensus was that by participating, young people were able to try out new things, without any pressure to succeed, and were then able to find things that they were good at, and that they enjoyed. This in turn, gave them more confidence and was seen to have the potential to enable them to learn more effectively.

When Chloe started school she was a quiet withdrawn four year old. She rarely spoke. The PSA became involved with the family and discovered a traumatic past, with parental drug and alcohol abuse, and a history of social services intervention. Both her parents attended rehabilitation and the family have slowly turned their life around. In addition to that, Chloe was entitled to help through the subsidy, and started to attend drama classes. She is now in year 3 and has become much more confident, and is able to participate in class more effectively. The FSW puts this down to both the family situation improving and her participation in drama.

Parents were also keen to tell us about the changes in their children. The most compelling evidence, in some ways, comes from the young people themselves. They recognised the link between taking part in activities and becoming more confident and ready to learn.

It's helping me concentrate on it [schoolwork]. When I do my GCSEs when I'm older I can concentrate a bit more and get higher grades.

Well the kick boxing made me feel confident, more confident in what I'm doing.

It helps you with your maths as well sometimes.

I think it helps me with my learning. It helps me to know that I can do it and I'm not gonna be scared.

Inclusion

Deprived young people are often the most excluded from their communities and are not able to participate in the kinds of activities that their peers take for granted. By using the subsidy, young people have been able to experience taking part in a wider range of activities and have had opportunities opened up to them that were previously denied to them. Taking part in activities has also helped young people to meet new friends and become part of a group.

My daughter is quite shy so she holds back quite a lot from getting to know other children. But by doing this she's talked, she's in a position where she has to talk to the person next to her. Suddenly the barriers are broken. So it's actually doing a lot for her confidence. (Parent)

Enhancing family life

Activities can give respite for children from a difficult home life, and also for parents who find it hard to cope, especially if they are ill. On occasion, activities undertaken using the subsidy have supported care plans for young people. Season tickets to local swimming pools can enable a family to take part in an activity together. Parents expressed guilt at not being able to provide the opportunities they felt that their children needed and also acknowledged the guilt that their children felt in asking to take part in activities knowing it would have to be paid for from the family budget.

My daughter will actually opt not to do something because she doesn't want me to spend the money, which is quite sad. So when she knows it's Free Time she doesn't feel guilty for using my money. (Parent)

Parents felt that the subsidy had eased those feelings of guilt.

Jim and Jean are a couple with three primary school aged sons. They have always worked hard, and been committed to providing their boys with the opportunities they themselves did not have as children. Their sons took part in activities and participated in school trips and holiday activities. A year ago, Jim had to give up his job to care for Jean, who was in poor health. They struggled to ensure that their children could still participate in activities, but found ends increasingly difficult to meet. By using the subsidy, all the boys attend breakfast club, after school activities, and holiday activities. The family also uses local leisure facilities as a family, enabling them to do fun activities together. The parents feel that being able to participate in activities has given their boys more confidence, and helped them to fit in among their friends. It has kept them fit and active, and gives them a respite from the stresses of daily family life. It has also helped Jim and Jean to cope with the guilt that they feel at not being able to give their children these opportunities themselves.

Parental engagement

Being able to offer activities is sometimes used as a 'sweetener' to engage families in accessing further support. It enables families to see their school as supportive rather than enforcing.

You gain the parents' trust a lot quicker. You can see results quicker. It has been a very, very handy tool, because you start off on a good footing for them, providing them with something that makes their child happy. (FSW)

One headteacher explained the positive impact the subsidy had had on the relationships with parents at his school. A positive relationship with parents is seen by him to raise the profile of the

school, and of the area more generally. As children get to know about the opportunities open to them, they start to develop a pride in their area and school.

The more that you are doing to support a child and give them opportunities, the more likely you are to have a positive relationship with the parents and carers even if they themselves had a rough time at school. That all improves the relationships you can have with parents who might otherwise be less engaged and therefore it's good for the reputation of the school. (Headteacher)

Providing opportunities for success

The subsidy enabled young people to take part in activities that they had never tried before. This opened up new opportunities for them to succeed. Young people explained how good it felt to be good at something, and that it made them feel proud and happy. They acknowledged that they did not succeed at everything they tried, but appreciated being given the chance to try different things, and discover the things that they could achieve in. Parents also recognised the importance of the subsidy for enabling young people to discover their talents, and try out different things.



Messages from young people

The pupils who had taken part in activities under the scheme expressed their appreciation. They told us that they were able to meet new people, learn new skills, have fun with friends and get fit. The

comments they made were positive and compelling.

It gives you confidence.

I think it's really nice to have Free Time money so you can do lots of activities and have fun with your life.

It makes me feel like I have a future.

Young people saw many benefits of taking part in activities using the subsidy including:

- meeting new friends
- seeing what you're good at
- having fun
- getting out and doing something
- keeping healthy and fit
- feeling happy and calm

In conclusion

The availability of the subsidy to enable young people to take part in activities was seen by all to be positive. Enabling young people to participate had seen them increase their attendance at school, gain in confidence, be in a better place to learn, and had eased the strains of family life. Young people had been given opportunities to succeed and parents had engaged more readily with schools.

The implementation of the subsidy had not always been an easy ride, however. As with any scheme of this kind, a steep learning curve had occurred until systems had been established that could ensure the scheme ran smoothly. It is clear from the accounts of those who were involved that several key ingredients need to be in place for a smooth delivery. Sufficient resources for administering the subsidy must be in place from the beginning, to ensure swift and easy payment, safety checks, and to liaise with families. Schools must be prepared to engage with external agencies and may wish to consider allocating a specific person to carry this work forward, such as a co-ordinator or family

support worker. It is also important to consult with the users, i.e. young people themselves, in order to ensure that the right kinds of activities are on offer so that the most impact can be made. This consultation needs to be ongoing and transparent.

In addition, continuous efforts need to be made to stimulate uptake in the target group, in order to ensure that as many young people as possible benefit from what is on offer. This seems to work best by direct face to face contact with trusted adults, and developing clear strategies to support this work need to be a key consideration. Avoiding stigmatising young people and families is also of crucial importance in a scheme of this kind, and it was clear that staff had been careful to consider this issue. The parents and young people we spoke to did not feel that they had been stigmatised, but did express guilt about their circumstances, and there is a need to be sensitive to this.



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