Gateway Evaluation Report

Written and researched by the Poverty Alliance on behalf of Fife Gingerbread

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Public report version amended . February 2017

Published by :

The Poverty Alliance

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The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue.

Reference No: SCO19926.

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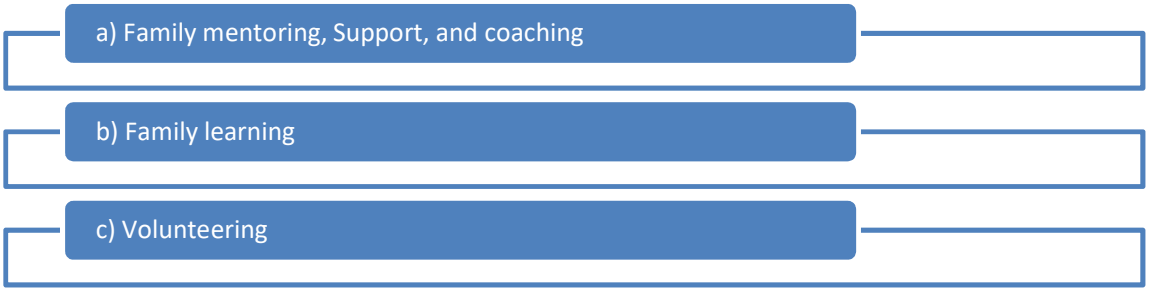
Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the Gateway project. The partnership project[1] is delivered by Fife Gingerbread, a charity which provides a range of support to disadvantaged families in Fife. The Gateway project works with vulnerable families in the Levenmouth area in order to improve educational outcomes and build family resilience among participants. The main aim of this evaluation research project was to understand the impact which the Gateway has had on child educational attainment and relationships between families, schools and other local services.

The Gateway project employs a holistic model in working with families. The Gateway is one of 26 projects across the UK (one of four in Scotland) which received funding from the Big Lottery Fund between January 2012 and March 2017 as part of their Improving Futures Programme. Application criteria stipulated that only one bid could be made by each local authority and Gateway was approved and signed off by the Community Planning Partnership. The aim of the funding programme was to explore new approaches to improving outcomes for children in families with multiple and complex needs. The Gateway project offers support to vulnerable families where the oldest child is aged between 5 and 10 years. Families in ten different schools have received support from the project. The Gateway aims to create opportunities for families to tackle their difficulties, building their resilience and developing personal and interpersonal skills. The project is built along three strands

[1] Originally with Barnardo's, Fife College, Fife Voluntary Action, Family and Community Support Team and Fife Rights Forum.



a) Family mentoring, support, and coaching

The Gateway Project Team members are based together in the Fife Gingerbread office in the heart of Leven and from here they offer an outreach service for families. Gateway staff visit families in their homes and in venues most convenient for them. Flexibility and adaptation to suit individual/ family needs is a key feature of the project.

The team share extensive experience of working with vulnerable children and families, and have in-depth knowledge of the issues which can affect them and the services available to them. Throughout the process the Family Mentor adopts a child-centred approach, taking very careful account of the important assets offered by the wider family, and by the community.

b) Family learning

At the core of the project is the provision of family learning opportunities across the area. Through a wide range of activities, families are encouraged to view learning as a means of developing core skills, personal skills, improving employability, building family relationships, and having fun together. The informal approach adopted by the Project Team encourages families to participate – offering opportunities to live, love, and laugh together.

c) Volunteering

Volunteering is widely acknowledged as a means of learning and skills development, a valuable way of providing peer support within the community, as well as developing self-esteem and confidence. At every stage of the project the Project Team identifies individuals with the potential to become volunteers, making a difference in their community, and giving something back. Volunteers are invited to provide support to families participating in the project, as buddies and advocates; volunteers may become 'shadow tutors' and, family members may become volunteers, contributing to the overall sustainability of the project.

Literature Review: Poverty and Education

Impact of Poverty on Educational Attainment

Supporting families at pre-school and early years continues to be an important focus in Scotland. Research shows that children growing up in poor families emerge from school with lower levels of educational attainment. Those with lower educational attainment have a higher likelihood of living on low income, working in low paid employment, and having periods of unemployment. On average, children in Scotland living in disadvantaged areas are found to be between six and 13 months behind their peers in problem solving and 11 to 18 months behind their peers in expressive vocabulary at age five[2]. Assisting families to help improve attainment at school is therefore critical for reducing the risk of poverty and improving opportunities.

Evidence from a study by The Poverty Alliance (2015)[3] on poverty and play illustrated a complex relationship between living on a low income and play. The study, found that poverty and difficult life circumstances shaped the play experiences which children took part. Parents and caregivers discussed issues such as managing on a low income and dealing with caring responsibilities which were often complex, and families required ongoing support to enable them to deal with these issues and support effective play for their children.

Research from Growing up in Scotland (GUS) found that 'children from less advantaged households are less likely to experience a wide range of 'home learning' activities than children from more advantaged households[4]'. They also found other key differences, such as changes in vocabulary and ability in the pre-school period between the ages of 3 and 5 years, are more strongly related to aspects of the child's home environment and the role of parents than external factors like pre-school education. GUS research also reported the importance of home learning and parent-child attachment for all children, and in particular for children whose parents had lower educational qualifications.

[2] Ellis, Sue., Sosu, E., (2014) 'Closing The Attainment Gap In Scottish Education'. *JRF*. N2016.
[3] McHardy, F., (2015) 'Play In and Around the Home: Play and Poverty in Fife' Poverty Alliance: Glasgow
[4] Growing up in Scotland (nd) 'Key Finding'. *Growingupinscotland.org.uk*.

Home learning plays a significant role in a child's development and this must be considered alongside the impact of pre-school care and school in a child's life course. A review of research on the impact of family support interventions concluded that: "for all children, the quality of the home learning environment at preschool stage is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or Income"[5]. Growing up in Scotland research explored the activities undertaken in households preparing for school and found that families in higher income household and with higher levels of education reported a greater average number of activities, such as talking to their children about school and practicing numbers[6].

Relationships between families and schools are also shaped by poverty and disadvantage. Research on parental involvement with schools (for example helping with homework, talking to teachers, attending school functions, and taking part in school governance) showed that where parents or care-givers are actively involved, children report more positive school experiences. Coupled families and older mothers were more likely to have higher involvement than lone parents and younger mothers. Deprivation is also a key factor. Parents living in less deprived areas, those in higher occupational classes, in higher income groups, and with higher educational qualifications tend to report higher levels of involvement in schools[7]. In terms of information from schools, parents in more advantaged circumstances were more likely than those in more disadvantaged circumstances to report having received information about their child's progress[8]. Research by Growing Up in Scotland on obtaining advice and support to assist children at home with learning illustrated 65% of parents reported that they had received information/advice on how to help their child with learning at home (excluding doing homework). Seventy three per cent of parents in the highest income group reported receiving this advice compared with 58% in the lowest income group[9]. A 2007

[5] Slyva , K ., Melhuish, E., Sammons ,.P , Siraj-Blacthford , Taggert M (nd*) 'The effective provision of pre-school education (eppe) project: findings from pre-school to end of key stage 1'*

[6] Growing up in Scotland (nd) 'Key Finding'. *Growingupinscotland.org.uk*.

[7] Growing up in Scotland (2012) 'Early experiences of primary school' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2012/05/7940/7

[8] ibid

[9] Ibid

OECD report indicated that parents' socio-economic background mattered more for children's attainment than the school attended[10].

The Child Poverty Action Group's (2015)[11] 'cost of a school day project' found that children from low income families faced a number of disadvantages which were not experienced by more affluent peers. The study highlighted barriers to home learning among children from low income families including: lack of materials; internet access; home environment issues such as parental stress; and overcrowding.

There is also a higher prevalence of additional support needs amongst children living in the poorest 20 per cent of families[12]. For example, six times as many children in the most deprived families are identified as having social emotional and behavioural difficulties compared with the least deprived families. Across local authority areas with high levels of deprivation there are some mixed patterns of rates of additional support needs and this is due to lack of consistency in a mechanism to identify children and to provide them with effective support[13].

Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort study indicates that poverty and socio-economic difference play a role in attainment. The study suggests that persistent poverty has a larger cumulative negative impact on children's cognitive development than episodic poverty, and that for children who are persistently in poverty throughout their early years their cognitive development test scores at age 7 are more than 10 percentile ranks lower than children who have never experienced poverty [14].

Policy context

Supporting families at pre-school and early years continues to be an important policy priority in Scotland. 'Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed' is a key National Outcome within Scotland's National

[10] OECD 2007 cited in Ellis, Sue., Sosu, E., (2014) 'Closing The Attainment Gap In Scottish Education'. *JRF*. N2016.
[11] Child Poverty Action Group (2015) 'Cost of the School Day' http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/cost-school-day-report-and-executive-summary
[12] Shaw, B, Bernardes, E, Threteheway, A, Menzies, L (2016) 'Special educational needs and their links to poverty' https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/special-educational-needs-and-their-links-poverty
[13] Ibid
[14] Dickerson, A., Gurleen, P, (2012/2) 'Persistent poverty and children's cognitive development Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study'

Performance Framework. Preventative and early intervention approaches are central to the Scottish Government's policies aimed at improving outcomes for children. The Early Years Framework prioritises early intervention, supporting early development and learning, promoting play and providing proactive support for parents and carers, reinforcing families and strengthening communities. Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is the national framework for all services working with children and which aims to improve how services work together to meet the needs of children. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 brought much of the GIRFEC approach into law and included a number of provisions including increasing the availability of free pre-school childcare, and extending the provision of free school meals to all primary one to three children.

The Scottish Government has a clear policy objective of reducing the link between deprivation and poor educational attainment. The Attainment Scotland Fund[15] is targeting £180 million over four years from 2015 on supporting pupils in the local authorities of Scotland with the highest concentrations of deprivation. In a review of educational attainment across Scotland several interventions that help to reduce the attainment gap were highlighted. These included interventions such as parental involvement programmes to support home learning, and high quality preschool learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and mentoring[16].

Family Intervention and Improving Educational Attainment

Over the past twenty years a considerable body of evidence has emerged on the efficacy of family intervention in improving outcomes for vulnerable families. A 'whole family approach' has come to be recognised as best practice among policy makers and practitioners.[17] Action for Children's Dundee Families Project, set up in 1996, was seen to pioneer this way of working with families through intense, personalised support to improve a range of outcomes for families, including child educational attainment. Evaluation of five Intensive Family Support Projects in Scotland aimed at reducing anti-social behaviour

[15] Scottish Government (2014) 'Scottish Attainment Challenge' http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/Raisingeducationalattainment
[16] Ibid
[17] Pawson, H ., Davidson, E., Sosenko, F., Flint , J., Nixon , J., Casey, ., Sanderson , D(2009) '*Evaluation of Intensive Family Support Projects*' Scottish Government: Edinburgh

found interventions commonly help with parenting skills and improving children's school attendance, building self-confidence, emotional support and welfare benefits advice. The evaluation found that the Projects were successful at building trusting relationships with families and that interventions had a number of immediate successes, while recognising the challenge of achieving long-term change for families with multiple and complex needs. Drug abuse and mental ill health were identified as examples of intractable issues which in some cases were barriers to the Projects achieving positive outcomes for families[18].

A review of international research evidence found family support to be one of the most significant contributors to children's continued success in the education system, particularly among children in low-income areas. The empirical evidence was found to show that parental engagement is one of the key factors in improving pupil attainment. However it is important to note that: "simply being involved with the school is shown to have little effect on individual attainment unless there are direct and explicit connections to learning"[19]. The evidence review therefore concluded that the provision of support which improves the quality of parent–child interaction is likely to make the most difference to subsequent achievement. The importance of intervention in the early years; support for parents to engage with their children in home learning; voluntary rather than compulsory participation; and of improving connections between home and school were all identified among principles of validated good practice that support low income families to raise the achievement of their children. The review also strongly emphasises the importance of support for families at critical transition points in their children's schooling, such as the move from primary to secondary school.

[18] Pawson, H ., Davidson, E., Sosenko, F., Flint , J., Nixon , J., Casey, ., Sanderson , D(2009) '*Evaluation of Intensive Family Support Projects*' Scottish Government: Edinburgh

[19] Save the Children (nd) '*Helping Families Support Children's Success at School*' https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Helping_Families_Review_of_Research_Evidence_(5)_1.pdf.

Aims and Research Questions

This report presents findings from an evaluation project commissioned by the Fife Gingerbread carried out by Poverty Alliance in 2016.

The three main objectives of this project were:

- To develop a better understanding of the range of support and role of the gateway project and in improving outcomes and addressing the support needs of families it has engaged with.
- To assess the contribution of the Gateway project on improving relationships and connections with schools.
- To understand the challenges the project has faced and explore areas of improvement.

In answering these questions the evaluation will seek to identify and provide practice and recommendations for the project.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken to completing this evaluative research. Elsewhere monitoring data from the Gateway project has been used to inform quantitative analysis of the impact of the wider Improving Futures Programme http://www.improvingfutures.org/ .

While useful in identifying trends across the different interventions, such work was not able to provide detailed reflections on individual projects and the contexts in which they are working. Qualitative research allows for richer, more in-depth understanding of the impact which the project has had from the perspective of those involved. Through semi-structured interviews with school staff and participant families, valuable insights were gained into the difference which the Gateway project has made for them.

Interviews were completed with senior staff including four head teachers and one depute head in schools where the Gateway project has been based. Interviews explored key elements of the Gateway project, such as family based learning, and explored the relationship between this support and children's

attainment and outcomes at school. In order to gauge the impact of the Gateway project, interviews with senior staff in the schools considered factors such as: families' engagement and relationship quality with school prior to and after involvement; confidence and other social skills of children who have been supported through Gateway; and parents' involvement in and understanding of their children's learning. A breakdown of the interview questions can be found at Appendix A.

The research also involved home-based interviews with six families who had taken part in the Gateway project through a mixture of referrals. Informal discussions were also conducted with project staff to understand their experiences of working in the project.

Summary of Key Findings

Advantages and Impacts of a School Based Approach

- ***Partnership working***:
  The Gateway approach, whereby the project is based directly in the school setting with an allocated family mentor ensures strong relationships were built with both school staff and the families. This approach enabled both partners to collectively work towards outcomes in terms of supporting children's ability to learn. The shared approach also addressed wider issues such as poverty and family breakdown which had been traditionally difficult for schools to tackle due to the limitations of school remits.
- ***Tailored to school's needs:***
  This school based approach allowed the Gateway project to be tailored to local contexts and ensured more effective targeting of the support on offer to families in need. This also allowed key workers to be a visible presence within the school environment for parents and children, an effective method for engaging with families.
- ***Dealing with Difficult Issues:***
  Issues families faced were complex and sensitive including relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, physical and mental health issues, financial issues, and bereavement. Gateway provided a critical link between schools and families to help them address difficulties. This provided schools with a greater understanding of the support needs of the family and the children, and of the barriers families faced.
- ***Early intervention:***
  Navigating the landscape of statutory services was described as challenging and it was sometimes difficult for schools to know what support would be best for families. Timescales for referrals could often be long and could lead to outcomes such as behavioural issues escalating. The embedded nature of the project within the school

allowed quicker support to be implemented for families due to accessibility and relationships with family mentor staff.

- ***Assisting with Educational Readiness:***
  The Gateway project provided support with issues such as absenteeism and lateness. By working with families to establish household routines and address complex household circumstances they were able to prevent children from becoming school refusers or missing out on significant periods of study. The whole family approach adopted by Gateway allowed all children in the household to be engaged, helping to build positive family dynamics.
- ***Linkages with Classroom Approach***:
  The Gateway project promoted positive behaviour and organised household environments with families. This provided a cross over with the ethos promoted within the school environment in terms of organized classroom pedagogy.
- ***Support out with School Term Time:***
  The family learning aspect of the project provided a critical link with maintaining relationships with families during periods such as the school holidays. Through engagement with family learning, this enabled families to continue capacity building work within the home environment and maintain readiness for learning upon school term resuming. The approach of having no charge for accessing family groups removed financial barriers for families taking part.

Advantages and Impacts of a Whole Family Approach

- ***Identification of Family Needs and Support***
  Families supported by the project found Gateway vital in terms of helping them to articulate their needs to staff in schools and other services. This was particularly beneficial for those who suffered from low self-esteem and confidence or who had experienced issues such as depression or anxiety or traumatic events such as family member's imprisonment.

- ***Assisting with Families Practical Needs:***
  Where families were impacted by a disability or long term health condition, the project was viewed as valuable in adapting home environments and routines to their needs. This included supporting families with obtaining new housing if their current accommodation was unsuitable and enabling children to be living in homes where both play and learning could be effectively supported.
- ***Budgeting:***
  Gateway had a key role in assisting families with accessing financial support services to maximise their income and support them with wider issues such as budgeting and debt management.
- ***Improving parent and child interactions:***
  Families outlined the benefits of being supported at home and establishing routines and support, in particular for families with children with behavioural challenges or those in who were in the process of seeking diagnoses for conditions such as Autism.
- ***Advocacy:***
  Gateway was highlighted as providing an important advocacy role for families with previously negative experiences such as communication breakdowns with statutory services, for example social work.
- ***Holistic prevention:***
  Gateway project had a clear preventative role in addressing immediate needs as well as wider complex issues such as parental mental health. In doing so it was able to support households and prevent further escalation of issues. This was especially important in larger families facing greater levels of household stress and low income.

Challenges Facing the Project

- ***Sustainability of School Support:***
  The family learning groups that had been established by Gateway with parent volunteers were limited in the support they could access from school staff for example teachers and the sustainability of element of this project was highlighted.

- ***Demand and Need:***
  The scope of the project and the age restrictions in the project limited the families that the project could support. This has an impact if families moved outwith the geographical location.

Evaluation Findings from schools: Understanding the Impact of Gateway

Gateway and Relationships with Schools

The relationship with the school was identified as being critical to the success of the project. In the delivery of the Gateway project, the approach of allocating a family mentor to a particular school and being able to build continuity within the school and school staff was critical in enabling in-depth engagement. School staff spoke of the importance of trust when working with outside agencies. This was seen as particularly important if schools were less familiar with working with third sector partners. It was also recognised that there was a need for time to build a shared understanding of working approaches and where the project would 'fit'. Gateway was praised by schools for taking a flexible approach and engaging in dialogue with schools to ensure the model applied fitted their needs.

Being able to work together over a period of time was seen as useful in allowing the Gateway project to best adapt to the needs of schools. Schools valued the project and that resources such as family learning within the school were being tailored to their needs.

As a result of Gateway being based within the school directly the schools often used it as a first port of call. Gateway was viewed as a first stage of support for early stage prevention when key issues were emerging such as behavioural difficulties or attendance issues. School staff participants often expressed frustration that statutory services were not straight-forward to access when supporting children and families facing crises. Navigating the landscape of statutory services was described as challenging and it was sometimes difficult for schools to know what support would be best placed for families. By contrast, the Gateway project was seen as more approachable and easier to engage with for advice due to accessibility of staff and the support the project could quickly provide to families in need.

> *"Saved so much bureaucracy could give them a ring" (School B)*
>
> *"Family mentor is voluntary, it's less intrusive for families" (School C)*
>
> *"My families see then as less invasive" (School D)*

The early intervention approach of Gateway was seen as critical in terms of being able to intervene and flag with families the support they could offer. For cases that were identified as more complex Gateway provided an often critical role alongside other key agencies.

> *"Lost without them being able to do something when it needs to be done, not 100 emails later"*
>
> (School B)

Schools valued the whole family approach of the project and the less intrusive nature of support it could provide. Being based in schools, for example through coffee mornings or other activities, was seen as beneficial for engaging families requiring light touch support. The attachment of family mentors and family learning to the school provided a package of holistic support. Having the same project workers assigned to schools on an on-going basis was also beneficial. This enabled workers to build an understanding of the needs and demographics of the school and its surrounding areas as well as providing familiarity to parents and children.

The skill-set of the project workers involved in Gateway was seen as an important building block and one that was central to the project's success. Due to the range of family issues they dealt with, as well as the reluctance of some families to engage with services, there was an emphasis placed on the ability of the workers to connect with families and to obtain their trust and commitment to engage with the help and support Gateway could offer.

> *"Families are mistrusting of authority and, perceive them as some level"* (School D)

The wide remit and range of areas in which project staff were able to support families was also seen as important. Schools recognised that they were often places where parents would be reluctant to disclose the difficulties they were facing, or to discuss highly sensitive, personal issues such as domestic abuse. The sensitivity, training and expertise that workers were able to bring to such matters was widely praised. In addition, because project workers were able to work across the home and the school, parents and caregivers could build a relationship in an environment where they felt safe to speak about the difficulties they were facing.

Communication and feedback between the schools and the Gateway project was deemed positive. The regular feedback and liaison the schools had with project workers differentiated the project from other statutory services the schools were often simultaneously liaising with. It also enabled schools to keep a check on and adopt the strategies needed to support children working with the Gateway project.

Schools highlighted it was predominately leadership or senior management of the school that were involved in liaising with Gateway staff. This was recognised to be because of the Scottish Government's 'named person' policy[20] whereby senior staff members had responsibility for the coordination of support for children. Senior staff described how classroom teachers would have limited interaction with the Gateway project due to the remits and time constraints of their working day. Classroom teachers would only be involved where there was an integrated support plan in place for a child in their class. Issues identified by classroom teachers would be passed to senior staff in the named person role and this would be used to make decisions about the children's wellbeing and the involvement of the Gateway project.

Several schools discussed family learning groups taking place within their school. The work conducted within the school setting was seen as highly valuable but was identified as a stage that was only able to develop effectively after a number of relationships had been established with families. The support provided during school holidays such as Summer or October groups was valued as this prevented issues escalating for families during this time. It also helped build capacity for children to learn upon returning to school as well as supporting continuity of relationships between the projects and families.

The family learning groups in schools aspect of the project was highlighted as being fragile without external involvement of the Gateway due to staffing constraints of school staff time and capacity to embed and sustain this within the school. Teaching staff and management staff had limited time due to the

[20] A Named Person will be available to children and young people across Scotland from birth to age 18, or beyond if still in school. This means a child, young person, parent, or someone who works with them, knows who they can approach for help or advice if they need it. A Named Person will normally be a health visitor for pre-school children and a head teacher, guidance teacher or other promoted member of staff for school aged children and young people Source : Scottish Government

breadth and remit of their roles and it was discussed that this would be difficult to address going forward

Identification of Families and the Process of Referrals

Families who might benefit from the Gateway project were identified by school staff due to issues arising such as poor child behaviour, poor attendance, or through conversations with parents. Other mechanisms were also identified by schools for example if a meeting was held with the Family team; Gateway was often identified at that stage as a source of support. Other routes of identification for the project included when family learning activities were being run, which would also provide Gateway staff with an opportunity to build relationships with families and identify issues requiring support.

The approach of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) provides a structure within schools for looking at a child's wellbeing. Schools have a number of routes of support they can signpost or refer to, however Gateway was viewed by some schools within the project as being a fast track route for support and a first option for cases where informal or less invasive support was required. Gateway was well positioned to do early intervention and anticipatory prevention work for more complex issues that families may be facing. Gateway could provide children with intense individualised support. As a result of their ability to build close relationships with families, Gateway was viewed as being able to identify further issues or needs the families may have beyond what the schools initially identified as impacting on the household.

> "*Sometimes we don't know the sticking point can be, for all sorts of reasons Gateway making that bridge , helping us gather call all the information we would need to meet the children needs*".
>
> (School C)

The fast track approach that Gateway offered was deemed a success and a key benefit of having the Gateway project embedded within schools. Criteria for being able to refer families to Gateway was flexible to their needs and was a key reason why schools engaged with the project as opposed to other services whose criteria may be more fixed or had extensive waiting lists. It was recognised that Gateway support would be administered more quickly and more effectively than that of other services. The approach of more informal

chats within schools for example coffee mornings held in schools to assist with queries. This was alongside formal applications to work for a period of time with a family mentor and provided a menu of options of support.

A number of issues were identified as being potential trigger points for referral of a family to Gateway for support. For example parents or caregivers having financial difficulties such as rent arrears; a relationship breakdown; a child having behavioural difficulties; or poor school attendance. In addition, in some schools child self-referral was recognised as a route to accessing the project, for example by asking for help from a teacher or other member of school staff, which would then serve as a starting point for an approach to the family. In other cases, for example circumstances, where parents or caregivers were particularly young, or where a family had recently moved to an area or had little wider support networks, were also identified as triggers for referral to the project.

School-family relationships and the role of Gateway

It was clearly recognised by interviewees that the impact of the Gateway project within the school context was dependent upon the nature and quality of families' engagement with the project. It was perceived that the project could only have a limited impact on a child without effective 'buy in' and engagement from the parents. It was recognised that some parents and caregivers would be reluctant to engage and not want to acknowledge that they might be in need of support. Engaging with support services was recognised as carrying an element of stigma for some families. For example interviewees considered there could be reluctance to engage among families with a long history of social work intervention, or because of negative views that were held of other families already engaging with the project.

Several schools outlined the impacts which parental behaviour or household stresses can have on children and that the Gateway project provided an opportunity to work on this. Several schools recognised that families often had competing priorities or very chaotic circumstances and, that liaising and speaking to the schools would not be possible, or at least a very low priority.

> "*Using Gateway as support mechanism they {parents} recognise that we are here to help them, not to be a stick to beat them with. Having a*

better understanding of the family, they are more likely to tell us if there is a problem and we know there have been issues in the past. Build a bridge between parent and school". (School C)

Relationships between schools and families could be difficult and Gateway provided a useful tool to support parents and caregivers with their engagement with the school.

"Hugely positive resource for me as a head teacher" (School D)

Parents and caregivers could often see meetings with the school as daunting and formal, and the project provided support to help parents and caregivers engage and articulate their needs at these meetings. By providing this support, it was recognised that families were more comfortable to articulate issues and concerns and be open about the impact that such problems had on the household. This process was also seen to lead to other positive outcomes in terms of managing expectations of the parents and caregivers and explaining the school's role in relation to issues families were facing. This was particularly important where parents and caregivers had lower confidence or self-esteem, or required support to communicate effectively. The family mentors were also able to help with more practical needs or barriers families might face, such as transport.

"*It could be as simple as providing Dad transport to come to meetings who may be otherwise unable to attend" (School A)*

More broadly, the project provided an opportunity to de-escalate a situation following an incident at a school, for example a family conflict. Gateway allowed support to be offered quickly, in contrast to other agencies. This was deemed an important factor for preventing issues escalating and having wider negative outcomes such as poorer educational attainment.

"*Because they run that coffee morning if something is brought to our attention on a Thursday , we know a family mentor will be in on the Tuesday and its straight away making that contact where as with other agencies they meet quarterly for a referral process and the situation between you identifying a need and the referral being taken and then the referral being processed and a space becoming available as is the*

case with Barnardos , FACTS or any of the other agencies which we have or CAMHS is significant and the waiting list ,whereas with this there is access to someone almost instantly". *(School A)*

"Without [Gateway] we would potentially have school refusers, significant gaps in children's education, and behaviours issues we were not getting to the bottom of"

(School B)

Building Key Skills : Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers presented to the Gateway project with a range of issues and needs. One key area was mental health, either their own, that of their children, or both. School staff reported that children could often demonstrate poor behaviour if a parent was suffering from poor mental health. One school discussed an example where Gateway had been able to support a parent with depression to seek medical assistance from a doctor. Addressing parental mental health was seen often to have a positive impact on children's mental health. Such intervention also served as a means of preventing future crises for families.

Schools discussed many parents and caregivers suffering from low confidence, and low self-esteem, and poor self-worth. Many parents and caregivers were cited as having been in relationships with partners or wider family members which had been abusive or had an unhealthy dynamic. Such experiences were recognised to have resulted in parents and caregivers feeling disempowered in other elements of their lives, such as managing the household finances and routines. Many had also experienced difficult transitions such as relationship breakdown and/or challenging separations, and found these periods emotionally challenging. Family mentors were able to assist through one to one intensive work and referrals and signposting to additional services. Such issues were highlighted as being beyond the school remit to address and Gateway provided a key route for responding to this.

"There is a line between life at home and life at school" (School B)

Complex life issues such as family breakdown or relationship problems were a key barrier to families asking for help and addressing other issues such as

financial issues or other issues within the household. These wider challenges impacted on all in the households and children would often react negative ways, with poor behaviour or attendance at school. A key area where the project had positive impacts on parents and caregivers was in supporting them to increase children's school attendance. Poor attendance led to challenges for children's learning as due to missed work and reduced confidence in the classroom. This was an issue where schools had limited opportunities to support parents and caregivers. Family mentors were able to support parents, caregivers and children, empowering them to establish routines that would allow for increased attendance. Establishing such routines could be daunting for parents and caregivers, yet this was important for breaking patterns of poor attendance.

> *"This could even be a phone call to say are you up, depending on the need?" (School A)*

Gateway was able to reinforce and supplement the messaging on the importance of attendance at school. Support was also identified as useful for families whereby there was a pattern of lateness as opposed to that of non-attendance.

Families were also supported with improving children's presentation at school in terms of uniform or cleanliness. This again often had results in how a child performed at school. Gateway could provide support with addressing practicalities such as a Scottish Welfare Fund application for a new washing machine etc.

Family mentors also played a critical role in working with parents and caregivers on boundaries and attachment with children. As Gateway workers were based within the home environment they were able to observe and support parent-child interactions and provide support in a non-threating environment. They worked intensively to help them establish patterns of behaviour and communication which were healthy and effective in situations where communication had broken down. For some parents' this included their use of appropriate language around children if highlighted by the school. One school highlighted this was an issue that not only impacted on children but also

impacted on other children due to repetition of language or resulting in tensions with other parents.

Family mentors were also able work on issues such as the safe use of social media. This was flagged as an issue that could cause conflict for families and impact negatively on children. This was often a key concern where there was conflict between separated parents. Schools reported parents and caregivers misusing social media as a tool for venting or as weapon which was often unhelpful and would lead to further conflict.

"*Isolation and anger about life a key trigger for this"* (School B)

Several examples were given across interviews of cases where it was felt that Gateway involvement had been critical. For example in maintaining family contact between separated families; in prevention of a child being taken into care; and in some cases enabling a parent or caregiver to obtain and sustain employment.

Family mentors and family learning were able to work with different family members, and specifically with parents and caregivers to establish a more effective home learning environment. This reflected the ethos and approach that schools were embedding within their classroom.

"*Organised house reflecting organised classroom pedagogy*" (School B)

Families were encouraged to engage with family based learning groups and activities and by engaging opened and connected with other opportunities such as schemes included Incredible Years parenting groups, much of which was implemented through the family mentor work and though the volunteering aspect built up through family learning. One key area of capacity building was the family groups that were run in school. These built up skills in parents and caregivers and gave them the opportunity to run their own groups and become volunteers.

"*Building different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle without Gateway the jigsaw puzzle would still be incomplete"* (*School A*)

Schools reported an increase in the in the parents and caregivers who became volunteers. Although a number of parents and caregivers had taken on

volunteering roles through these family groups within the schools, this had not led to them becoming involved in other school activities such as Parent Teachers Associations. It was also reported that these family groups struggled to become self-sustaining and required on-going support from the Gateway project.

Building Key Skills : Children

It was outlined by schools that it was difficult to attribute observed changes in children's skills to the Gateway project's intervention specifically. Children involved with the project could often be working to develop their skills with multiple agencies, as well as the input received from classroom teachers. However, it was the focus which Gateway had on children's home life which was viewed as particularly positive. By enabling children to have richer home life, interviewees felt the project helped improve children's ability to attend school ready to learn and engage with the school curriculum.

Particular points such as the summer holidays were viewed as critical. This was again an area whereby school remits could not provide support. Gateway offered family programs during the school holidays and this allowed children important social time and time to work on behaviour as well as being able to engage in play.

> *" The fact that they are free is important as it allows people to engage without stigma, there is no need to find that pound, there is no do I buy a loaf of bread or do I attend that club"*
>
> (School A)

Family learning during holiday periods also reinforce the importance of routines and boundaries for families and enabled them to build upon the support they had obtained during term time.

Challenges identified by Schools

Schools spoke of the range of children and families supported by the project. In some cases it was highlighted the benefits of an additional resources for example several Gateway workers would have enabled a greater reach of the project and a wider impact on the school as a whole.

The level of support required by families was also highlighted as a challenge. Schools noted that it was important that families did not become dependent on support and were empowered and capacity built. Withdrawal / exit points could be a balancing act with some families. This was a particular issue raised with family learning that allowed groups to become self-sustaining, as it was very difficult to ensure that they progressed. Working with parents and caregivers to build capacity to become volunteers and run groups needed to be an ongoing progress. This required recognition that parents and caregivers would potentially exit or fall away from volunteering for a number of reasons, for example work seeking requirements, or children moved on through the school.

The number of schools supported by Gateway was also raised, in terms of the scale of the number of schools being supported, and the potential for support to become diluted if caseloads increased across schools, or if more schools were included in future streams.

The age that children could be referred to the project was raised a challenge. The criteria needed to be broadened to allow families with children in secondary etc to become involved in the project.

Sustainable funding as required to enable schools going forward in terms of the ability to plan and build on the existing work and relationships that Gateway has established.

Evaluation Findings from Families: Understanding the Impact of Gateway

This evaluation also focused on understanding the perspective of families who had engaged with the project for a period of several months or longer. Through the evaluation we identified a number of thematic areas emerging from family experiences.

Issues families Presented to Gateway

Gateway had worked with families who had a range of issues impacting on their lives. The Gateway approach of addressing issues with the family as a whole was seen as beneficial and effective as it enabled a number of issues to be tackled in a coherent manner, and to provided stability to families experiencing difficulties or in some cases crisis points. Families reported that before contact with the Gateway they had often felt overwhelmed and scared, and in some cases felt that they had lost control of their ability to deal with the challenges they faced. Issues ranged in severity and impact on the household such as child protection issues, behavioural issues of children resulting in violence in the home and issues such as debt and housing. The nature of some of the issues families were dealing with were sensitive, and parents expressed that prior to involvement with the Gateway project they had been worried about outside agency involvement for a number of reasons.

"I keep things to myself and it got out of control" (Family 3)

A comprehensive process of trust building was required with families. Parents highlighted their initial resistance about allowing a Gateway worker to support the family because of concerns about how they may be perceived as parents. Parents had to build up trust with workers to share their own issues as well as their children's needs. Shame and fear were described as key emotions families experienced on first engaging with the service, and families valued the non-judgemental approach they received from Gateway workers. The process of being able to receive support through meetings within the home was seen as critical. This provided a means of support when families were restricted to their home environment due to barriers such as a child's health condition or an issue such as agoraphobia. It was also an environment where families were often more comfortable.

By working in family homes, this enabled the Gateway workers to see, and observe, and understand the dynamics and issues being experienced in life at home. This enabled a full picture and assessment of family wellbeing and their needs and living conditions. This was particularly beneficial for larger families to provide fresh insight and direction to families. The Gateway workers were able to provide support with both practical and emotional issues. Examples highlighted across families included:

- Support with obtaining housing that was safe and secure and provided a healthy environment for children. Examples across this evaluation indicated families experiencing poor private rented sector experience or overcrowded accommodation, or requiring new accommodation as a result of domestic abuse. Gateway had a key role in supporting families to obtain different accommodation.
- Support with parental and child mental health issues. This included support with attending GP' appointments, accessing specialist support and counselling, and ongoing support through worker outreach.
- Addressing behavioural issues in children. A number of families identified this to be a key issue and required support in addressing issues such as violence and aggression by children both at home and within school environments. The project was able to provide support and strategies that could be applied across home and school contexts.
- Maintenance of support to families with child protection concerns. Gateway was able to provide safeguarding support to households to ensure the adherence of child protection plans i.e. whereby child had been deemed at risk from a parent's ex- partner or where there had been other concerns reported within the household.

Families identified that Gateway provided a key support mechanism that was invaluable, even where there was multi agency involvement. Gateway provided a keystone for families which provided them with stability and security during a period of intensive service involvement (both voluntary and statutory) in their lives.

Families and Engagement with Services and Support

Across this evaluation family expressed the number of challenges they had faced accessing support prior to being involved with the Gateway project. Some families had expressed mistrust of services; this was a key issue where families had previously experienced a high level of social work involvement or if they hadn't previously had prior engagement with support services.

> *"I've not been through that situation before , I've not had to deal with social workers and walking into that big meeting and there were police there too , I started crying, it was quite scary"*
>
> (Family 3)

The rooting of the project through the school provided an entry point to engage with families on trigger issues such as poor attendance at school or behavioural issues. Schools provided a clear referral point and families were able to obtain Gateway support on an initial issue and build upon that to address wider issues in their lives.

> *" I was isolated, I was closed in and at the stage where I didn't need any help from anyone , that I could do everything myself , that's how I thought , in reality I needed a lot more help than I thought"* (Family 5)

Gateway provided a core role of voice and advocacy in supporting parents to articulate their needs and to provide support in dealing with services such as schools, health care services and so on. Examples were given across this evaluation, whereby individuals found communication difficult when they were affected by depression or low confidence or were overcoming traumatic events such as domestic abuse. The Gateway staff were viewed as important for guidance when parents were taking their first steps in engaging with services such as social work.

Gateway provided parents with support to communicate effectively and enabled them to be part of meetings to discuss issues impacting on their child/ children. Several families discussed how they previously would get angry or upset at meetings and with Gateway support they were able to contribute in a more effective manner. The project also provided a key role in enabling parents to prepare effectively for meetings and Gateway workers also provided an advocacy role in the issues parents faced. The holistic home approach meant that workers were well placed to provide additional evidence on the issues families faced. In attending meetings workers also provided an additional 'listener' at meetings to help parents understand the perspective of other services. This was particularly important when services were having multi agency meetings. The role of Gateway ensured parents were able to engage in meetings and to avoid communication breakdowns or disengagement between families and services.

For those with children with a long term conditions or disabilities they often faced practical barriers to participating in meetings , for example childcare or

transport support. The Gateway workers were able to assist families with these issues and were able to allow parents to feel involved the decision impacting on their children. This contributed to the empowerment of families.

When parents were experiencing extreme stress when dealing with complex life circumstances, Gateway was welcomed as being able to provide a fresh perspective on a household. This was important for families with limited social networks and enabled households to take a step back and engage in a reflective approach on the effectiveness of coping mechanisms and strategies they were employing in the household.

Relationships with Families

Families highlighted the importance of the schools based single point of contact. Being able to establish a relationship with the family mentor, meant that families could build trust and open up about issues that had impacted on families. One member spoke of self-referral and the challenges they had faced asking for help.

> *"I phoned up and asked for help, it took ages for me to phone for help, took me a while.. picked up the phone about five times over a month"*
>
> (Family 3)

By adopting a single point of contact, there was consistency for families and this provided families with a secure basis to form a connection. This was important as parents expressed it was difficult to let a service into their lives in particular working with a child or children in the household so this enabled parents to feel secure with the support offered.

Strong relationships established with parents allowed families to be open and honest about their circumstances, something they often didn't feel initially able to do with other services such as schools but progressed to with support from Gateway. This also enabled people to feel less reticent about trying different approaches within the household and look at their interactions within and outwith the household.

Parental /Caregivers Relationships with Schools and Education

Prior to Gateway involvement, parents reported challenges and issues with a child or children's engagement in school. Parents reported how this was often

linked to wider issues going on within the household such as high levels of household stress or other factors such as a child suffering from a health condition or disability.

> *"Helped us through a lot with my child , they've got really challenging behaviours ADHD, OCD and the Autistic Spectrum"* (Family 2)

Some parents reported finding it difficult to engage in their child's education and participate in parental activities such as a child's parent's night. Parents were often reluctant to take part in discussions with teachers around issues such as absenteeism and late coming or aggressive behaviour within a classroom environment due to their own underlying issues. For some families they discussed feeling initially embarrassed by their situation and feeling scared of being perceived as a poor parent.

In working with the project, families were able to push for more support and recognition of needs of children in schools with conditions such as Autism and ADHD. Families were often in a process of waiting for extensive period of times for diagnoses and support structures to be put in around conditions and Gateway was able to work with the school, child and parent to provide a package of support that could be applied in the house and in the school. This could include approaches such as sensory toys or quiet spaces. This had reported impacts of assisting families in ensuring the behaviour was able to be managed and to providing a more effective learning environment in the school setting. Parents reported children being more interested and focused on learning.

Gateway assisted families in constructing a number of strategies for providing household routines. Families discussed how family routines had broken down or where they had difficulties establishing routines. In some households children missed school or resulted in poor engagement at school with children falling behind.

> *"Wouldn't want to go to school, I would just say well stay off to make it easier for myself and their attendance would just build up"* (Family 3)

Across the project issues were also reported with engagement in homework and children regularly completing it. Parents were supported by working

alongside the family mentor to create structures within the household and to establish boundaries. This was administered through observation and introducing behavioural charts. Families reported that these were personalised to their children's interest thereby providing benefits in ensuring the child felt valued within the process.

> *"Used to give in for peace and quiet but now I have got the boundaries and I've set the rules and the boundaries and we are getting somewhere"*
>
> *(Family 5)*

In some family situations the Gateway workers had to address poor housing conditions and facilitate housing moves to enable families to get a property fully meeting their needs and to enable a healthy living environment for the children.

> "*Gateway was a really good help, I needed a fresh start…the situation because I was at risk would be safer if I moved"* (Family 3)

Families identified that workers provided support at a pace that was appropriate to their needs and provided feedback in a constructive manner enabling them to recognise areas they needed to address. Families reported the prolonged support they received provided a solid foundation to embed in the household. The approach of family learning workshops with school and during school holidays supported parents to maintain and reinforce routines and behaviour. By setting boundaries and structure within the household more positive behaviour was adopted within the school setting, parents reported a reduction in the number of calls they were getting from the school and a reduction in requests to take a child home from school due to poor behaviour.

Parents also reported improved communication between them and their children. The Gateway project focused on providing balance within households between siblings. This was particularly an issue in larger families where parents struggled to provide one to one time to each child and where children expressing challenging behaviour would be given more attention. Parents reported that when trying new strategies and putting into practice structures and boundaries they found that children valued this time and this led to a

reduction in household stress. Parents discussed being supported with parenting classes and their children being referred onto groups with other children to enable them to address issues such as expressing of emotion. This was deemed very important where children had experienced emotional trauma and been unable to effectively process this/ and or where children were unable able to express their emotion. Support was also given to parents to address their own emotional wellbeing. By addressing this, parental and child relationships improved.

> "*They felt left out , if they came home and I felt down I would just say go and play*" (Family 5)

Practical Support Required by Families

Families reported a range of issues as a result of living on a low income. This included difficulties to manage money, issues with accessing benefits and entitlements, poor access to childcare, transport issues and challenges meeting additional costs as result of house moves or other changes in circumstances. The experience of poverty had often resulted in families struggling to address day to day needs and to adequately meet child's or children's needs. The pressures of living in poverty also resulted in issues such as isolation, difficulties accessing services and inadequate living circumstances.

Addressing issues such as debt and money management provided core benefits to families. Families were supported with budgeting advice and to attend advice services from support services such Citizen's Advice. Some reported having being misinformed about benefits from agencies such as Job Centre Plus. Gateway provided assistance in ensuring that families were able to access their full benefit entitlement.

Using budgeting charts drawn up in partnership with Gateway Family mentors was a tool several families reported as being extremely useful in helping them regain control over their spending and understand their household spending effectively. This was reported in larger households or in households where there had been parental mental health difficulties. Household budget charts were also deemed beneficial to help families budget for pressures points they

faced such as school holidays, where parents would face additional costs in their weekly budgets such as through providing additional meals.

Recognised across all interviewed families were the benefits of the free activities provided through family fun clubs. This provided families with free access to activities for their children that they wouldn't have obtained otherwise. Parent's spoke that the food being provided at such activities meant that there were no barriers to attending and taking part in any of the support going forward. This allowed for families to continue to access emotional support and assistance with other issues in their lives and provided opportunities for building peer relationships with other families. For some families this was particularly critical if the children had inadequate play space around them to enable them to engage in play.

Preventative Role of the Gateway project

Gateway provided intervention for families in a number of ways through the family learning, volunteering and mentoring. Families were at different points when intervention took place. All families recognised that the coping mechanisms being applied before they worked with the project were inadequate and not addressing the issues they were faced.

By working with the family as whole, the Gateway Project was able to prevent issues escalating, for example by addressing housing arrears to prevent families facing eviction. Where there were issues with housing suitability due to a child's health condition or disability, they were in some cases able to assist with evidence of need for a move. Project workers were also able to help address health issues such as seeking support and diagnoses for conditions such as Autism. Providing listening and emotional support to families who had suffered trauma and or mental health issues ensured that families were able to stabilise issues. Gateway were also able to ensure that families facing severe pressure were prioritised with key agencies and services. Gateway also provided an intermediary to advocate with services such as job centre for parents who were unable to sign on in person.

"I couldn't sign on so I was terrified of losing my home"

(Family One)

One example given was of an isolated single parent facing circumstances with a child with severe anxiety and an undiagnosed condition. This had resulted in the family becoming housebound due to the child's behaviour and day to day needs.

> *"Child was so anxious, they would sit in my lap with a blanket and would breakdown and scream outside the toilet door if I went to the toilet. I actually had to cut back on the water I was drinking to make sure I made fewer trips"* (Family One)

Gateway was able to support the parent in being able to obtain vital supplies such as medicine and to provide critical emotional support to the parent who was living in a highly stressful situation. In doing so they supported the parent's mental health whilst the individual was unable to access wider support due to being the sole carer for the child and they prevented an escalation of mental distress. Through the support of the project they were able to support with the identification of the child's needs and assist with the return to school.

> "*Worker was a continuous presence which was my key support because at that point ……I was completely alone and without the support I would be on anti-depressants and definitely struggling*" (Family One)

The prevention role of the project was deemed as positive in preventing issues escalating in the school and home environment. Parents reluctance to engage with schools has prevented them opening up about the issues they were facing and in some cases resulted in a confrontational approach in teacher parent meetings. Gateway worked with families to ensure they didn't feel threatened of disempowered and could identify the value of working with the school to address their issues. By adopting this ethos it, prevented issues such as disengagement with schools.

> "*There were a lot of anxieties about talking to the school, to start off with because I felt they weren't listening and making assumptions about the house*" (Family Five)

With families who had prior social work involvement for example children taken previously into care, this was especially important. Families including

their children often had severe mistrust of services and it was important for families to regain trust to enable them to work effectively with services on an ongoing basis.

Another theme that emerged in terms of prevention was the potential for those who had engaged with the project to be key advocates for the project and provide a potential source of referrals to the project. Several families had mentioned the project to other family or friends, and this had resulted in uptake of the service. The 'word of mouth approach' was seen as valuable and it was perceived by families as a key route to reaching families in need.

> "*My sister in law split from her husband and she went in arrears and Gateway were able to help*" (Family 2)

Several spoke of being willing to share their experiences more widely to help other families in need.

Critically also was the issue of geographical remit of the project. Limitations with project funding meant the project was no longer able to support on an ongoing basis. The family in question were liaising with services with another agency in a new area and were concerned about losing the established relationships with services.

> " *I have moved outwith the area and I'm going to struggle , I had that extra security to know it was there each day if I needed anything , I had to change everything different doctors , paediatricians etc."* (Family 2)

Conclusions

Overall the project was well received by both host schools and parents and caregivers who had engaged with the services. The project provided a person centred approach to understanding families in the home environment and provided an engagement approach which worked with families who were reluctant to seek help or had previously had negative experiences with services. The trust built within the households both with parents and children enabled families to obtain a critical reflection on their circumstances and the steps and measures needed to address this. The embedded nature within the schools enabled a trust to be established with the school partner and for a core

understanding to be built across the project of the areas and issues families could be supported with. The intermediary 'go between' role the project provided reduced the pressures on schools supporting children and allowed them a clear route for supporting with issues that were beyond their remit.

This process of supporting change in families could often take time and the non-time limited approach, taken by the project was valued across schools and families. Results from the project evaluation demonstrated that there were outcomes for both parents and caregivers and children from adopting the measures encouraged by the Gateway staff. The multi layered approach of engaging in the family learning and volunteering to build on the foundational work conducted by the family mentors built family capacities. For some families the service had provided a vital lifeline during times of crisis and had enabled communication and support to be embedded around extremely sensitive issues such as leaving domestic violence, supporting children after they had been returned from care, and other complex circumstances.

By working throughout the school a consistency of support could be provided to families which was vital for large families or households that were isolated. Gateway provided continued contact which helped provide a secure basis for families to adapt to change and to allow for families to communicate about difficulties. This also served as a preventative approach in addressing issues as they emerged and examining issues that could cause crisis or severe impacts in the future on households.

Recommendations

- Evidence showed that the project's home based outreach and school base was critical to its success, and to maintain the project outcomes the this approach should be continued.
- Clearer connections need to be made on the role of family volunteering and the sustainability of this aspect of the approach. Further work needs to be done to allow this to become embedded within schools.
- The age criteria of the project in regards to the exclusion of families of secondary school age was seen as negative and limited referrals that schools wished to make. It was identified that this would be a future group that Gateway may wish to target and broaden the project.

- The project should work to build the capacity of those who had engaged with the services in the promotion and targeting of the support the project could offer. The value of 'word of mouth' was highlighted and this could be utilised to encourage up take of referrals.
- Quality of support provided was critical and it was emphasised by schools that a further allocation of workers per school would increase the reach and impact of the project going forward.
- Evidence emerged from both parents and schools on the need for the continuation of the non-time limited approach of the project which allowed for secure engagement with project staff of both parents and children and helped them identify and address complex issues.
- The Gateway model provided a key link between education and the wider community, and further work is required to share the learning and practice demonstrated in this project.