The Evaluation of the Children’s Fund Projects in Lincolnshire

August 2004

Children’s Fund Lincolnshire
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“Our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty…It is a 20 year mission”

Tony Blair,
March, 1999
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We would like to sincerely thank all of the children, parents and carers who have given up their time to contribute to this research and to tell us about their many experiences. The service providers of the Children’s Fund projects have also provided us with valuable information and support that has enabled us to complete our work.

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1. Introduction

Today in the UK, around 20% of children live in relative poverty\(^1\) while over 4% live in an absolute poverty (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: Tanniru, 2002 and Brewer et al, 2003). Poor children have less access to material goods and are more likely to experience poor health, score lower on standardized tests and experience violent crime (Lewit et al, 1997). Moreover, it is believed that poor children are more likely to end up as poor adults (Yaqub, 2002).

The UK government’s policy focuses on recognising the issues surrounding children’s lives and has undertaken various initiatives in order to make a difference. The opening quote is a testimony to that and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has reinforced the Prime Minister’s agenda by calling child poverty “a scar on the nation’s soul”. Nowadays, researchers have recognised that ending income related poverty is not on its own enough to ensure decent opportunities for all children (Palmer et al, 2002 and CASE, 2000). Therefore, the New Labour Government is working towards improving the family, local community, social and wider economic environment of children. One example of this is the Children’s Fund, which was established in 2001 in different parts of the UK.

The Children’s Fund is an exciting programme with the potential to make real changes to the lives of children (5-13 year olds) who have experienced early signs of difficulties (Blunkett and Boateng, 2001). This scheme channels millions of pounds directly to local communities and voluntary groups for over three years (Society Guardian, 2001). Basically, it forms a key part of the Government’s strategy to tackle child poverty and social exclusion (Children’s Fund Guidance I, 2001 and CYPU, 2003). Furthermore, its objectives go in parallel with initiatives such as Sure Start which supports children from birth until the age of 4, and Connexions which works with young people in their teens (13 - 19 year olds) by providing advice and support.

\(^1\) This figure is the fourth largest within the OECD countries.
According to Blunkett and Boateng (2001), the specific aims of the Children’s Fund include empowering children, young people, families and communities by promoting their aspirations and experiences. It also endeavours to tackle the economic disadvantage and isolation faced by children by increasing their access to matters that are often taken for granted by privileged children (e.g. sport activities) and providing an opportunity for children’s voices to be heard. It is argued that these aims can be achieved by accomplishing the following objectives.

1. Promoting attendance in schools and improving educational performance,
2. Prevention of crime,
3. Reduction of health inequality and
4. Ensuring that preventive activities are accessible and working towards social inclusion.

In order to achieve the above objectives, so far a total of 83 projects have been set up in Lincolnshire (For detail see Appendix 1). Most of the interventions focus on the promotion of educational performances since education is crucial in affecting the long-term welfare and destiny of children. Yet, the Lincolnshire Children’s Fund budget was reduced in year 2004 due to the government’s financial priority shift towards other matters. Thus, more than half of these projects were cut off from the Children’s Fund in April 2004. Now, there are only 34 remaining projects, which are running with significantly reduced funding.

Fundamentally, the aim of this study is to evaluate the activities of the Children’s Fund projects in Lincolnshire from the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries (i.e. children and their carers). We chose to focus on stakeholders like children and their carers due to the fact that they are the direct users of the Children’s Fund projects. Here we intend to empower the beneficiaries of the Children’s Fund by giving them a chance to express their views on ‘what works’ and ‘what doesn’t’ regarding the projects that they have been taking part in. Finding out this information is important because it is possible that the Children’s Fund programme can improve the well being of children but still leave them worse off as compared to children who do not participate in the programme (Currie, 1997). This might happen because the
disadvantages of poor children are multi-natured and the projects might not address all aspects of poverty.

To make this study unique, we have incorporated training and support for service users and providers in evaluation techniques (See Appendix 4). Moreover, the extensive and original evaluative summary we have conducted from the Children’s Fund beneficiaries’ perspectives is also a strong distinctive feature. The overall aim of our critical evaluation can be achieved by;

a. Finding out whether the activities of the Children’s Fund projects go in line with the needs of the children and their carers (i.e. in terms of being preventive, socially inclusive and empowering),

B. Identifying examples of best practice,

C. Providing basic evaluation skills to service users and providers of the Children's Fund projects and

d. Disseminating the research findings to children, their carers and policy makers in a way that is accessible to them.

The remainder of this report incorporates 6 sections. Section 2 looks at the research methodology and section 3 discusses the sampling technique. We will talk about ethical issues, document and data analysis in sections 4, 5 and 6 respectively. Finally section 7 presents the details of training we have provided in Lincolnshire and section 8 concludes this report.

2. Research Methodology

As indicated in section 1, the aim of this research is to evaluate the projects funded by the Children’s Fund in Lincolnshire from the perspectives of children and their carers. Considering the views of children in the UK is an interesting phenomenon since they are regarded as a minority group in their social positioning within local and national
power structures (Mayall, 1999). Thus, the structural minimal consideration reflected in government policies that concern children (Mayall, 1999 and Blunkett and Boateng, 2001) diminishes as we start to perceive them as ‘experts’. The issue unravelled above indicates the need for designing a contextually embedded research methodology, which is capable of reflecting children’s standpoints. Thus, we selected to use a qualitative research methodology since it is more appropriate in terms of getting an in-depth understanding and conceptualisation regarding the views of the participants. Thus, the specific technique we use for our evaluation is based on a participatory approach. This is a community-based approach to consultation that prioritises the views of local people as ‘experts’ (PEANuT, 2003). Here, both the researcher and the researched are collaborators in the construction of knowledge, which reduces researchers’ bias, particular focus and blind spots (Banister et al, 1994).

In terms of involving the beneficiaries of the Children’s Fund projects as ‘experts’, discussions were undertaken surrounding the expectations children/carers had when they initially joined a particular project, the benefits gained from the project, strengths and limitations of projects and ideas on how to make progress. We used focus groups and semi-structured interviews as data collection procedures (For details see Appendix 2). The questions have a semi-structured nature exploring ten key and intrinsically related issues. These have facilitated dialogues and two-way communications among the researched parties and with the researcher. In addition, the evaluation involved children and their carers separately because discussions that are undertaken jointly can affect the formulation of a child standpoint (Hood et al, 1999). In the end, the data gathered through the various research techniques was analysed using Ms Word and Ms Excel packages.

3. Sampling Technique

In essence we made an initial decision to focus on projects that are continuing after April 2004. This is because the purpose of our evaluation is to find out whether a project can be improved while it is still running rather than looking at its output in more detail. In addition, time and finance are other issues that we needed to take into
consideration. Thus, we decided to do a case study of 6 projects\(^2\) since such an analysis delivers a detailed insight regarding the children and carers involved in projects funded by the Children’s Fund (Denscombe, 1998).

Prior to selecting the 6 projects for our case study, we were faced with a bewildering array of choices, which proved difficult (Currie, 1997). In order to solve this problem, we used a *purposive sampling technique*, which enabled us to select the typical and interesting projects. The projects selected include; *Bereavement Support Worker-ULHT*, which was later changed to the *Owls Nurture group*; *YMCA Activity Programme, Sense East, Minority Ethnic Communities Project, the Lincolnshire Children’s Support Service, Sutton Bridge on Two Wheels and Sutton Bridge Real Life Baby Project*. The nature of the projects and the rationale for incorporating each one of these projects into our study will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Here, we emphasise that selecting 6 projects and ensuring their generalisability to the remaining 34 projects is a difficult task since every project has its own specific aims and target groups.

Moreover, the projects have different natures due to their costs, duration, the context in which they are set up and their scale. Nevertheless, all the projects have identical aims, namely to prevent social exclusion and poverty of children in Lincolnshire by working towards achieving one or more of the objectives of the Children’s Fund (See section 1). Following this line, an effort will be made to ensure the generalisability of our research findings towards projects that are not included in our evaluation (Denscombe, 1998).

The Bereavement Support service was identified as a potential case study firstly because it incorporated several of the Children’s Fund’s sub-objectives. Secondly, the nature of this service provision is relatively unique. There has been a noticeable deficiency of similar services for children, and where they have existed, their profile has been noticeably low. However, after careful consideration, the project decided to withdraw, because they felt that due to the sensitive circumstances of their work, it would have been inappropriate for researchers to meet with children and parents.

\(^2\) This constitutes 18% of the whole projects that continue after April 2004.
Several consultations with the Children’s Fund core team followed, and a number of replacement sites were considered. The nurture group at Mablethorpe primary school was chosen because its service delivery could be measured against a number of key outcomes identified in the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance relating to education and several of the 7 sub-objectives. In support of this, the inclusion of the nurture group under the theme of promoting educational opportunities (in the Children’s Fund Plan 2004-2006) would mean an increase in the representativeness of our sample. The nurture group had also been identified as a project which attempted to encourage strong parental involvement, and the evaluation team were interested to see if this aim was being realised.

The second project we evaluated was the YMCA Activity Programme. This project deals with the provision of sport and one-to-one mentoring activities to young children. Evaluation of such a project is useful because the available activity may prevent children from physical and emotional health difficulties. The project is also attractive in terms of scale as it incorporates around a quarter of the children from the Lincolnshire Children’s Fund projects.

The next three projects selected for our evaluation were Sense East, Minority Ethnic Communities Project and the Lincolnshire Children’s Support Service. These projects work for disabled children, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, and children experiencing difficult home circumstances respectively. Looking at such projects is beneficial since it helps to look at the effort being made towards children who are most at risk of social exclusion due to their difficulty in accessing status and their well-documented disadvantages. Thus, it is convincing to argue that listening to these marginalised children’s voices assists their fair representation and sensible policy-making in the future.

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3 For example, improved educational performance
4 Note that the children’s fund is involved with 4,500 children in Lincolnshire
Lastly, we have selected the Sutton Bridge on Two Wheels and Real Life Baby Projects whose major aim is to tackle teenage boredom and pregnancy through 5-week workshops and other similar activities. We decided to focus on these type of projects since the UK is struggling with one of the highest rate of youth crime and teenage pregnancy in Western Europe (Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2003). For the effectiveness of government resource allocation, the evaluation will assist in suggesting improvements of preventive programs if malpractice is observed or replicating good practice in other locations.

The sampling technique we undertook within each project was determined after we have deliberated on a series of brainstorming sessions with the Children’s Fund staff, a few selected children and their carers (Henderson et al, 2002). All these gave us ideas about how to advertise the evaluation process, appropriate ways to select samples and the timing of interviews and focus group discussions. We intend to incorporate frequent users of the Children’s Fund projects because such people have an intimate and crucial knowledge about the projects.

4. Ethical Issues

Since research is context specific, ethical considerations must be borne in mind during the process of evaluation (Save the Children, 2001). Fundamentally, the dignity, safety and well being of the researched are given utmost priority. We believe that using a language that is free of stigmatisation helps in terms of attaining respect for all stakeholders particularly for those who have vulnerable status (Blaxter et al, 1999). The safety and well being of the researched is maintained by conducting the fieldwork in locations that are familiar to them (e.g. their home). This helps because they feel a sense of belongingness to their own environments. When these places were changed for unforeseen reasons, the researchers ensured their well being by showing fire exits, toilets and other relevant places like the nearest cafes.

Moreover, an effort was made to work towards minimising the power relationship that will immediately be created between the researcher and the researched. This is created due to the different status and the age gap between carers/children and researcher/s.
Even if the elimination of power relationship can be a difficult task, we worked towards minimising it via the language we use and by visiting the projects many times, which helped us to improve our cultural appropriateness. In addition, we have been always committed to getting the consent of carers whenever we involve children in the research. Written and oral debriefing sessions have been conducted regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the research and finding out about the research output (See Appendix 3 for details on written debriefing session). Finally, we have acknowledged and thanked explicitly those who have participated in the research.

5. Document Analysis

This section synthesises the documents of the 7 projects that are selected for evaluation. These are the Library Special Services –Minority Community Project, YMCA-Activity programme, Sense East, Sutton Bridge Baby Project, Sutton Bridge on Two Wheels, the Lincolnshire Children’s Support Service and the Owls Nurture Group. Basically, this analysis will look at various documents including e-mail and letter exchanges projects had with various parties (e.g. their project staff), the minutes of meetings held by project staff and pamphlets distributed in order to advertise project activities. We used the following criteria in the document analysis:

1. Summary of main points, and an examination of context that the document was written in. What is the purpose of the document? Does it have a target audience?

2. Are any aims and objectives set out? Are these realistic/achievable and clear?

3. Is the information in the document clear and understandable? Is it accurate? Examination of how the material is organised - is it coherent? Consideration of the target audience - is the information clear for them?

4. Are any claims being made? Are these realistic? Are there any questions left unanswered?

1. The Library Special Services- Minority Communities Project

Basically, finding out general information about this project was not difficult. This project has been running since July 2003. Its major aim is to prevent vulnerable ethnic
minority children (aged between 5 and 13 years old) from becoming socially excluded. In order to achieve its aim the project runs three major activities. These are the training of library staff which was initiated through the development of library services, an after school club and different academies (e.g. Arabic and Russian) within the Lincolnshire area. The main focus of our evaluation has been on the Arabic Academy.

In essence, the training of library staff focuses on staff’s cultural and racial awareness. Some of the training has already taken place. On the other hand, the after school club has been running since November 2003. This club runs twice a week and incorporates about 8 Portuguese children. Its activities include homework support, fun activities, craft sessions and practical help in terms of integrating the children into the wider community.

Regarding the Arabic academy for Lincolnshire, it has started running in January 2004 in partnership with Branston Community College. The scheme runs Arabic language, Maths, Arabic culture, History, Koran courses and initiatives for celebrating cultural events for children and their carers. Moreover, it promotes wider awareness in the host population. Principally, this project does incorporate any child who is interested to get involved. There are 3 teachers of Arabic as well as other teachers for the children now in post at the academy. In addition, an application has been made to run private prayers at the end of the day. The little information we have regarding, the Russian academy indicates that it runs Russian language training.

**Analysis of document**

Basically, it would be fair to say that the documents of this project are not clear at times. For instance, it is stated that there are three activities being run by the project and these are discussed without providing sections and sub-sections. Another example is the case where the various languages used to advertise the art, craft and poetry program for the ethnic minority children (aged between 5-11 and teenagers) residing in Lincoln is not described. We believe that knowing this is important as language has a strong power in determining the audience. Moreover, the documents do not indicate which ethnic group they are targeting.
Furthermore, coherence of the documents is observed. Yet, the transparency of the documents is somewhat unsatisfactory\textsuperscript{5}. For instance, no information is provided regarding the ways in which contacts with minority communities and international groups across the county can be achieved. Moreover, the procedures in which the 4-outreach workers of the project (i.e., 2 Portuguese, 1 Bulgarian and 1 Sudanese ladies) are selected and employed is not explicitly explained. In addition, there is no information indicating how the initiation of diversity training within education and cultural services directorate is going to be carried forward.

2. The YMCA Activity Programme

The YMCA activity programme was launched in January 2001. This project currently works in 19 schools that are based in Lincoln. The schools are divided into four geographical areas. Some of the activities of the YMCA include PE curriculum, after school and holiday clubs, creative arts and one-to-one work with pupils. The activities are believed to build the self-esteem and social development of young people who are at risk of social exclusion. It is also believed that they will improve attendance, behaviour, inclusion and attainment in schools, team building skills, confidence to work together, enjoying sport and creative arts.

So far there are four full-time activity workers working in the 4 areas. The workers are encouraged to develop their skills in terms of curriculum work, after school clubs, holiday schemes (in-door and out-door so as to cope with adverse weather), one-to-one and residential work and administrative skills.

In October 2003, the evaluation team conducted visits to two of the YMCA’s half term holiday clubs. These were based in North Hykeham’s All Saint’s Church of England School and the Leslie Mansor Primary School in Lincoln. These visits allowed us to gain an understanding of the type of work the YMCA conducts, and how the children are responding to this.

\textsuperscript{5} Note that the issue of transparency is inter-linked with clarity.
21 children were attending the club at *All Saint’s* on the day of the visit, and they firstly took part in ‘ice-breaker’ activities. Although all the children attended the same school, there was a mixture of age groups, and these activities were clearly helping to break down any barriers that might have occurred because of the difference in age. There was a lively and relaxed atmosphere in the gym where the activities were taking place. Two children were reluctant to take part in the activities and were clearly not enjoying themselves, but the main youth worker on duty was dealing with this effectively. At the same time, the rest of the group were engaged in a game of quick cricket outside on the sports field. They seemed to be enjoying the fresh air and running about, and were working well in their teams, particularly in terms of encouraging each other. We were able to speak to one of the volunteers, who was a student at the University of Lincoln. She had got involved with the YMCA through a volunteer ‘hub’ at the university and it was her first day with the Sport in the Community programme. She was enthusiastic about her role and there was a good channel of established communication between the volunteers and the YMCA’s leadership team. We determined that her involvement, and that of the other volunteers, was a good example of the YMCA working closely with the local community and other agencies to enhance their service delivery. After their break, the children went on to engage in a creative activity and it appeared that there was a good balance between combining this and the earlier sports session.

At the Leslie Mansor primary school, there was a slightly smaller group, but a similar relaxed and fun atmosphere was evident. The staff and volunteers were approachable and very willing to engage with the children, and as in the previous school, the important role that volunteers have was evident, particularly when it came to carrying out different activities and managing this effectively within the group.

**Analysis of document**

Basically, the YMCA activity program has the best documentation. The presentation of this project in a report style can be a teaching example to other projects. In addition, the conciseness of the document has saved us time in our assessment.
Generally, the documents of YMCA are clear, coherent and transparent. However, there are cases where clarity was compromised. For instance, there was no clear explanation as to how the activities of YMCA raise self-esteem. In fact, it can be argued that stigmatisation might crop up because children are attending YMCA. This has an adverse impact on their self-esteem. Moreover, it is still not clear as to why some schools in areas that are not considered poor (e.g. some schools in the Hykeham area) were able to be included in the YMCA scheme.

3. The Sense East Project

Sense East offers a range of one-to-one support services to help 10 disabled children from Lincolnshire area who are between the age of 5 and 13. Basically, it aims to help children in accessing their environment, fulfil their potential and live as independently as possible. Specialist services support people with either acquired or congenital deaf blindness are provided by professional trained staff. Basically, an intervener works with a congenitally deaf blind child on a one-to-one basis. They act as an enabler, promoting the child’s development, based on an assessment of their needs. The activities of the project are provided mainly at the children’s home twice a week for 2 hours. Sense East has already done an evaluation of their project by interviewing parents and the overall result of the interview is fair.

Analysis of document

As a whole, the documents of this project are concisely kept. Moreover, we find almost all the information they have provided as clear, coherent and transparent. However, there is lack of clarity in terms of explaining the general overview of the project (e.g. when it was established, how many families it has helped so far etc…).

4. The Sutton Bridge Baby Life Project

The core of the Sutton Bridge baby Life Project program is a parenting simulation. This utilises a baby think it over simulator (i.e. a computer operated robot like baby doll), which is designed to help young adults understand important facts about infants. This includes the unpredictable nature and demands of infants that need to be met
promptly, their time and attention requirements and how they change parents’ way of life profoundly.

In this project, students (i.e. both male and female) will be given the simulator to stay at their home for weekends. During this time, they take the responsibility to attend the needs of the simulator (e.g. they need to respond to the cry of the simulator by touching the ID to contact point in baby’s back). It is believed that an opportunity will be created for children to learn about caring for babies and for parents to discuss issues such as parenting, marriage and dating. The project also provides useful lessons by professionals (e.g. midwives and school nurses) including the first stage of pregnancy, shaken baby syndrome, thoughts on baby’s living space, the cost of having a baby and being a teen mother.

So far, this project has conducted its own evaluation, which did come up with positive response regarding the impact it has on young children’s view of early age sex.

**Analysis of document**

The documents of this project have not been clear at times. For example, it is stated that the project is believed to initiate parents to discuss the issues of unprotected sex and its consequences with their children. Yet, this information is not supported by statistical evidence. Overall, the documents are coherent but not transparent. For instance there is no relevant information as to when the project was established and the impact it has brought on the reduction of teen pregnancy in the Sutton Bridge area.

**Sutton Bridge on Two-Wheel Project**

This is a community-based project that provides cycle maintenance skills for children and young people. A local volunteer who has training in cycle maintenance and City & Guilds provides the lesson. A fully equipped workshop, located in a portakabin in grounds of the local youth club, has been established. The local police force has provided a number of cycles for the children to work on. The children can also work on their own cycles. Afterwards, the refurbished cycles can be sold in order to generate income for the project. The project will also aim to set up a cycling club
involving the whole family in Sutton Bridge, and introduce a road safety programme for younger children.

Analysis of document

This document is clear and coherent. However, it lacks transparency at times. For instance, there is no information as to how and by whom the local volunteer is trained. Moreover, not a lot of information is provided regarding the activities of the cycling club the project is intending to run.

The Lincolnshire Children’s Support Service

The LCSS was established as an extension of the Family Welfare Association (FWA), a national organisation that provides various forms of support to families. When the LCSS secured funding from the Lincolnshire Children’s Fund, it introduced a local service that could follow in the tradition of the FWA, while providing support that was context specific. It is based in Boston, and assists families in this area, as well as those in Spalding and Sutton Bridge. These families will have children aged between 5 and 13, and may be encountering difficulties with finances, the children’s behaviour, domestic violence, health, relationship breakdowns, sexual abuse, bereavement and other similar issues. It is clear from this that the remit of the LCSS is vast, but the service provides highly skilled and qualified staff in order to address these complex needs. Families can refer themselves to the LCSS, or they can be referred by a voluntary or statutory agency. After referral, the LCSS aim to offer short-term support to families who may be reaching a crisis point in dealing with certain issues, and this is expected to last for 6 months. The majority of cases last for 3 months plus. Support may be available after these 6 months, but families will have to be referred again on the basis of a different case. It is expected however that the family support workers would be able to identify difficulties as and when they arise during those 6 months, to prevent the need for re-referral. Children however will remain in contact with the LCSS, through the monthly Sunday fun club. It is the aim of the LCSS to conduct an assessment within 1-2 weeks of a referral, and allocate support within 2 weeks of the assessment. The work that the LCSS conducts varies, from specific activity groups to one- to-one sessions with families based in their home. Advice is offered on issues such as benefits and how to budget, and additional help is made available to children through
one-to-one support on issues such as school and family relationships. Families are often signposted to other services.

**Analysis of Documents**

*Documents used:* (1) Summary of LCSS provided by the Children’s Fund; (2) LCSS leaflet giving a description of the available services and contact details; (3) a poster advertising the LCSS and the ways in which they can help families; (4a) an information pack containing letters to professionals who may find the services of the LCSS useful, and to parents (4b) who may require the support of the LCSS. (5) A leaflet aimed at recruiting volunteers to assist with the work of the LCSS

The documents listed above all provide a similar overview of the services that are offered by the LCSS, and are useful in this respect for providing a clear account of how families can be assisted. The aims and objectives of the LCSS are set out reasonably clearly, although in document 2, these are not set out explicitly. Rather, a greater emphasis is placed upon explaining the work that the LCSS does and what it can offer to parents. It may be that the target audience for this leaflet (parents) would find this more useful, but it is arguably appropriate in terms of transparency to outline why the service has been set up and what it hopes to achieve by offering the type of service that it does. Interestingly, one of the key aims of the LCSS, which is to provide *short-term* assistance to families, is not made clear in document 2, yet it is emphasised in documents 1 and 4a, which are primarily aimed at professionals. Stating this fact to professionals is significant because it allows them to understand where the LCSS stand in relation to other services and perhaps organise their work accordingly. It could be argued however that in document 2, the leaflet that is directed at parents, a misleading picture is given. There is no indication that assistance will be provided on a short-term basis, or how intensive this service will be. Parents are informed of this in a suitable manner when they meet with the LCSS, and this is significant. At the earliest stage possible however, it is recommended that service users are informed of the exact nature of assistance that will be provided in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Documents 1 and 4a are useful for providing evidence that the aims of the LCSS are closely related to the overall objectives of the Children’s Fund. The LCSS state that
they will provide ‘early and intensive’ support that is ‘highly responsive’. This links to a key feature of the Children’s Fund, which is to establish preventative programmes of support to children and families that are exhibiting early signs of difficulty. Their documents show commitment to working alongside organisations that provide similar support to families, particularly by having a system in place that manages referrals. In addition, by working with families in their home environment, the LCSS are offering direct support, recognising that this is the place where there is likely to be a high need, and where there can be greater benefits for service users. This is also outlined in document 2, which is directed at parents, and highlights the ability of support workers to base their service provision at the family’s home. This is clearly explained, and also provides evidence that the LCSS is accessible. To reinforce this, the LCSS demonstrate a significant recognition of the problems that are often faced by parents with young children. They state in document 2 for example that it is important for parents to ‘have time for themselves’, and that the LCSS will support families who don’t usually have access to free time or who need additional assistance during the ‘never ending school holidays and weekends.’ This demonstration of empathy and ability to relate to the needs of families can be said to encourage a greater sense of accessibility to the services that the LCSS provides. This is particularly important when one considers that many of the families who require support may experience various forms of exclusion and may not ordinarily consider approaching organisations such as the LCSS.

While this supportive stance is maintained in some documents, in another (document 3), the language that is used could be interpreted in a more negative manner. This document is a poster that advertises the services of the LCSS. Although it is brief and straightforward, its title: *Are you struggling to be a parent?* may deter parents to access the service because they may not wish to admit or concede that they are facing difficulties. Perhaps it may be more beneficial to adopt a similar line to document 2, which demonstrates more empathy.

Document 4b follows the line of support and understanding of the difficult circumstances faced by many families. It attempts to agree with what may be going through the parents’ mind at the time of reading the letter, that “*bringing up a child is very often hard work, and at times it can be stressful.* The target audience of parents
and carers has therefore been taken into account in this letter, and this is also evident in the language that is used, which is clear and straightforward. The letter is also useful for providing information on the aims and the work of the LCSS, how it is linked to the FWA, and also how it is working alongside other local organisations to provide support for children.

Document 5 is clearly set out, and its intention – to recruit volunteers for the LCSS – is clearly stated. The document’s promise of a kind is to offer *an excellent volunteering experience* (p.1) for those who wish to make a difference to families and who have some spare time. By having these points on the first page, the document may be able to achieve its aim relatively quickly, through an attempt to immediately attract a potential volunteer. Inside the leaflet, the aims of the LCSS are made apparent, which gives the reader some good background information, not only on the organisation, but on the significant role that volunteers can play. The target audience has been considered, because the leaflet is designed in a question and answer format. The information lists the type of work that is available, such as befriending and administrative support, and would meet other practical based queries, such as stating that volunteers would have to gain police clearance. The leaflet is concise, although it could benefit from having feedback from previous volunteers in order to boost recruitment.

**The Owls group at Mablethorpe Nursery and Primary Community School**

The Owls was established in 2002. It is a nurture group, with the primary aim of supporting children who are experiencing a wide range of issues – social, emotional, personal – and not just educational difficulties. In all of these areas, the objective is to provide a nurturing and supportive environment free from distractions, where children who have missed out on early opportunities, for whatever reason, can be assisted. The staff at the Owls attended a training course on nurture groups at Cambridge University to support them in their work. It is important to note that although the Owls is to all intents and purposes a nurture group, it does not accord itself this title publicly. Both staff in the school and families refer to the group simply as the ‘Owls’, in line with the other classes in the school which are also named after birds. It was decided in the early planning stages of the group to drop the word ‘nurture’ from its
title. This was primarily because staff were acutely aware of the potential for stigmatisation and feelings of isolation to arise amongst families, if it was clear within the school community that children were attending the Owls because they were experiencing difficulties. The issue of stigmatisation will be discussed in more detail later, because some parents and children identified it during the fieldwork as having the potential to arise. It was clear from early observations of the Owls however that the staff aim to recognise and meet the needs of families to the best of their ability. The fact that the word ‘nurture’ was not included in the group’s title is a significant indication of this.

All of the children who attend the Owls class have been recommended on the basis of observations made by their class teacher and/or parent. These observations may relate to concerns around the behaviour of the child, their educational attainment or their personal or social development. Further analysis of the child’s needs are established using the Boxall test and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Home visits are usually made, to discuss with the child’s parent(s)/carers what will happen when their son or daughter goes into the class and how they will be supported. These visits may also be used to follow up any concerns that the parent has about the issues their child is currently facing.

Within the formation of the owls class itself, there are children at different levels of development. This is a natural circumstance, as children enter the group at different times, with a wide spectrum of issues that need to be addressed. The children are made aware of these different stages through the accordance of titles. There are ‘owls’, who are at the beginning of their journey of progress and support; snowy owls, who are gradually spending more time back in their own mainstream class having made significant progress; and wise owls, who are preparing to be back in their class full time. They will have a leaving party to mark this important event.

A typical day for the nurture group will always begin with breakfast as the owls’ classroom is fully equipped with kitchen facilities. Although the breakfast is not intended to replace the children’s home breakfast, it is designed to promote manners and social skills which may have been missed out at home. The children are all welcomed individually, both by their teachers and each other, and are then asked to
talk about how they feel at the start of that particular day. The provision of space for
the discussion of feelings to be channelled through everyday activities (such as
breakfast) appears to be an appropriate method for encouraging children to be open
and honest, particularly when they may not have been able to articulate their emotions
significantly before. Visits to the Owls confirmed that this method provides an
opportunity to discuss feelings in an open and unrestrictive environment. As a
consequence, this could play a key role in fulfilling one of the main aims of the Owls,
which is to increase the self-esteem of children through being able to talk confidently
about their feelings This method is also followed during a weekly club for the wise
owls, which is one of the ways in which staff attempt to provide continued to support
to children once they are back in their mainstream class.

The children may then be able to go into their own class for fixed activities such as
P.E, or if the class is taking part in a special activity. The children will then be offered
‘free choice’ of available activities, and will be asked afterwards what they have
learnt from this. This helps the process of understanding the significance of different
activities, rather than just participating in a tokenistic way, and it can encourage self-
assessment. The children will then take part in numeracy or literacy exercises. At the
end of each session in the Owls, the children will be encouraged to add to a targets
chart. This indicates how the children felt they had done at the end of each session in
the group, and they would do this with either smiley faces, faces that expressed an
‘ok’ feeling, and unhappy faces. The children determine how they are feeling against
their individual targets. These targets might range from listening to others, to not
being too quiet in class. The children may also complete a similar chart that provides
an overview of their behaviour and progress. A copy of this second chart is kept with
the child’s mainstream teacher, so that progress can be monitored at every
opportunity. This signifies good communication between staff, and it could be argued
from this that the well being of children in the Owls is considered by all teachers
within the school, and not just those in the nurture group. There is also a home target
sheet for parents to fill out should they wish, with specific issues that may need
addressing in the child’s home environment. This might be something like going to
bed early or completing homework. During the fieldwork, many parents identified the
home target sheets as being a significant feature of the Owls’ service provision,
particularly in terms of easing difficulties at home. This will be discussed in more detail shortly.

On Wednesdays, parents are invited to drop in sessions, to share any issues or concerns, about their home life and/or the issues their child is facing and how they are progressing. These sessions are largely informal, and all parents are welcomed. This is a group drop in session, but parents can also make appointments to be seen on a 1-1 basis.

**Analysis of Document**

The staff at the Owls have produced a brochure aimed primarily at parents and carers whose child may attend the group. It is designed to provide them with information about the group’s structure and activities, and to address any queries they may have. The brochure is clearly laid out, with a good combination of text and pictures of the Owls classroom, the staff, and children taking part in a variety of activities. The pictures would be particularly helpful for parents who require more information about the Owls, as they clearly show all the different aspects of the group. They may also be useful as a discussion prompt for parents and carers who wish to tell their children more about what to expect when they go to the Owls.

The brochure is divided into 7 sections. Each section is designed to give specific information on an aspect of the Owls. In section 2, for example, ‘Meet the Staff’, there is a clear aim to give assurance to parents and carers of the experience and qualifications of the staff. This is supplemented by an effort to empathise with the ‘trials and tribulations’ (Owls brochure p.3) of family life through the teachers’ own experiences. This is done in a non-patronising way and in a reassuring manner, which may well appeal to parents and carers. One of the sections in the brochure is devoted to feedback from existing service users. This is a useful section, because it offers potential service users the opportunity to view the Owls from a perspective other than that of the authors. A section is also given over to questions that may be asked by parents and carers. This is a well thought out section, because it addresses potential concerns, such as ‘what about my child’s academic learning?’, as well as practical issues, such as ‘will this replace breakfast at home?’ and ‘is this (breakfast) free?’ All of the questions outlined in the brochure would be important to parents and carers, so it is significant that they have been addressed. It may be useful however for there to be a brief statement at the end of the questions section, which makes it clear that
parents and carers are welcome to meet with staff at the Owls if they have any other queries.

Several statements are made in the brochure relating to the Owls. Although these are portrayed as facts rather than aims, they do link closely to the overall aspirations of the Owls. These include the potential for breakfast time to help build close relationships between the staff and the Owls children. It would however be important for the brochure to be consistent in the manner in which it makes these statements. For example, it states that, “we have found that breakfast time has helped tremendously in developing children’s social and communication skills.” (Owls brochure p.4) (Our emphasis) This would indicate that through feedback or research, the Owls have been able to reach this conclusion. Earlier however, the brochure states that “…sitting around the big table...helps them (the children) to build close relationships...and contributes to an increase in each child’s self esteem.” (Ibid.) This is certainly an aim of the Owls, but it is not clear from the brochure whether this is being achieved or if it is just a claim. It may be helpful for parents and carers if the brochure substantiated this statement, and other similar claims, and/or made clear that these statements are similar to the overall aims of the Owls. An example where this could be applied is on page 1, which states that the Owls room “…provides a very special, calm and nurturing environment.” This could be substantiated by the phrase “the Owls room aims to provide…”

Overall, the brochure provides a coherent and accessible introduction to the Owls’ service provision. This is most notable in the language that it uses. As discussed earlier, it is apparent that the main target audience are parents and carers. The brochure has responded to this in a proficient manner, by using comprehensible language, which is also relatively jargon-free.

5. Research Outcomes

This section is compiled on the basis of the interview and focus group discussions conducted with the service users of the 7 evaluated projects. The details of the questions asked are included in appendix 2, and we have attempted to analyse responses thematically, using the themes under which the questions were organised.
Here we would like to indicate that we have made an effort to talk to as many respondents as possible.

The Library Special Services –Minority Community Project

At the initial stage, we attempted to evaluate the various workshops that run for children at Lincoln Central Library. These workshops involve artistic activities such as poetry writing. However, due to the low level of attendance we witnessed at some of the workshops we have paid a visit to, we decided to have a look into the other activities of this project. Moreover, we believe that children attend only the workshops that are of interest to them. Hence, they may not be regular attendees and lack knowledge on the overall picture of the workshops. Therefore, we decided to have a look into the Arabic Academy.

In essence, we wanted to talk to as many children and parents as possible. However, we had difficulty in accessing the personal addresses of the project participants. Finally, we managed to speak to two parents and 6 children out of approximately 13 that go to the project. Basically, the children who have attended this project had an initial expectation to learn how to read and write the Arabic language. They also wanted to integrate with other children and to have fun. The parents interviewed had also similar viewpoints (i.e. wanted their children to learn the Arabic language and also to integrate). Both children and their parents believe that the academy has so far been good in terms of fulfilling their initial expectations.

|“Arabic families want their children to speak and write in Arabic”| A mother who has 3 children that attend the academy |
|“I learnt the sound of the Arabic letters and I write short sentences.”| A 9-year-old boy |

There are certain improvement areas for the project. To cite some examples, parents want additional schemes to be added into the projects (e.g. more Islam lessons). Moreover, they stated that mixed age group during lessons has made it difficult to handle the classes. They also indicated that having assessment tests every now and
then helps to maintain a good standard for the students and also indicated that having
the Arabic Class in the summer time is advantageous as well. Moreover, the opinion
on the tutors of the project is somewhat positive. In addition, both children and
parents stated that this is not the first evaluation of the Academy that they have been
involved in.

The YMCA Activity Program

Basically, almost all children attending the YMCA learnt about it through their
schools. Then they had to ask the consent of their parents in order to be able to attend.
Yet, both parents and children acknowledge that the decision to attend the project was
mainly down to the interest of the children. The need to have fun, friends and getting
involved in sports were the main reasons for taking part.

Children have stated that they have benefited in terms of getting fitter, being better at
sports and also having fun. In the mean time, parents are glad because their children
enjoy YMCA. It also gives them space and time by engaging their children, reduces
children’s boredom and also keeps them off streets. Almost all the children agreed
that it was important to keep healthy, and that the YMCA supported them in
achieving this. Overall, the views we have gathered indicated that the YMCA activity
program is beneficial to the local community.

*James: At first I didn’t think I’d like it, but then I started really enjoying it and now
I’m having real good fun*

“My mum’s pleased with YMCA ‘cause I’ve always tried to get into hockey clubs”.
10 year old girl

Robert: They actually enjoy it, my mum actually enjoys me going because then she
can get…

Helen: the house to herself
Robert…me and my brother out of the way and not fighting and she can do the housework in peace, and that’s why my mum likes it.

However, children have indicated that they would be happier if they sometimes are given freedom to choose what they like to do and also they wanted to have more time to spend with the YMCA activity scheme. Moreover, the opinions expressed with regards to the play workers of the YMCA are mostly positive (i.e. many are perceived as caring and fun to be with).

_Helen: I think the YMCA people have fun more than we do_

We also asked respondents if they have ever been asked to give feedback regarding the work that is being done by the project. Children have stated that they have been consulted in terms of the type of sports activity they would like to be involved in.

| “If we are not asked for our opinions on the type of games we do, we wouldn’t enjoy ourselves that much”. |
| 9 year old boy |

In August 2004, an evaluation training workshop took place with 6 children from the YMCA. This also provided a good opportunity to gather data on the effectiveness of the YMCA’s summer programme. 6 children were present for our workshop – 2 males and 4 females

The children utilised several PA tools during this workshop. These included a graffiti wall, in which the children listed all the activities that they do in the YMCA summer club. These included swimming, benchball, ice-skating, football, hockey, rounders, dancing and cricket. Using the results from the graffiti wall, the children completed a bean counter⁶, to vote for their favourite activities. Swimming was voted as the overall favourite with 14 votes, followed by ice-skating with 12 votes, and football with 4 votes. Although the children felt that this reflected their own preferences, they

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⁶ A bean counter is a PA tool designed to narrow many choices down to one decision, which should reflect the preference of the group. Each member of the group is usually allocated six stickers, or some similar materials that could be used for voting. He/she can place all their stickers on one choice, or distribute them according to their different preferences.
recognised that there may be a different result if other children from the summer club were asked. They said that football was a favourite activity for many.

The children then completed an *H-form*. This helped them to identify the positive and negative aspects of the YMCA summer club. The children were quick to contend that there were very few negative aspects, citing the bad rain and storms as being the main downside. This was primarily because it prevented them from going outside to play sports. There were many positive aspects to the summer activities however:

- I like the staff
- Tuck shop
- Doncaster Dome
- We like the staff
- Bench ball
- Kick ball
- We like Gaz and Nige and Damo and Chris (*YMCA activity workers*)
- Playing rounders
- We like Anna (*YMCA activity worker*)
- We make lots of cool stuff
- Playing cricket
- We have fun

Using the H-form, the children gave the summer club an overall rating of 10 out 10. Some children were keen to extend this rating however, and award the YMCA

‘*A million out of a million*’ and ‘*one million out of ten*’

The fact that the children focused largely on the positive aspects of the summer club is significant, in terms of the quality of the YMCA’s service provision, and in the organisation’s ability to work closely with schools and communities throughout the year. The need to work with children and young people during the school holidays is arguably particularly important, because boredom is high, and some parents and carers may be restricted by time, money and transport to provide activities. This demonstrates to a high extent the YMCA’s ability to ensure that clubs are accessible in every sense of the word. This attribute is evident in their service delivery as a whole, and is also in line with the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance.

The summer clubs this year have been running for 4 days a week, and the YMCA have attempted to provide 3 clubs a week across Lincoln. By hosting the clubs in the
existing schools that they work with, the YMCA are not only providing a service that is familiar and therefore reassuring to parents and children, but they are meeting their aim of keeping their “...involvement in the school fresh and exciting.” (YMCA Sport in the Community’s Department Plan p. 11).

For one day of each summer club, the children will go to Doncaster Dome, which offers a variety of fun activities, such as swimming and ice-skating. In the morning of each club, there will usually be an equal mixture of creative arts and sports. In the afternoon, various sports will be offered, and the activity workers have experimented with providing alternative activities, such as a bouncy castle, a treasure hunt, and allowing the children to bring games from home. A similar format to the after schools club is followed, whereby the children compete in teams and are awarded points. They are also given wrist bands, which reward good attitudes and effort for example. The children attending the workshop were proud to display these. They were clearly happy and relaxed on the day this workshop was conducted, as the data above testifies, and they were well supported by the commitment and enthusiasm of the activity workers.

Children’s Participation

The YMCA has made an increasing effort to enhance levels of participation amongst children, to support the future development of their project. One example of this was the recent involvement of 2 children in interviewing prospective employees for the Sports in the Community Programme. With support from the Children’s Fund’s Participation Co-ordinator, an existing YMCA employee worked closely with the children to examine the job description for the advertised post. In particular, they looked at parts of it that they did not understand, and worked together to explain these. The children then developed their own job description. This helped them to expand on their ideas about what is required from a prospective employee, and also to develop their own questions for the interview. These questions varied from exploring standard issues such as past experience, to asking how the candidates would encourage someone to go back to the YMCA if they had stopped coming. Before the interviews took place, the children and the activity worker discussed how it was
important to be fair to every candidate, through asking the same questions for example, and to be careful not to judge people on initial appearances.

During the interviews, the children were encouraged to make notes, and to record their initial feelings using a smiley face scale (smiley face representing good feelings, an unhappy face representing bad feelings, and so on.). After the interviews had been completed, the children were asked to give verbal feedback, and this was taken into consideration when the final decisions were made. Ultimately, these decisions lay with senior YMCA employees, because they felt that this was the most appropriate course of action. The contribution of the children however was felt to be influential in the decision making process, and they arguably offered a valuable insight into the necessary qualities that are required for someone who will be working with young people. The children were given a certificate to acknowledge their participation, as well as lunch and cinema vouchers as a reward for their work. The YMCA felt that this was a particularly important course of action, in order to recognise the children’s efforts.

The willingness of the YMCA to involve children in this way is a strong initiative, and demonstrates a genuine willingness to increase participation. This could be repeated with more children, and attempts could be made to involve children in the earlier stages of selecting new employees, such as the formulation of the job description that will be advertised.

The concept of working alongside children in this way is becoming more accepted within charities and public sector organisations, but there is a danger that this participation could be tokenistic. Children need to feel that their contribution has been valued, and arguably for this to happen, their input and feedback needs to be considered seriously by those who are organising the initiative. Children will be aware if their opinions are not taken on board, and if this happens, this could lead to disillusionment and an unwillingness to take part in future participation initiatives. Where there are genuine efforts to involve children in this way however, the benefits for organisations can be high. Most notably, they will be reassured that the chosen
candidate works well with children, and can respond effectively to their needs. As a consequence, the children that the organisation works with should also receive a high quality of service provision and may also feel an increased sense of ownership because their efforts have been valued.

**Sense East**

We were able to visit families in their homes across Lincolnshire. These families have children with sensory impairment making it impossible to interview the children. However, we have visited and observed some of these children.

Basically, most parents have learnt about Sense East’s activity through leaflets that were distributed via their local hospitals. After a minimum of 7 years on the waiting list, these families were able to have an intervener visit their homes twice a week for two hours. Some have also stated that their children will be taking part in the summer holiday scheme organised by Sense East. The main strengths of this project are known to be engaging the children in fun activities and giving time off for parents from looking after them. Regarding the improvement area for the project, all parents suggested more time coverage by the Sense East intervener scheme. One parent has also suggested that the need to see new types of playing equipments for children. Overall, every parent has stated that they are agreeable with the interveners. They also stated that they have been consulted at some point.

> “Sense East gives something that my daughter looks forward to. It occupies her.”  
> **Mother of a disabled child**

> “…Obviously, at first when someone came to your house and work with your child, you don’t know who they are but now it is ok. It is working really well”.
> **Mother of a disabled child**

7 The interviews took place during the school summer holidays, which meant that more children could
Sutton Bridge Baby Project

Our evaluation work on this project has been somehow limited mainly due to the remoteness of the project. Moreover, we gained only two responses from the 6 project participants whose addresses we were able to obtain. After a series of attempts we were able to interview two children and their mother. According to the children and their parent, they had an initial expectation of learning about parenthood. The children have indicated that the project has enabled them to learn how difficult it is to care for a baby. The children have also stated that the limitation of the project stems mainly from the length of time they have the baby doll in their care. They think that the time is too long, despite the message it brings.

| “13 to 15 year olds, almost everybody should try it out and see how it changes their lives” |
| A 13-year-old girl |

The parent we have talked to has highlighted that the project has a strong commendation mainly due to the aspect it works on (i.e. the elimination of teen pregnancy). Moreover, both children and the parent we have talked to stated that they would like to see the project working in more schools. Moreover, the children we have spoken to indicate that they are happy with most of the project staff.

Sutton Bridge on Two Wheels Project

We were able to interview 8 children that attend this project. They all have indicated that their initial expectation from the project was to be able to learn how to repair their bicycles. They indicated that this project is useful to the local community by keeping children off the streets, integrating them with one another and entertaining them as well.

not take part because they were from home.
According to the children, the major strength of the project is teaching them how to repair their bicycles and also letting them have fun. It is also indicated that one of the limitations of the project is its location.

Children have indicated that they prefer the location to be changed. Moreover, almost all of them have stated that they are happy with the project workers. In addition, the children have indicated that they would like to see this project get involved with children living in a different location.

“\textit{I thought the project worker was cool because he helped me}.\newline\textit{An 8-year-old boy}"

The Owls Group at Mablethorpe Community Primary and Nursery School

A total of 6 parents were interviewed. 10 of the current Owls children were interviewed in 3 focus groups. 6 Wise owls were also interviewed in 2 separate focus groups.\footnote{Comments from the Wise Owl children will be interspersed with those from the current Owls group, because they talk about similar benefits. Where it is appropriate however, references will be made to the Wise Owls club, and how these children feel now that they are back in their own class. CB = Interviewer. All other names have been changed, apart from the teachers’ names, who have given permission for their names to be used.}

Children

Access, and the Initial Expectations from the Children’s Fund Project

All the children who were interviewed confirmed that they were told about the Owls through staff at the school. In the majority of cases, this was through the staff at the Owls, and the children recalled the various ways in which this was done.

\textit{Ben: I was in year 1 and I got a letter... Yeah, we both (children in the focus group) got a letter about it. And then we had to take the letter home.}\newline
\textit{Dan: ...They came to our house...Mrs Elwick and Mrs Spencer}
Luke: …They came to my house, and played a game with me… and they saw my cat and my dog… and they also played cards with me, and asked me what my favourite breakfast was, and asked me questions about what I would like to do in Owls.

The home visits were particularly memorable for the children, and this practice can be seen as very beneficial for families. It provides an opportunity for them to have any queries and concerns addressed in a comfortable and secure environment, and it also improves their initial accessibility to the service, by having the service providers come to them. These visits may also prove to be effective for the service providers, in terms of allowing them to determine any specific issues at home which may be impacting on the child’s situation.

The children also associated their initial awareness of the Owls with what happened on their first visit to the group. This informal encounter appears to be crucial in allowing the child to see what actually happens in the group, without the pressure of actually having to take part in any structured timetable. Overall, the children felt welcomed on this visit, which allowed them to establish a good rapport with both staff and current pupils. This in turn would have allowed them to become more settled in their future time with the Owls.

CB: Do you remember what Mrs Spencer said when she was telling you what the Owls was all about?

Vicky: Welcome to Owls

Jamie: She gave us a welcome Owls mat

Vicky: They let us play for an hour

Ben: I thought we was going to play games, and that’s what we did.

The children’s expectations of the Owls varied. The majority were looking forward to their time in a new class, and thought that it would be different from their mainstream class. Others were slightly apprehensive. Where this was the case however, the children noted that they were soon made to feel welcome by the staff and the other children. Other children demonstrated an awareness of why they were going to the Owls and the purpose of the group.

CB: What made you want to take part in the Owls?
Jamie: Because it sounds exciting

David: We were not doing good in our class, and then this teacher, the Owls teacher came and asked us if we were allowed to come to Owls

Michael: It was scary when I first came in

CB: Was it? Why was it scary?

Jess: Because we didn’t know any other people

CB: And did anybody make it better for you?

Jess: Yeah

David: The teachers told her (Jess)

Peter: And the other children did, like Ben

This mixture of emotions would be natural within a group of children of different characteristics, needs and temperaments. What is significant is the way in which the children felt reassured when they were apprehensive, and how some also demonstrated an understanding of the overall purpose of the Owls. This illustrates that the overall welcome package that the children and their families received was effective, in terms of the amount of support and information they were given in the early stages. This can be supported by the parents’ testimonies (see later section), and it is also a good example of the project meeting the Children’s Part 1 Guidance, in terms of actively involving families in delivering services, and in ‘creating individual packages of support.’ (Children’s Fund Part 1 Guidance)

The Gains and Success Stories from the Children’s Fund Projects

Most of the children referred to their targets when they discussed the ways in which they have benefited from the Owls. They were also aware of the significance of the targets themselves, which will be discussed in the following section, Strengths and Limitations. The children that were interviewed had a variety of targets. These included:

• To have good reasons for seeking individual adult attention
• To listen carefully and follow instructions
• To speak loud enough so that everyone in the group can hear first time
• To make eye contact when speaking or listening to others
• To think before speaking
• To walk into class quietly, put up hand and wait before speaking

These reflected a variety of different issues that the child was facing, as well as helping to ensure the children improved academically. They would often only be a stepping stone to achieving long-term progress. As such, targets would be changed once they had been met, to ensure that the child could attain an overall sense of achievement.

*CB: Did the Owls help you get better at anything?*

*Laura: Talking loudly*

*Luke: Talking in a loud voice, so they gave her a target*

*CB: What about you Simone, is there anything that you got better at?*

*Simone: Sums*

*Dan: I’ve got better at numeracy and literacy, and my times tables*

*Luke: The Owls helped me hold my pencil correctly*

**Strengths and Limitations of the Children’s Fund Projects**

The children were able to expand on why they felt they had gained so much in the Owls, and they also talked about things that were not so good. In line with the previous section, the children referred to the significance of having targets, and how they helped them to achieve progress. The target system would therefore appear to be effective from the children’s point of view, and can help to increase educational attainment, as well as address a child’s behavioural and emotional difficulties. It is also illustrative of a system which motivates children and gives them incentives to learn.

*Peter: We do like it when we have the targets*

*David: But if I didn’t want to have a target, then I wouldn’t get sets of smileys (smiley faces)*

*CB: David, why do you like the targets?*

*David: Erm, because they’re wicked*
Peter: Because they make you learn

David: And if you’re bad, and they (the targets) punish you

The Wise Owls also recognised the value of having targets:

Luke: I like the targets, because if I get 10 stickers, you get to choose a prize out the box… I get a prize out of the prize box… I like to do my smiley faces…

The Wise Owls also talked about their leaving party as being a key strength:

Luke: I had pizza toppings…cheese on toast, and we had… fruit salads and some yoghurt. And I invited my teacher… I enjoyed it because we had party games

Dan: I feel happy because I left the Owls because I had a big, big party.

Ben: They made a card and put photos in and we took one home…and they put ‘thank you for meeting your targets’ in the card as well.

The leaving parties for the Wise Owls appear to be another good example of a reward system, and both parents and children appreciated this. Several of the Wise Owl children commented on how they feel, now that they are back in their own class. While it is clear that the children miss being in the Owls, they demonstrated that they felt prepared enough and happy to go back to their own class

CB: How do you feel now that you’ve left the Owls, do you feel sad, or do you feel happy, or…

Dan: Happy

Luke: I feel both. Because I miss the Owls, and my friends are in there, and I miss the teachers, and I feel happy ‘cause I get to stop in my own class in case I miss anything.

CB: Do you miss the Owls?

Dan: Yes I do…Because I don’t go there, but I have a wise Owls club, and I go there every time

The daily breakfast that the Owls group provides for the children was also recognised as a significant strength. This would help to support the Owls’ aim that breakfast ‘is a very special part of being in the Owls’ (Owls brochure p.4), as discussed in the background to this project.
CB: Do you like breakfast time in the Owls?

All: Yeah!

CB: Why do you like breakfast?

Jamie: ‘Cause it’s delicious

Jake: And it makes you healthy

David: Since I came into Owls, I feel happy when I come in ‘cause you can have an extra breakfast, and when you have an extra breakfast you’re allowed to play after

All of the children commented on the 2 teachers, and how they are both a key strength of the Owls group.

Jess: They sort things out

David: And they help you learn... And they’re just nice people, and that’s why I come!

Luke: They help us, I think they’re very nice people

Jess: ...They’re very nice...and they take us out to play and they’re nice teachers

Most of the children said that they would tell other children about the Owls, and they would do this by talking about its strengths. One child demonstrated this when asked if he would tell other children:

Luke: Yes, it’s nice, and if you’re full of gloom, it’s a happy room, and if you’re feeling sad, you can go there.

One other child however demonstrated some concerns about telling other children, indicating that there may be some stigma attached to him if he did.

CB: Would you tell other children about the Owls?

Ben: No

CB: Would you not? Why not?

Ben: ‘Cause they would tell...other people.

CB: And would you not like anyone else to know that you came to the Owls?

Ben: Shakes his head... ‘Cause if they’ve got some one who’s not my friend and they hurt me, and if one of them has, and he kicked me here, I didn’t want to tell ‘cause they would tell him
The Owls staff were informed about this child’s comments after the interview, and it should be emphasised that this opinion was not expressed by the majority of the children. Ben later said that although he would not tell children about the Owls per se, he would tell them that he enjoyed it, and that it would help other children. Following comments that were made by some parents relating to this issue, the Owls staff said that they were aware of the potential for stigma to arise and were willing to address it. The Owls children themselves recognised that some children may be worried about coming to the group. They were asked what they would do to reassure children:

*Jamie: I’d say ‘Welcome to Owls’*

The children expressed very few views on the Owls’ limitations, preferring instead to focus on its strengths. The only major area of discontent appeared to be the washing up after breakfast. The children really don’t like to do it!

**Views regarding the future of the Children’s Fund project**

When asked how they would build on the strengths and improve on the limitations of the Owls, some of the children said they would just like more time to play, both in the current group and the Wise Owls

*Luke: Can you ask Mrs Spencer if we can play at Wise Owls?*

Other children however made some suggestions as to how they could improve an aspect of the current target system, which involves getting stickers for good work.

*CB: And do you like getting stickers?*
*All: Yeah!*

*Peter: I don’t like them really that much...Because all they are is stickers.***

*David: Stickers only stick to you and then go on the table by accident*

*Peter: Why don’t they give us a trophy?*

*CB: What would you like the trophy for?*

*Peter: For doing good work*

*David: You can get lots*
Jess: For doing good writing

It may be beneficial for the Owls staff to explore this issue further with the children, in terms of clarifying their views on the target system, and determining whether alterations could be made.

Summary

From the children’s perspective, it would appear that the Owls group has many strengths and very few limitations. The children attending the Wise Owls club felt that there was sufficient support for them once they had returned to their mainstream class, but clearly enjoyed the continued contact with the Owls. This is significant as it illustrates that staff have fully considered the long-term impact of a child’s time in the Owls, and have incorporated this into their service delivery. The children in the current group could recall many benefits for themselves, in terms of educational attainment and in their well-being. The key strengths of the Owls from the children’s perspective are breakfast, the target system, the free-time and the teachers. There is the potential for improvements to be made to the target system, and the staff may also want to consider involving children if changes were made. The staff are aware that one child raised the issue of stigma, and it is possible for this to be addressed.

Parents and Carers

Access and Initial Expectations

Although some parents knew about the Owls through their association with the school, the vast majority associated their initial access with a recollection of their child’s circumstances at the time.

Anna: Sarah’s teacher last year said she thought she would benefit from coming in here, she wasn’t concentrating, she’s easily, very easily distracted, and they thought if she came over here they might be able to integrate her, and help her a little bit more.

Ella: Well, Aiden has got bad behaviour, well, it’s not bad behaviour, but he’s got hyperactivity, and his concentration’s not so good. But they’ve (the medical profession) told me he’s autistic... And he came into Owls last year? I think he’s been in it for about a year now.
Lindsey: I’d heard about it (the Owls) just through the mums and bits in the newspaper and things like that…He (Stephen) wasn’t settling in too well in the Chicks (Reception class at Mablethorpe school), and we had a lot of concerns with his behaviour and his ability to do things. He was really quite behind ‘cause he’s been poorly since he was about one… And then they (the school) wrote to me and invited me along, and said he might benefit from the group…

The parents’ expectations varied. Some felt relieved that their child was going to receive help, others were apprehensive at having to accept help, and others expressed enthusiasm once they had seen the Owls classroom and were fully aware of what would be happening.

Lindsey: I didn’t expect it to be as wonderful as it is. You know, I mean, it is a lovely little place. I was thrilled to bits, I was really pleased that he was coming in…I just thought it would be just like a ‘normal’ classroom…but this is quite exceptional I think…it’s like a home.

It would be necessary for parents to receive high quality information about what the Owls aims and objectives were, and for support to be offered at every opportunity, particularly if the staff were aware of any apprehension and anxiety. It would appear from the parents comments that this support was received, which is in line with the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance, relating to ensuring that services are accessible to families, ‘particularly those most in need.’ The following quotes illustrate the various feelings that these parents had, and how they were supported by the Owls staff.

Alison: But I mean the initial shock (about going into the Owls), I was told the autumn term before Christmas... that she had been selected, and it was like ‘I don’t want her to come in now,’ because she seemed to be progressing...But I mean, as it was, I think possibly she would have come out of herself, but it would have been a few years down the line, you know, rather than now.

Louisa: Well, actually... at first I was worried, wasn’t I? I was quite concerned... Because I thought, oh, you know what’s the matter with him?

Andrew: We thought that he might start to fall behind...The other children in his year

Anna: To be quite honest, I didn’t really 100% see how bringing her into a smaller environment was going to help her concentration in class
CB: When you said you had your concerns, did you have chance to talk about them with anybody?

Louisa: [Enthusiastically] Oh yes, we did

Andrew: We talked it over with...Mrs Spencer, Mrs Elwick, and

Louisa: Sue Rothery (Head teacher) and the 3 teachers

Andrew: And the 3 teachers (in own class) that he’s gone through while he’s been in Owls...for them to tell us if he does start to fall behind in anything...

Although most parents simply hoped for a ‘change’ in their child, their expectations were based on the information given to them by the Owls staff. It is evident that this information was clear and realistic, which the parents appreciated.

Alison: There weren’t any expectations really, because they were very very good at explaining that it wasn’t going to be overnight. There were little goals...we had to just concentrate on the little things and then build from there. It was plainly laid out, not to expect the earth.

Phil: We took it on face value really, we didn’t know what to expect, but all we wanted was to improve her. And it has done, 100%.

**Gains and Success Stories**

It was apparent in this section that all of the parents who were apprehensive to begin with were able to balance these feelings with the benefits their child has received. This evidence can be substantiated by the many other success stories for this project.

Louisa: It has helped him... he’s liked it that much he hasn’t wanted to leave... I thought it helped him, because it was really making him do things that he didn’t want to do...You know, getting him to sit down at a table and doing things for himself, because he could do things for himself, but he wanted other people to do it.

Andrew: He also mixes easier...He’s not afraid, if somebody new comes in, to just (say) ‘come on, join in the group’ sort of thing

Louisa: He’s settled down a bit hasn’t he? He doesn’t lose his temper so much, does he?

Andrew: He’s calmed down a great deal to what he was

Lindsey: (He’s benefited) In getting on with other children, he mixes better, he’s more confident. Wonderful manners. At one time, he would never have sat at the table and
eaten, not at all... He’s really kind to Rachel as well (his younger sister), and he’ll wait for things now, he’ll take turns.

Alison: But her school work even now has come on in leaps and bounds... It’s confidence... with the speaking, has come everything. It was like when we went to birthday parties, and she was asked what she would like to eat, and she wouldn’t say anything, she would just have to get what she was given. Well now, when we go to parties, she’ll be up there and getting everyone’s food.

The parents also identified many benefits for their families, which would indicate the overall effectiveness of this project and its potential for long-term and widespread impact. Having a child with emotional or social difficulties can be an enormous strain on a family, and it was clear from the parents’ testimonies that the support from the Owls has gone some way to alleviate this pressure.

Debbie: It was a worrying time for us, so yeah, it’s made life a lot easier for us at home.

The parents also commented on the home target sheets, and their usefulness. This initiative by the Owls would be a good example of a project creating individual packages of support (Children’s Fund Part 1 Guidance).

Lindsey: Oh yes, we’ve used them a lot... I’m glad they’re encouraging him, I really am.

**Strengths and Limitations**

One of the main reasons why the parents felt that their children had benefited was the small size of the group. Their comments would therefore support one of the main aims of the Owls, which is to provide a special nurturing environment. They would also go some way to substantiate the existence of nurture groups in general, by highlighting one of the key characteristics of this initiative.

Anna: Because it’s a small group... if you do things more in-depth, it’s easier for them to study the children, and find out what makes them tick, they’ve discovered how it’s easier to keep her concentrating, which is something that a teacher would never have been able to discover. So, yeah, the small group has really helped that.

Lindsey: It’s such a small group of them, it gives them more confidence.

While none of the parents criticised the efforts of their child’s mainstream teacher, it was clear from the interviews that when a child has a particular behavioural or emotional
difficulty, they are much more likely to benefit in a smaller, focused environment, than they would do in their regular class.

As with the children, the parents also identified breakfast as one of the main strengths of the Owls. They highlighted this mainly in terms of how the process encourages children to talk through their feelings. This was particularly important for parents whose children found it difficult to talk and interact with others. Breakfast was also found to improve the children’s manners and social skills, which is in line with the aims of the Owls.

Debbie: Well, I think the breakfast (is a strength), ‘cause they all get together to sit down. They talk about things, like family life, it gets them talking doesn’t it? And it builds their confidence up.

Lindsey: In sharing, in taking turns, he’s learnt to be more patient. He understands more about other people’s feelings, you know if someone’s sad, things like that.

There were some parents however who felt that their child may not benefit from an extra breakfast. While they emphasised the strengths of the breakfast in terms of building the children’s confidence, their concern was mainly on a practical level. They discussed how one child was putting weight on because of the extra breakfast, and how it was difficult at home during the holidays and weekends, because the child expected an extra meal in the morning, after their usual breakfast. This was a concern expressed by a minority of parents, but it may be beneficial for the Owls staff to regularly review whether or not the breakfast is fitting into the child’s lifestyle, and maybe just offer them fruit or yoghurt, in place of toast or cereal.

Like the children, the parents also highlighted the skills and abilities of the staff in the Owls. It would appear that the staff play a crucial role in enabling the children to develop and overcome their difficulties, as well as ensuring that access to the project is sufficient, and that parents have the necessary support.

Phil: You couldn’t get a better two to do it. If Simone’s got any problems, inside or outside school, they talk to her. They don’t do anything behind your back: ‘Simone needs this, are you happy for us to do this?’

Alison: Oh, they’re fantastic with the kids. Laura’s always talking about Mrs Elwick. I said to Mrs Elwick, ‘you’re a bit of a favourite you are’. She said, ‘Really?’ But
(Rosalyn) is perfectly placed for my daughter, to help her. They’re nice, I don’t think you could have better people.

Ella: I think the way they do things, like talk quietly... And they’ve sorted out the healthy eating as well, which is calming him down a bit as well

Lindsey: Mrs Spencer and Mrs Elwick, they’re brilliant, they really are. I think they’re fantastic.

Andrew: It doesn’t matter which one of the kids it is, they adapt... Alison’s daughter, Laura, when she first came into the class, she wouldn’t speak to anybody. So they adapted, and started using sign language

Louisa: I think they’ve got a lot of patience... They’ve had patience with Luke, but to have patience with the others as well... I think they’re very good. They don’t shout, do they?

The parents all agreed that the accordance of different titles within the Owls (such as Snowy Owl and Wise Owl) provided a good incentive for the children to make progress. They also commented on the effectiveness of the continued support for Wise Owls children.

Anna: When you become a Snowy Owl... I think obviously that’s another confidence boost... Sarah’s really looking forward to becoming a Wise Owl and she knows that she can still come and they’re still here for her to talk to. Once she becomes a Wise Owl they monitor (her) in class a little bit more as well so she’s got the support which is lovely.

Debbie: I think it’s good, because they still have the connections with the Owls. It’s not like, ‘we’ll put her back in her class and forget about her. She still feels part of the group, she didn’t want to leave!

Alison: (Having the different levels of owls) it’s really really boosting. She got really mardy when someone got moved up to a snowy owl. Well I said ‘meet your targets and then you’ll be a snowy owl.’

The parents’ group that takes place every Wednesday morning provides a good opportunity to discuss any problems that are occurring at home, or with the children, or just to have an informal chat.

Alison: It’s just really to get to know everyone else, and to put everyone else at ease

Parents whose children have become Wise Owls are still invited to these meetings, which they said they appreciate. Many of the parents will use this meeting if they have any concerns, or to offer feedback. While the Owls does not provide any formal
feedback mechanism for parents, it was felt that the approachability of the staff ensures that systems are in place to provide constant support and access. If they wish to raise feedback issues therefore, they can do in this environment.

CB: Have they ever asked you what you think of the Owls?

Lindsey: Not in so many words, no. I mean, they ask you if you’ve any problems, or if there’s anything you don’t understand… But I seem to be getting on fine with it all, it’s been lovely.

The Owls group may want to consider incorporating feedback and/or consultation sessions into the parents’ meeting, as will be explored in the following section.

The Owls group has very few limitations according to the parents. Where these have arisen, they have been in relation to concerns with individual children, rather than in terms of the overall service delivery. One child for example was felt to be missing out on a reward system in her mainstream class. When this was raised with the Owls staff, it was soon resolved. One child was felt to have been separated from her friends when she came into the Owls, because she wasn’t able to see them as much. The Owls group may want to consider issues such as these when planning their service delivery, and teachers could work together to identify friends and ensure that they have regular contact.

Views Regarding the future of the Children’s Fund Projects

All of the parents said that they would tell other parents and carers about the Owls project, which indicates their confidence in its service delivery and its potential for future impact. Indeed, most parents said that they had already done this.

CB: Would you recommend the Owls to any other parents?

Lindsey: Most definitely. If children aren’t fitting into bigger groups, it builds their confidence, well, they are, they’re nurtured, they’re in a small group, nothing gets missed

Ella: Yes I would, if they’ve got problems. Because it does help them a lot…They’re good with the kids, and any problems they’ve got, they’ll help them out with that.
Most of the parents indicated that they felt their views were important when it comes to being asked what they think of the Owls. They were not dissatisfied with the feedback mechanisms as they stand, because they have easy access to the staff and information is readily available. Most parents would welcome additional consultation sessions if they were available and some suggested the ways in which this could take place.

Anna: I think it’s important that you get to have your input and that you’re listened to. I mean…that would be excellent, to discuss it there (at the parent’s group) maybe say once a month, or whatever, every six months, it would be nice to sort of like say, well, we’re going to do this...

Anna then suggested that the Owls group compile a regular newsletter to give to parents, informing them what will be happening in the Owls each term. This is something that happens in some other classes at Mablethorpe primary school. The Owls group may want to consider this, and seek the input of children and parents on the design and on issues that could be included.

Lindsey: I wouldn’t mind that at all (having formal feedback)…That’s nice. Then when you’ve got the group of parents, you know exactly what everyone’s thinking or wanting

Some parents commented on when it would be appropriate to seek feedback

Alison: I think they’ve got the measure right, it’s possibly three or four times in a year, that’s enough. If it was just once a month, it would be too tedious.

During the interviews, some parents raised the issue of stigma being attached to the Owls group, and how it could be addressed. While the staff have attempted to tackle this issue by dropping the word ‘nurture’ from the title of the Owls group (see background information), there may be additional ways to address this. One parent suggested that people simply may not know the purpose of the Owls, so staff may want to consider ways of raising awareness of its aims and objectives. Parents could certainly play a key role in this, in terms of passing on positive feedback for example, through open days, fundraising events and leaflets (Parents’ suggestions)

Alison: ‘Cause I mean, people have walked past, ‘how come they’ve got a kitchen in their class?’ ‘Why can’t my kids go in there?’ Then you get the other end of the scale,
‘Oh, they’ve got a kitchen in there, they’ve got to have breakfast in there. Do they not feed them at home?’

CB: So maybe just making people more aware of what exactly the Owls is?

Alison: Yeah, for the sake of the parents. I mean, the children, Laura was quite happy to come in here. And I was like, (acts shocked) when it hit me. And yet there are other parents that were thrilled. But I think if it’s not explained properly (parents can be unsettled by the experience)

The parents had several other comments to make, relating to the overall benefits of the Owls group, and their views on its future.

Phil: Making a lot more of these classrooms, these Owls, I think would improve things for a lot of children. ‘Cause there are a lot of children like Simone, that need to be in these places. If I had the money, I’d pay for it myself

Alison: I know that they are struggling with funding. I mean, I do feel that the Owls benefit the whole school. If Laura was still in the classroom, struggling along, it would take the teacher’s time up, so I think if there’s 12 children at the most (in the Owls), that’s 12 teachers that could be taken up, so the school does benefit.

Summary
Overall, the Owls group has demonstrated some very positive aspects to its service delivery, and very few limitations. This can be seen from the perspective of both children and parents/carers. Both of these groups cited benefits, including the quality of information they were given at the start, and the continued support that they receive throughout their association with the Owls. The Owls is therefore a very accessible project, and it can be seen as an example of good practice on this basis. The parents also feel that their children have gained educational benefits from being in the Owls, and they have witnessed vast improvements in their behaviour and social skills. In many cases, parents felt that there was very little that could be done for their children, but the Owls group has helped to exceed their expectations. Families as a whole have also received benefits, most notably through the alleviation of worry and stress that inevitably arises when a child has emotional, educational or behavioural difficulties. This has been made possible through the commitment of the staff in the Owls, and the parents’ strong involvement in the group’s service delivery. Earlier this year, the Owls
group had some of their funding reduced, as did many other Children’s Fund projects in Lincolnshire. This resulted in the staff having to make a difficult decision that meant one teacher could not work full-time in the Owls. It was not possible to determine the service users’ views on the effect of this, because the scheduled interviews had been completed after the change had taken place. Having said this, one parent commented on the significance of two teachers before we were aware of the changes to the service provision.

*Phil: If they’re going to make these places (other nurture groups), they want a couple of teachers to do the Owls, but they don’t want to keep changing, ‘cause it’ll upset them (the children). It’s what they get used to...which gives them more confidence.*

It is clear that every effort is being made to ensure the children are not affected by this change. The staff have concerns however that this change may disrupt the equilibrium of the group, because they feel that two teachers is an ideal number to deal with practical issues as well as teaching, and also because it provides an ideal relationship model for the children. More time would be needed to assess the impact of this on the children’s well-being, so the Owls group could consider reviewing this in a few months time. The loss of a full time member of staff does however raise the issue of the long-term impact of a reduction in funding, for this and other Children’s Fund projects.
Learning about plants and gardening in the Owls
Baking and learning how to cook in the Owls
Working out how children have met their targets in the Owls
The Lincolnshire Children’s Support Service (LCSS)

Children

In April 2004, a focus group discussion was conducted with seven children from the ‘Don’t Be Bored Mad Fun Club’. There were 4 boys and 3 girls in the focus group, aged between 8 and 13. This club takes place once a month on a Sunday. It is organised by the LCSS, as an extension of the support that they provide to families. The primary aim of the club is to reach out to isolated children and provide them with respite from family difficulties. The group therefore aims to be a good social experience for the children, and symbolises a combination and continuation of all the work that is done by the LCSS.

At the beginning of the focus group, the children drew a spider diagram, listing everything that they do in the fun club. It is clear from their information that a variety of fun games and outings are offered, which paves the way for the LCSS to meet their aim of providing opportunities for the children to try out new activities and make new friends (LCSS leaflet to explain and introduce their services, p.1) Moreover, the results from the spider diagram show that the children recognise the wider importance of the fun club, in terms of providing respite from their family life, and being in a comfortable environment with people that they trust, so that they can discuss issues that are concerning them.

Information from the spider diagram:

- Swimming
- Basket Ball
- Skating
- You get to do more stuff than what you probably do at home
- Meet new people
- Have fun
- Help People
- Football
- Play games
- Peace and Quiet
- Rounders
- Drawings of feelings
- Sing

Key to Speakers: Interviewer = CB
All other names have been changed
Apart from the names of the family support workers, who gave their permission for their names to be used.
- Dance
- Peace away *(from home)* much better
- When we came we had to write, but now we can play and go on trips
- Table football
- Rowing
- Snooker Table
- Tell people if we are getting picked on
- At Easter we have an Easter egg hunt
- Can play and go on trips

**Access, and the Initial Expectations of Children from the Children’s Fund Project**

*CB: How about you Russell, how did you find out (about the fun club)…?*

*Russell: Through my family support worker*

*Mark: That’s how we all found out.*

It would appear from the discussion with the children that the Family Support Workers (FSW) are the key to providing the means necessary to access the fun club. All of the children identified this as being the case from their experience. The role of the FSW here would be indicative of the close interaction that they have with each family, and the understanding they have of individual circumstances. As such, it would appear to be a natural progression that children are asked if they want to go along to the club after they have met (along with their family), a FSW, and he/she has developed an understanding of whether or not the child would benefit from attending. This issue can also be related to the importance of building up a rapport with the child before they attend the club. One child in the group for example identified the fact that he used to feel nervous before going to the fun club (See section 2). In this case, it would be important for the FSW to work with him and talk over any fears to ensure that he is ready to attend. The role of the FSW in providing access therefore appears appropriate, particularly in terms of taking into account the needs of each child. It is possible that other projects that work closely with children in a similar way would benefit from this *modus operandi.* The Bereavement Support service that is based at Lincoln County Hospital for example organised a visual arts workshop entitled Pictures from Life in 2003, to support children who had experienced loss. A strong argument could be made for the fact that close co-operation with the children who

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*This is an ongoing initiative. The Bereavement Support project have already hosted a second workshop, and a third is planned for September 2004.*
took part and a thorough understanding of their needs and how they would benefit from this initiative, are elements that played a key role in the success of the workshop.

Having gained access to the fun club, the children agreed that continued access was relatively easy to achieve, and was one of the positive aspects of the fun club. In the H-form that the children did during the focus group, they identified the club as being ‘easy to get to,’ and the fact that ‘we get picked up’ was a clear benefit for them. Here, the LCSS have demonstrated a significant understanding of the need to make the fun club accessible, in line with sub-objective five of the Children’s Fund11 (Children’s Fund Guidance on Objectives, Target Setting, Local Monitoring and Evaluation 2001). The LCSS have shown a willingness to address this in a pro-active manner, by providing a minibus that picks children up from their home and drops them off again. This initiative also takes into account the safety of the children, and can be said to be an extension of the support that the LCSS provides to families, by reducing the pressure on parents to take their children to the club, particularly when access to transport may be an issue.

The children were well informed about what would be happening at the fun club prior to their initial involvement. It is clear that a variety of activities were promised, and the trips out that are a regular feature of the club featured highly on the children’s’ list of expectations. More importantly, it appears that the assurances made to the children about what would happen were adhered to. This illustrates strongly the LCSS’s commitment to redress the balance of disappointments and setbacks that the children have experienced in other aspects of their lives. This is arguably a vital step to take when working with children, which is emphasised more so when these children have experienced difficult circumstances. It is therefore crucial that any project working with children in similar situations adheres to their pledges and assurances, to avoid disillusionment becoming a commonplace feature in the lives of young people.

*Charlotte: We got told we would be going on outings*

*Mark: On trips...*

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11 “To ensure that children (and) young people… feel that the preventive services being developed through the partnerships are accessible.”
Charlotte: We got told we would be going on trips, and that there was people here we would get along with, and, like, people our own age we could talk to.

Clearly the fun club was expected to produce additional social benefits, such as making new friends, in addition to providing respite from day-to-day family life. The LCSS have made progress therefore in achieving their aims for the fun club, which relate to the need to access children who are isolated from everyday social activities, and to provide a channel whereby this can be remedied. They have also made progress in consideration of sub-objective six of the Children’s Fund, which relates to developing effective services for children and young people who are “commonly excluded from gaining the benefits of public services…” (ibid p.2)

The children also identified expectations from their parents as well.

Mark: I got told that we would be going out…and my mum wanted me to get out the house for a bit,

Charlotte: And it gets me out the house, that’s a good reason

Mark: So my mum said, why don’t you go out the house for a bit so you’re not cooped up in the house all the time?

This evidence relating to the role of the fun club in terms of providing respite for parents can also be linked to the following section, Gains and Success Stories. It also illustrates how the LCSS aim to take into consideration the needs of the whole family, rather than one or two individuals, when it comes to planning their service provision.

The Gains and Success Stories from the Children’s Fund Project

Charlotte: …if we’ve got something troubling us, you can talk to Sharon or Karen or someone (FSWs) and they just get along with you and listen to your problems.

The above quote is a good example of how the LCSS have developed the fun club to ensure that it is an extension of their primary remit. It is not merely there to provide fun and distracting activities, although this is certainly one its key features and attributes. It also has a purpose however to demonstrate to children that if they need to, they can use the fun club as an additional opportunity to talk through any worries they may have. This often happens when a FSW visits the family at home, but it may well be beneficial for the child
to know that they can talk in a neutral environment, without the restrictions of the home environment, or expressing a concern in front of their parent(s).

The children were able to identify a variety of other positive changes to their lives since they first started going to the fun club. These included social benefits, as well as a strong recognition of the work that the LCSS does to support families

*Some children: Things are a bit more fun*

*Mark: I’ve met more people*

Charlotte: Well, it was really weird because I didn’t used to get on with my brother, and then after that, my brother started getting on well with me ’cause my family support worker used to come round and sort things out.

*Russell: You make new friends*

*CB: Paul, what about you? Can you think back to when you first started coming?*

The group talk over Paul, but he says he feels less nervous about coming to the group and that he’s got used to it now.

As these and the following quotes show, the children were able to identify significant benefits for their families, as well as for themselves. This illustrates clearly that the LCSS are meeting their aims in relation to providing opportunities for parents to find time for themselves, and also for children to “…try out new activities and make new friends.” (LCSS leaflet to explain and introduce their services, p.1)

*CB: What about your family? What do you think they think of the fun club?*

*Marie: It’s better that we get somewhere to play*

*Russell: It’s good…you always get to meet nice people*

*Marie: They (parents) think it’s fun.*

*Mark: When I get back, I tell my mum I’ve had a good time and she thinks it’s a good idea ’cause it gets me away from my brothers and sisters.*

*Sophie: Yeah, and it gives me a break from my sisters, ’cause they’re annoying, they’re hard to control and everything…’cause I have to look after my baby sister and I look after her sometimes with my mum. My sister’s gone out today to see Granny, so me and my mum can have some peace and quiet and then I can come here.*
Charlotte: Yeah, it gets annoying when you have to look after your baby brother,

Some members of group: Or your sister

Charlotte: Or your sister, ‘cause every time you go to the loo they play up and they start shouting, like for crisps and that, and when you say no they kick you and that like my little brother does

**Strengths and Limitations of the Children’s Fund Project**

Having identified many of the benefits of the fun club, the children then went on to discuss the reasons why it is good. They also talked about aspects that were not so strong, and the ways in which these could be improved.

A H-form\(^{12}\) was utilised to enable the children to identify the positive and negative attributes of the fun club. They determined the following as positive aspects and characteristics:

- We get to go out on trips and get to have a McDonalds and be nice
- I like going swimming
- We get picked up (from home and taken to the fun club)
- Bowling
- Nice People
- Support Workers like us
- Easy to get to
- I love fun club
- Have games
- It’s really fun they (support workers) look after us
- They (support workers) are nice to us
- Playing snooker
- It is like having a day at the beach
- You get a break from your family
- Very kind people

As in the spider diagram, the children demonstrated a strong awareness of the wider benefits of the fun club. It is clear that they enjoy the variety of activities that are on offer, but they also recognise the significance of having a break from their families,

\(^{12}\) On a flip chart size piece of paper, a large ‘H’ is drawn. On the left side, a plus sign is drawn, to indicate positive things, and on the right side, a minus sign is drawn, to indicate negative things. The children are then encouraged to write comments on post-it notes and place them on the side that they feel is most appropriate. Across the middle of the H, suggestions can be made.
the easy access to the fun club, and the high quality of service provision that is offered via the FSWs. Their comments speak for themselves in illustrating the many benefits of the fun club.

There were very few negative comments to be made about the fun club. These mostly centred on some of the activities on offer, but these were more likely to reflect the child’s personal preferences, rather than the actual quality of the activity.

- When every Sunday we get bored it is only once a month (a reference to the amount of times the fun club runs)
- Don’t like running
- They don’t do hot Sunday dinners
- Football
- Mini bus is too small

The children made several suggestions as to how the strengths of the fun club could be built upon, and how improvements could be made to tackle the limitations. These will be explored in the following section, but it is worth noting here that no suggestions were made to improve the frequency of the fun club. This was identified as being of significance however on the H-form, and it may well be beneficial for the LCSS to explore this issue further with the children.

Within the Strengths and Limitations sections, the children’s opinions were also sought on the staff who work at the LCSS. Some of the children chose to write their comments down:

Karen, Debbie Sharon very very kind
They enjoy children!!!!!!!!!
Karen and Sharon and Debbie love to be around children
The family support workers are really nice and they are kind to us!

Other children spoke in some detail about the staff.

Russell: They give us sweets and everything
Charlotte: Karen, Sharon and Debbie all appreciate us
Sophie: Karen, Debbie and Sharon and the people who work here are really good ’cause they give us treats and biscuits and juice and everything.

Paul: They all like us and they take us out on trips.

Marie: They’re very kind

Mark: They’re nice...they look after us.

Charlotte: I think... Karen, Sharon and Debbie love to be around children, especially on Sundays.

Marie: Well, they’re (Support Workers) very good; they let us do fun activities

The children’s comments here are invaluable in illustrating one of the key features of the LCSS, which is the high quality of support that FSWs are able to offer. It is also apparent that the way in which the FSWs interact with the children in order to carry out their work is important. More than anything, the children observed the personal qualities of the FSWs, such as how nice and kind they are, and how they are able to relate to children. This demonstrates clearly the value of offering a service which not only meets the practical requirements of the children, but also one which addresses their emotional and social needs.

With reference to being consulted about the services that are provided by the LCSS, the children said that they have been asked about what they think.

CB: ...Before I came along today, has anybody else asked you what you think of the fun club?

Some members of group: Yeah

CB: Yeah? What have they asked you?

Mark: Just asked us if we like it and what we want.

CB: Who came along to ask you?

Charlotte: Can’t remember

CB: But have the people who work here, Sharon and Debbie, have they asked you?

Charlotte: Yeah, Sharon has. And Debbie has.

Prior to the focus group being conducted, the children were asked by the FSWs if they would like to be part of an interview panel to recruit new employees for the LCSS.
Several children were enthusiastic about this, and the project was clearly making efforts to encourage user participation. The children attending the fun club that day were also asked by the FSWs to draw and complete a body map. This was a life size outline of a person, on which the children were encouraged to write or draw the ideal characteristics and attributes that they would like to see in future employees. Using this method was clearly accessible for the children, and they enjoyed taking part. This way of working illustrates that the LCSS are attempting to meet the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance to actively involve children and young people in the future planning of their service, and also the Children’s Fund sub-objective seven, which relates to involving families in sustaining service delivery.

The children all agreed that it was important to be asked what they think, primarily because in their view, this helps to improve the services that are on offer. As one child said quite simply:

*Charlotte: Because... it’s like my mum’s boyfriend says: if you don’t ask, you don’t get.*

**Views Regarding the Future of the Children’s Fund Projects**

Using the H-form, the children made several suggestions as to how the fun club could be improved. These included:

- More people to look after us!!!
- Make them do Sunday dinners
- Awards for best improved child
- Awards for most popular child
- More space
- More activities
- Make up red and yellow cards *(a reference to the use of cards in football to monitor the behaviour and language of participants. Can also be used by children in group discussions if they don’t understand something or if they need a break)*

With further consultations with the children, many of these suggestions, such as those for awards and the rules for behaviour, could be implemented. These suggestions in particular infer that the children want to take an active role in the development of the
fun club, to ensure that it continues to be a happy, safe and enjoyable environment for those attending. Having ‘more people to look after us’ may be difficult because it would mean more funding to recruit staff. However, it may be possible for the LCSS to recruit more volunteers for this purpose. Indeed, these may be necessary in the kitchen particularly, if the children’s suggestion to have hot Sunday dinners is followed through! Having more space to do activities may not be feasible, because the youth centre where the club is currently held has been selected for certain purposes, such as the fact that it is well equipped with a kitchen, and it is in a central location. The suggestion for ‘more activities’ could also be followed through, with discussions to ascertain what exactly the children would like to see. The fact that the children made several constructive suggestions does not necessarily imply that they are discontented with the fun club as it currently stands. Rather, it could be argued that they are seeking to build on its many strengths, which in turn would give them an increased sense of ownership in its future development. It is therefore strongly recommended that the LCSS consult with the children in a similar vein as they did when they drew the body map for prospective employees, which would help to increase their overall participation in this project.

**Summary**
The children at the fun club were confident in expressing their opinions on the benefits of this project, and stating why it is so good. One of the overwhelming strengths in their view was the commitment of the FSWs, and their ability to relate to the children in a fun and enthusiastic way, while meeting the aims of the fun club. Striking the balance between meeting these practical requirements whilst also having the ability to relate to children at all levels is often easier said than done, and it can be taken for granted. The FSWs appear to have achieved this however, and the result is that the fun club has given the children significant benefits, in terms of access to the service, making new friends, and providing respite from difficult circumstances at home. The club is also able to provide opportunities to access activities which would not usually be feasible because of evidence of social exclusion. Improvements could be made in terms of increasing the children’s participation in the future development of the fun club, and the other events that are organised by the LCSS for children. This can be achieved, particularly as 2 members of the LCSS are expected to receive
training in evaluation and participatory skills, and the potential and commitment for this to increase is certainly evident.

**Parents**

It was only possible to interview 2 parents for this project. This was due mainly to the difficulty of contacting service users because they were experiencing complicated circumstances, and the fact that the field work was conducted when many families were away. The LCSS has been fully updated on this situation.

**Access and Initial Expectations**

The parents had different experiences of accessing this project. One was able to self-refer herself and her family, while the other was referred by a health visitor. The former recalled how her circumstances were extremely difficult at the time, and how she was almost at breaking point when she contacted the LCSS. She had tried many other organisations, but was unable to find the support she needed.

*Julie: Well, I had an emergency. I phoned all these numbers, and the only people on there who would help was them (the LCSS)…I thought nobody wanted to help…I just wanted to talk to somebody about it.*

Julie was given these numbers by a neighbour who was a social worker, so it would appear that the LCSS has good contacts with other service providers in this field. The contact that was made between Julie and the LCSS illustrates the potential for this organisation to be a life-line in times of emergency family situations. Julie said that unfortunately, the time between her assessment and receiving support was quite long (5 weeks), which she was dissatisfied about. It would appear that this was due to a backlog of referrals at the LCSS and the difficulty in securing a support worker because she was isolated. However, once the support was in place, she was happy with the outcomes. Claire, the second parent that was interviewed, said she heard from the LCSS within ‘a week or two of filling the forms out’.

Once contact was made, both parents felt that the information given to them was clear and understandable. Home visits were made to the families by a FSW to explain what
would happen, and this would meet the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance, to ensure that services are accessible. The examples of referrals illustrated here would meet the guidance which states that services should be sufficiently flexible and accessible to enable informal and self-referrals. The interview with Julie also provided a good example of the LCSS’ commitment to ensuring accessibility. She lives in an extremely rural and isolated area, and she was keen to point out that there were no other organisations that were willing to come out to her. When asked what would have happened if the LCSS hadn’t responded, she said that this was a worrying thing to think about:

Julie: I’m just really pleased that somebody came. I was in strangling-mode by this point. I needed some help because I had a son who was talking about killing himself. He was 5. That’s not normal

Gains and Success Stories

The parents noted that many benefits were received for themselves and their children. For the children, distracting activities were provided, such as days out and walks. This gives the children an opportunity to talk to someone neutral, while having the added benefit of giving parents a much needed break.

Claire: Well, they (the children) look forward to her (the FSW) coming and doing things with them, and with her coming, she helps me with bed-time routines. We’re still getting there, but we’re a lot better than we were at bedtimes. They sleep through the night now.

Claire also discussed how the LCSS have helped her with other aspects of home-life and being able to cope with routines better. She discussed how the support has benefited her personally:

Claire: If you’d seen me six months ago, I was very stressed...I’m a lot calmer now

Julie’s son (6) said that the FSW was a nice person. When the FSW first came to see him, he said he wanted to be in a happy family. He said that the FSW has made things
better, by taking him for walks, having long chats, playing games, and thinking about the people who are most important in his life.

*Julie: He's got someone else he can talk to now, and relate to...if he can't talk to me... I've got a happier child*

Having the opportunity to talk to someone neutral appears to be one of the key benefits of the LCSS, and this was illustrated by the parents. Julie commented in particular on the pressures of having people assume that you can cope because you are married and therefore have someone to turn to. Her husband serves in the armed forces however, and it is the case in many other families that spouses are away from home a great deal. Having the FSW worker there helps to alleviate some of this pressure and provides an outlet for concerns to be voiced.

There were some of the routines and suggestions that the parents didn’t agree with, but they suggested that they were willing to try things out and see which ones worked for them.

**Strengths and Limitations**

*Claire: I think with Debbie coming every week, it’s someone to talk to and give advice and she listened.*

*Julie: Obviously I’d love her (FSW) to come and live with us, that would help!*

The regular contact for families appears to be one of the strengths of the LCSS, and it allows a good rapport to be built up between the FSWs, parents and children. As was stated in the background to this project, regular visits will also allow the FSW to identify potential problems, and then work to resolve these before they escalate. This reduces the need for further service provision and assists families in the long-term. In doing so, this helps the LCSS to meet the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance, in terms of preventing difficulties before they affect a child’s life chances.

Claire also said that a parenting group that she went to helped her.

*Claire: It was good to know that there were other parents in the same situation, 'cause you feel a bit like 'it’s just me’. I made some friends there too.*
Both parents commented on the way in which they felt the LCSS was non-judgemental in their approach, something which is arguably crucial in terms of encouraging parents to maintain contact with the service and receive the necessary support.

_Claire: I think they’re really good in that you don’t feel like you’re being judged. Some people can be a bit patronising...especially when you’re on your own with them, (the children) you always feel that people look down on you._

_Julie: It’s nice to have someone who believes you. And that’s what the world makes you feel like sometimes (as if you’re exaggerating a problem)...Sharon’s taught me not to take any notice of what people say._

The way the FSW are able to counsel, support and encourage the parents was also highlighted as a key strength.

_Julie: Well it takes all the guilt and pressure off of how I feel. Even if it is for an hour or two hours a week, that all the guilt I feel about perhaps the way I’m doing something wrong..._

_CB: Do you mean in terms of bringing Robert up?_

_Julie: Yeah. It’s nice to have somebody there telling you you’re doing really well. You can’t see that yourself...I think Sharon’s great_

_Claire: With Debbie coming, it’s like having a friend come round. We shall miss her_

The parents also made reference to the LCSS’ ability to signpost them to other organisations that could help, and they said that this was a useful aspect to the service delivery.

The parents said that there were very few limitations of the LCSS. Julie referred to the time it took for her to receive support, and that once she did receive it, she reconsidered her position because the initial emergency had subsided. However, her FSW convinced her otherwise, because at the time, there was potential for the situation to arise again. Julie did not also realise that the service would only last for 6 months and she only found this out recently. She could not remember being told this at the beginning. Although the other parent that was interviewed was aware of this situation, it would be necessary for the LCSS to remain consistent in their approach, and also to inform parents of this at the earliest possible stage.  

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13 This issue was also raised in the document analysis section.
Views regarding the future of the Children’s Fund Projects

Both the parents said that they would recommend the project to other parents and carers, mainly because of the helpfulness of the support workers and the many benefits that they had received.

In terms of improvements, Julie said that she was unsure about what would happen after her six months of support had finished, and it would be helpful to know if she could contact the service again should she need to. Again, this points to the need for parents to receive the necessary information about the service provision. Julie recognised that although other parents would need support after her, it would be beneficial for her to be able to contact the LCSS should she reach the crisis point again, or simply to get advice. Although further funding would be required, Julie suggested that a helpline or something similar would be beneficial in this situation. This could perhaps be staffed by volunteers. The LCSS are committed however to preventing future difficulties and work closely with parents to achieve this.

*Julie: I think it would be nice to have something there in place...when it’s all over...every parent needs a lifeline of some sort*

The parents also commented on the need for other people, particularly parents, to know that this service is available. Previous service users could certainly play a key role in raising awareness about the LCSS, and collaborate with the organisation to raise its profile.

Claire said that she had filled out several questionnaires to give feedback on the LCSS, and felt that this provided an effective and confidential way to give her views about what works and what doesn’t. The LCSS actively seek feedback from service users, and are aiming to increase their levels of participation in the planning of services.

**Summary**

Both parents and children have identified many benefits of the LCSS’ service provision. The key strengths of this project lie in its accessibility, both in terms of providing transport to services, and through basing the service provision in the homes of families. The information given to parents about the service is also good, although
this could be improved by raising awareness about what happens when the support has finished. The LCSS have also played a major role in alleviating the many pressures that families experience, and they are able to do this through the commitment and skills offered by the Family Support Workers. This often works simply by being in a neutral position to offer advice, sign postings to other services, and giving parents a break from the hardships they face. There is great potential for this service to prevent difficulties escalating, which meets the main aim of the Children’s Fund. In doing so, families, and particularly children, will be able to experience much greater optimism for their future.

6. Provisions of Training to the Main Children’s Fund Target Areas

Following consultations with The Children’s Fund partnership, the University of Lincoln’s evaluation team performed a series of workshops for service providers, children and parents (See Appendix 5 and 6 for detail). These were held between April and August 2004. It was our aim to deliver training to as many of the Children's Fund targeted areas as possible\(^\text{14}\), and to meet the needs of projects who had identified the importance of gathering and assessing feedback from service users. There was a particular concern that valuable comments and information from service users was being lost because there was no coherent evaluation system in place that projects could utilise\(^\text{15}\). Our overall objective was to provide the necessary skills and information that would enable projects to successfully and independently evaluate their own service delivery. It was also anticipated that children and parents who attended the workshops would have a greater opportunity to become involved in the future development of their own projects.

\(^\text{14}\) The Children’s Fund target areas were determined by the partnership using a mapping exercise based on the 2001 Census, and these were incorporated into their delivery plan for 2004-2006. This mapping exercise enabled the Children’s Fund to identify areas where there were high levels of children at risk of social exclusion (Children’s Fund Lincolnshire Plan for 2004-2006).

\(^\text{15}\) This opinion was expressed by service providers during meetings of the Children’s Fund Forum, a gathering of all Children’s Fund projects in Lincolnshire that occurred every three or four months.
The workshops were promoted through the Children’s Fund Co-ordinators and directly to the projects themselves, through the use of letters and e-mails. We relied on service providers to promote the workshops for children and parents using posters and leaflets.

The content of the workshops was characterised largely by the use of Participatory Appraisal (PA), as an approach to research and as a set of methods and techniques. It soon became apparent from the comments of workshop participants that this approach could be useful for the general planning and development of community based projects, as well as for evaluations. In addition to the use of PA, we also gave information on the use of questionnaires and the analysis of questionnaire data using Microsoft Excel. In keeping with the theme of PA, our aim was that the workshops should be as participatory as possible. Participants were asked to introduce themselves using a timeline of significant events in their life, or were asked to describe their project using a timeline. They would then work together to complete a spider diagram to explain what an evaluation is, and usefully, how it compares to the steps one would take when planning a holiday. The other PA tools that were demonstrated were done so using practical examples from each of the projects’ work. This in turn helped to raise awareness amongst participants about the work of the Children’s Fund in other areas of Lincolnshire, and even about the Children’s Fund itself. Resource packs were distributed to all participants, containing handouts on all the information that had been discussed, and contact details should they require further support with evaluations. These packs were also offered to service providers who could not attend the workshops.

Overall, we received positive feedback from the workshops. This can be illustrated by the following comments from service providers and children:

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16 The idea for using the evaluation/holiday analogy to explain easily what an evaluation entails came from the Sure Start evaluation team at the University of Lincoln

17 At a workshop in Lincoln for example, some children from the estate where it was being held were interested to know about the work we were doing and wanted to attend the workshop.
“Thank you for hosting the workshop…I found the content of great interest and plan to use many of the tools for my project in the near future…I feel that all of the projects would benefit from the workshops and it is also a great opportunity to network and discover what the other services are delivering”

“I’m glad I came. I didn’t know what an evaluation was before today, but I do now.”

“…Although the group was small, I felt that this allowed us to have some good discussion. We are looking at doing a parent questionnaire sometime in the future…will remember you and will contact you when the time comes! Thanks”

8. Conclusion

Overall, the information we gathered from children and their carers using interviews, focus group discussions and a participatory appraisal approach has given us a clearer picture of the aims and objectives of each Children's Fund project. This includes project activities, and we have discovered whether initial expectations have been met. This is arguably a crucial aspect of the service delivery, as it relates to whether or not access to each project is sufficient. In most cases, parents and children received the necessary information about each project’s aims, and they were informed about how these would be achieved. Practical issues relating to access were also highlighted, and in most cases, children and parents felt that they could physically get to a project and that it was held at a time that was convenient to them. Examples of good practice were evident in projects such as the Two Wheels in Sutton Bridge, and the Lincolnshire Children’s Support Service, where transport was provided, and project workers met families in their own homes. The accessibility of many of the services also demonstrates that projects are working hard to reach out to families that are often excluded, which meets sub-objective six of the Children’s Fund objectives.
In addition, we were able to determine to what extent children are benefiting from these activities and also established recommendations on how projects can be improved. It would be impossible to summarise the many benefits that children have received, but improvements were evident particularly in the areas of health, educational attainment, behaviour and social skills, family relationships and self-esteem. Many projects also demonstrated evidence of preventing difficulties from escalating, and could therefore work effectively to improving a child’s long-term welfare. There was no strong or consistent evidence to suggest that projects are involving service users in the planning and delivery of services. However, this is not a static situation, and the Children’s Fund partnership is committed to supporting projects to improve this. Service providers themselves have recognised the need to increase participation and to evaluate their work. Some of the case study sites, such as the YMCA, have been effectively working to improve participation, and this is to be commended. We believe that the training we offered to service providers, children and their carers has gone some way to create an embedded evaluation system within the Children’s Fund. The Children’s Fund will work to ensure that this is ongoing, and most service providers feel they can develop this further. Most importantly, this has the potential to empower local communities in Lincolnshire by promoting independence and confidence in completing their own evaluations. Therefore, we recommend the following options:

1. More funding for further evaluative research
2. Developing a systematic way of organising the Children's Fund data collection procedure, with reference to evaluation and feedback from service users
3. More support from the Children's Fund in terms of co-ordinating projects that researchers are going to evaluate. This will reduce the excess amount of paper work and red-tape we have encountered in the field and will assist future researchers.

There was evidence within projects to suggest that children and families are being empowered to take responsibility of solutions for themselves, in line with the Children’s Fund Part One Guidance, and their involvement in future service planning could enhance this.
Many projects demonstrated examples of preventing future difficulties, which meets the main aim of the Children’s Fund. This is arguably our most significant finding, as it demonstrates that most projects are fully committed to improving the future life chances of children, and the benefits of this are already being realised.

References


### Appendix 1

**Names of Projects and Providers for the Children’s Fund in Lincolnshire as of October 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to Out-of-School Clubs for Disabled Children</td>
<td>MENCAP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active Leisure Timeout</td>
<td>ELDC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity Programme</td>
<td>Fenside Umbrella Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity Programme</td>
<td>Backies Sports and Youth Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity Programme</td>
<td>YMCA Lincoln</td>
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<tr>
<td>Addition of School Nurse</td>
<td>Grantham Behaviour Clinic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art Project</td>
<td>Bluecoat School, Stamford</td>
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<tr>
<td>Babies</td>
<td>Sutton Bridge Community Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bereavement Support</td>
<td>Coordinator ULHT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bereavement Support - Printing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boston Fit Kids Project</td>
<td>Boston Borough Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breakfast Clubs around Lincolnshire</td>
<td>St John Ambulance - Social Care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care Centre</td>
<td>St Peter at Gowts Primary School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Pedestrian Training</td>
<td>Road Safety Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Support Services</td>
<td>Boston Women's Aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children with Disabilities</td>
<td>Sure Start ELCR</td>
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<td>Children's Rights Service</td>
<td>NYAS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children's Support Services</td>
<td>Family Welfare Association</td>
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<td>Community Café</td>
<td>Arena</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordinating Play</td>
<td>Children's Links</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Services Unit</td>
<td>Lincs SS</td>
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<td>Drama/Music/Circus</td>
<td>St Paul's</td>
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<td>Drama/Music/Circus</td>
<td>Gill Vines</td>
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<td>Drama/Music/Circus</td>
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<td>Emotional Literacy</td>
<td>St Giles</td>
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<td>Erised Centre</td>
<td>Usher School</td>
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<td>Family Group Conferences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fit for the Future</td>
<td>Schools Nursing Team - Lincs SWPCT</td>
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<td>Grief and Loss Centre</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
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<td>Helping Me, Helping You 121Mentors</td>
<td>CG Partnership</td>
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<td>Home School Mentor</td>
<td>Birchwood Junior School Partnership</td>
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<td>Homework Wizard</td>
<td>Lincolnshire Library Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inclusion project</td>
<td>Lincoln North West cluster of schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervenor Scheme</td>
<td>Sense</td>
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<td>Let's Play</td>
<td>Earlesfield Community Forum</td>
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<td>Listen to Learn</td>
<td>NCH</td>
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<td>Making Children's Voices Count</td>
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<td>Minority Ethnic Communities</td>
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<td>NACRO Young People's Citizenship</td>
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<td>Nurture Inclusion</td>
<td>Skegness Infants</td>
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<td>On Two Wheels</td>
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<td>Parenting Groups</td>
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<td>Play safe</td>
<td>Boston BC and Play Forum</td>
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<td>Project Workers</td>
<td>Education Welfare Service</td>
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<td>Pyramid Trust</td>
<td>Healthy Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rapid Response</td>
<td>Lincs SS West Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAD</td>
<td>Mary Knox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Raindrops Community Project Ltd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEN procedures</td>
<td>Parent Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Holland Family Contact Centre</td>
<td>St John Ambulance - Social Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs Development Officer</td>
<td>Children's Links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Schools Nurse Advisors</td>
<td>United Lincolnshire Hospitals Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist Social Inclusion Work</td>
<td>Lincoln Women's Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing for Gainsborough Services</td>
<td>STRUT in the Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Centre</td>
<td>Lowfields Infant &amp; Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1 Primary Mental Health Worker</td>
<td>CAMHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards developing Family Support Services in the County</td>
<td>Lincs SW PCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trackers</td>
<td>Boston Haven High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travellers' Education</td>
<td>Traveller Education Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Carers' Befrienders</td>
<td>Action for Young Carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Carers' Befrienders</td>
<td>Share the Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2

Issues for discussion and consultation with children

Access, and the Expectations of Children from the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion)

1. How did you find out about the project (name) that you go to?
2. What made you want to take part?

The Gains and Success Stories from the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion)

3. Ask children to think back to when they first started going to the project. Has anything changed for you since you first started coming?
4. What does your family think of the project?

Strengths and Limitations of the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion and Consultation)

5. Do you enjoy the project? What are the best things about the project?
6. Is there anything that you don’t like about the project?
7. What would you change if you had to?
8. What do you think of the people who work at the project?
9. Before today, have you ever been asked about what you think of the project?
10. Has anybody asked you what you would like to do in the project?

Views Regarding the Future of the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion and Consultation)

11. What sort of things would you like to see in/at this project in the future?
12. Would you tell other children about the project?

Views regarding what is Important in the Evaluation of the Children’s Fund Projects (Brainstorming Session)

13. Have you got any more things that you would like to say about the project?
Issues for discussion and consultation with parents

Access, and the Expectations of Children and their Carers from the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion)

14. How did you find out about the project that your child is involved with?

15. What was your initial expectation from this project? Why?

The Gains and Success Stories from the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion)

16. Do you think that your child has benefited in any way from attending the project?

17. Do you feel the community has/will benefit in any way?

Strengths and Limitations of the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion and Consultation)

18. What are the main strengths of this project? Has the project achieved what it set out to do?

19. How can the strengths of the projects be carried forward?

20. What are the main limitations of this project?

21. How do you think the limitations of the projects can be overcome?

22. What do you think of the way in which staff in this project carry out their work?

23. Have you ever been consulted about the work that is being done by this project?

24. Have you ever been asked to give feedback regarding the work that is being done by this project?

Views Regarding the Future of the Children’s Fund Projects (Discussion and Consultation)

25. Can you advise us on what type of things you would like to see being done by this project in the future?

26. Would you recommend the project to other parents?

Views regarding what is Important in the Evaluation of the Children’s Fund Projects (Brainstorming Session followed by Consultation)

27. Have you got any more issues which should be discussed in terms of assessing this project?
Appendix 3

Covering Letter and Consent Forms to be sent to Carers

Department of Policy Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Law,
The University of Lincoln,
Brayford Pool,
Lincoln, LN6 7TS
ladmasachew@lincoln.ac.uk
cblanshard@lincoln.ac.uk

Tel: 01522 886977

Dear XXXX

Earlier this year, the Children’s Fund asked the University of Lincoln to carry out an evaluation of the projects that they assist in Lincolnshire. This work will attempt to find out the ways in which these projects aim to help children and if they are achieving their goals. If necessary, the Children’s Fund will be able to gain information about how they can improve services for children, parents and local communities in the future. Once the evaluation has been completed, the Children’s Fund in Lincolnshire will be able to tell the government about the work that is taking place in this area and what is being achieved.

One of the projects that have been selected for this evaluation work is the YMCA, which we believe your son/daughter XXXX is taking part in. The work we will be conducting focuses mainly on gathering the views of the children (using group discussions) and parents (using interviews) that are involved in the YMCA. We believe it is important to ask those who are directly involved with the projects - they may be able to give us a unique insight into what works well, and, if necessary, tell us what could be changed to improve the services that are on offer. We would therefore be very grateful if you would consider taking part in an interview to help us with our
research. We would also like to ask you if your son/daughter – XXX - would be able to take part in an interview/group discussion with other children.

We would like to tell you that all of the information you give us will be stored confidentially and used for no other purpose except to complete this research. It will not be possible to identify you personally from the responses that you give. In order to help our work, all of the interviews and group discussions will be tape-recorded. Both you and your child will have the right to withdraw from the research at any time, should you wish to do so. The interview and group discussion will take approximately XX minutes and XX minutes respectively. The date, venue and time for the interview will be: XXXX. The group discussion will be held on XXX at XXX. Once we have been able to gather the views and opinions of all the children and parents involved in the evaluation, we will let you know what we have found out.

We would also like to inform you that all of our interviewers have had a check on their background completed by the Criminal Records Bureau. For your peace of mind, this check allows them to work safely with children. Furthermore, the rights of you and your child will be considered at all stages of the research.

We would be grateful if you could fill out the consent form that is attached to this letter if you and/or your child would like to take part in this research. Once you have done this, please return it to us in the pre-paid envelope by: xxxx

Thank you for taking the time to read this information, and we look forward to meeting with you soon. If you have any questions in the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact us on: 01522 886848 or 01522 886792.

Yours sincerely,
Consent to use the information provided in Interviews and Group Discussions that Assist with the Evaluation of the Children’s Fund in Lincolnshire

Name of Project to be Evaluated: _____________________________________

________________________________________________________

Name of Researcher: ____________________________________________

Contact Telephone Number: _____________________________________

We would be grateful if you could read the following statement. This sets out how we will use the information that you and your child give us. If you are happy with this, please give your consent for either you and your child, or both of you, to take part in the research.

Statement of Consent

• The information on the attached letter explains why this research is being carried out and how I will be able to help. I understand that although the information I or my child gives may be seen in a report, no one will be able to identify us from what we say.

• My contribution and that of my child will be kept safely and securely in line with the Data Protection Act 1998.

• I understand that my child and I can withdraw from the interview or discussion group at any time.

Please tick either or both of the following options:

☐ I would be happy to take part in an interview that will help with the evaluation of the Children’s Fund Lincolnshire. I give my permission
for the information I give to be used for research purposes only (including research reports). I know that no one will be able to identify me from what I say.

☐ I would be happy for my child to take part in an interview/focus group (researcher to delete as appropriate) to help with the evaluation of the Children’s Fund Lincolnshire. I give my permission for the information my child gives to be used for research purposes only (including research reports). I know that no one will be able to identify him/her from what he/she says.

I hereby assign the copyright in my contribution to: ___________________ (researcher)

Name of Parent: ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________

Name of Child: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Date of Workshop</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alford</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No Children's Fund projects in this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>July 2004</td>
<td>Service providers from Action for Young Carers and Boston Fit Kids</td>
<td>After discussions with projects in Boston, it was decided that it would not be appropriate to invite children and parents, as these projects deal with particularly sensitive issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Lindsey Coastal</td>
<td>July 2004</td>
<td>Service providers from the Owls nurture group at Mablethorpe primary school</td>
<td>Service providers at this project should be in a position to pass on their training to other nurture groups in Lincolnshire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gainsborough</td>
<td>August 2004</td>
<td>Service providers from Rapid Response. 6 other projects in Lincolnshire will be attending</td>
<td>This workshop will take place on 27th August after this final report has been submitted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grantham</td>
<td>July 2004</td>
<td>Children and parents from the Earl of Dysart Primary School and the Junior Street Wardens</td>
<td>Some of this group are currently working alongside the Children’s Fund’s Participation Coordinator to design and conduct evaluations of other CF projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horncastle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Training was not given in this area, but was available to service providers from this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln and North Hykeham</td>
<td>April 2004 (2), May 2004, June 2004, August 2004</td>
<td>Children’s Fund coordinators; Share the Care service providers, children and parents; YMCA - service providers and children; Special Needs Development project - service provider; school health advisor for children with disabilities - service provider</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Rasen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No projects in this area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruskington</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spalding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No projects, but most of the services in Boston will cover this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stamford</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No projects in this area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutton Bridge</td>
<td>July 2004</td>
<td>Service providers, children and parents from the Teenage Pregnancy project and the Two Wheels project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that not all of these areas in their entirety feature children at risk of social exclusion. The Children’s Fund delivery plan outlines localised areas that should be specifically targeted for service provision.
## Appendix 5
### Programme of the training for Children’s Fund

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-10.30AM</td>
<td>Introduction to the workshop*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.30-11.30AM</td>
<td>Lesson on questionnaire design (i.e. formalising feedback collection) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.30-12.45PM</td>
<td>Analysing information collected from a questionnaire (We will offer Excel lessons in co-operation with Learning resources at the University) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.45-1PM</td>
<td>Lunch*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.30-2.30PM</td>
<td>This will involve introduction to PA and a mapping exercise **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.30-3PM</td>
<td>Lessons about the usage of at least 3 PA techniques to evaluate projects **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-3.30PM</td>
<td>Tea Break **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.30-4.30PM</td>
<td>Lesson on analysing information gathered from a PA session **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30-5PM</td>
<td>Question and answer session and a closing remark**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These sessions are provided to project staff.
** These sessions are provided to project staff, children and their carers.

Venue of training for project staff and service users was at Lincoln University and community centres and schools respectively.
Question in Parliament

Mr. Laws: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Skills what plans she has to establish nurture groups in primary schools in order to give special assistance to young children with social and educational problems; and if she will make a statement. [27047]

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Government recognise the benefit that nurture groups can provide for disaffected young children or those with emotional behavioural and other difficulties (EBD). A number of LEAs and schools already use this approach for pupils with EBD. In June 2001, my Department published guidance on promoting children's mental health in early years and school settings, which includes the use of nurture groups as an effective early intervention strategy for young children in schools who have mental health difficulties. In co-operation with the Coram Foundation we will also be publishing guidance later this year on effective strategies for dealing with pupils with behavioural and other difficulties. This will include the use of nurture groups as one of a range of strategies primary schools might adopt. It is for individual schools to decide where it is appropriate for nurture groups to be used depending on the needs of the children and the school's circumstances.

Note from Hansard: January 18th 2002.