



National Audit Office



Evaluating innovation in children's social care

Department for Education

REPORT

**by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

SESSION 2022-23

24 JUNE 2022

HC 70



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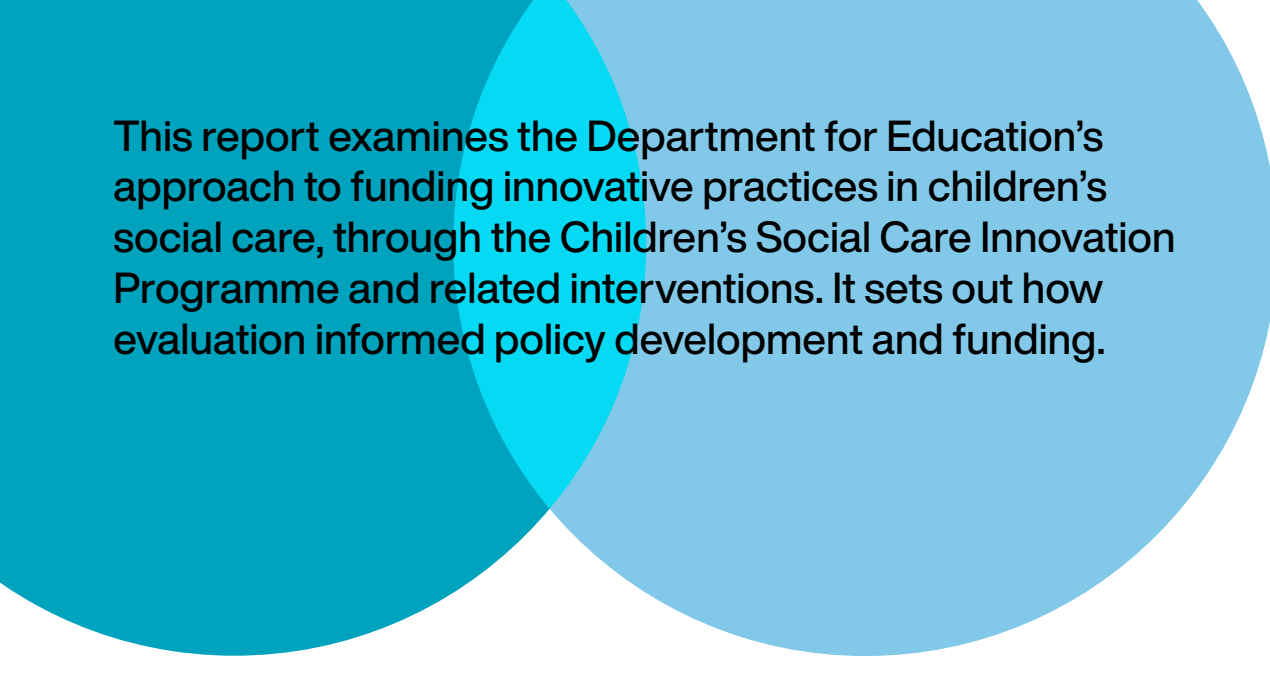
Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed on 22 June 2022

This report has been prepared under Section 6 of the
National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House
of Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

16 June 2022



This report examines the Department for Education's approach to funding innovative practices in children's social care, through the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme and related interventions. It sets out how evaluation informed policy development and funding.

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What this report is about

1 The quality of children's social care matters: where it is not adequate, children in need of help or protection may be exposed to neglect, abuse or harm. Since 2014 the Department for Education (the Department) has been funding a range of innovation projects intended to help local authorities improve both outcomes for children and value for money by developing new ways of working.

2 In total, since 2014, the Department has provided or committed some £333 million in support of innovation projects, their evaluations and linked programmes. At the core of the support for innovation was a commitment to evaluating the impact of local projects and using the results of evaluations to support more effective and efficient ways of delivering children's social care services.

3 In 2021 we received correspondence from a member of Parliament, drawing our attention to a local project, funded through the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (the Innovation Programme), which had received a positive evaluation. We decided that there was a good case for a report setting out the strengths of the Department's overall approach to funding and evaluating innovation projects. Looking at the Department's approach, through setting out the facts on a series of interventions of this kind, allows us to explore the wider value of evaluation to a department's work and draw out lessons for other departments.

4 The Department has already subjected its innovation projects to academic evaluation, and What Works for Children's Social Care (fully operational since 2019) is reviewing the ongoing projects. We have designed this report as a case study of a department's approach to using evaluation within a policy development cycle, covering how it:

- designs policy interventions with evaluation in mind;
- assures the quality of its evaluations; and
- uses the results of evaluation to inform the development of further interventions.

5 This report does not seek to examine the value for money of the Department's innovation projects. What it provides is a factual account of the Department's oversight and funding of innovation projects, and how it has used evaluation in its policy development process. Our focus is on the role of the Department, given its policy responsibility for children's services.

6 Our report covers:

- Part One: development of the Department's funding of innovation in children's social care since 2014;
- Part Two: use of evaluation in the Innovation Programme between 2014 and 2020;
- Part Three: building on learning from the Innovation Programme; and
- Part Four: overview of evaluation and next steps.

7 We conducted our fieldwork between January and March 2022.

Our methodology comprised document review, review and analysis of financial and performance data, and interviews with officials at the Department and at What Works for Children's Social Care. Further details are set out in Appendix One.

Summary

Key findings

The Children's Social Care Innovation Programme

8 The Department for Education (the Department) launched the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (the Innovation Programme) in 2014 with the aim of improving outcomes for children and value for money. In March 2014, the Department reported on the challenges of achieving innovation in children's social care and found unexplained variations across local authorities in the outcomes, quality, value and pace of improvement for children in need. The Department intended the Innovation Programme to:

- create stronger incentives and mechanisms for innovation, experimentation and replication of successful new approaches;
- achieve better life chances for children receiving help from the social care system; and
- deliver better value for money across children's social care (paragraphs 1.5 and 2.2).

9 The Department committed £212.8 million to the Innovation Programme between 2014-15 and 2019-20, funding a range of sector-led projects that were designed by local authorities and the providers they work with. The Department invited competitive bids from local authorities and other providers and contracted a delivery partner to assist bidders in developing their ideas. The Innovation Programme funded 94 projects with £199.3 million, including such schemes as:

- an integrated mental health, education and families service to support children in or on the edge of care;
- intensive targeted support for young people experiencing multiple placements to secure more stable placements and a positive transition to adulthood; and
- relationship-based support for women who have experienced removal of their children into care to avoid further removal of children.

The Department also spent a further £13.5 million, on top of the £199.3 million in project funding, on support for, and evaluation of, Innovation Programme projects (paragraphs 2.5 to 2.7, Figure 2 and Figures 3 to 5).

10 The Department awarded three rounds of funding in total, having decided to extend the Innovation Programme in 2016:

- **Round One (2014-15 to 2015-16).** The Department funded 57 projects focusing on areas including rethinking children's social work and support for adolescents in or on the edge of care.
- **Round Two (April 2016 to March 2020).** The Department funded 24 projects (including eight previously funded in Round One), aimed at building on the innovations found in Round One.
- **Round Three (November 2016 to March 2020).** The Department funded 21 projects in further priority areas of residential care, alternative delivery models, targeted support and social investment models (paragraphs 2.5 to 2.7).

The role of evaluation in the Innovation Programme

11 From the outset the Department made evaluation and dissemination of learning a central part of the Innovation Programme.

The Department made it a condition of receiving Innovation Programme funding that projects would be subject to external evaluation and appointed a range of research teams to carry out these evaluations. In the absence of a What Works Centre (which was first established in 2017, and not fully operational until 2019), the Department contracted two academic research partners (one for Round One and another for Rounds Two and Three) to oversee individual evaluations and publish overall evaluations of each round of funding. The Department's delivery partner for the Innovation Programme shared emerging learning from local projects through conferences and a website (paragraphs 2.8, 2.9 and 4.10).

12 The Department strengthened its approach to evaluation in later rounds of innovation funding.

For Rounds Two and Three of the Innovation Programme the Department developed a new evaluation strategy, which assessed the robustness of evaluation plans and encouraged harmonisation of research questions and measurement of outcomes. It also sought to build on practices that had already been developed by inviting applications from Round One projects looking to undertake wider testing of their innovations (paragraph 2.9).

13 Most evaluations of individual projects noted positive results and some reported cost savings. By September 2020, the Department had published around 100 evaluation reports covering individual projects. A number of these reported positive outcomes. In particular:

- **Round One.** The Department's overall evaluation of Round One found that 42 of the 56 completed projects reported improvements in the quality of services at the end of their delivery periods. Of these, 24 projects reported quantitative improvements such as reduced numbers of children in care or identified as in need, and reunifications with birth families. On value for money, it found that 21 projects had reported cost savings; and
- **Rounds Two and Three.** The Department's overall evaluation of Rounds Two and Three found that of 31 Innovation Programme evaluations assessing impact, and or outcomes, the majority (21) demonstrated some positive impact or positive changes (paragraph 2.10).

14 The Department was transparent in publishing the evaluation findings from across the Innovation Programme. The Department published around 100 evaluation reports, for projects representing 90% of the Innovation Programme's value. This contrasts favourably with the findings in our 2021 report *Evaluating government spending* that only 36% by spend of the projects in the Government Major Projects Portfolio had impact evaluation plans in place (paragraphs 2.10 and 2.11).

15 The Department carried out its own quality review of local evaluations of funded projects. During the Innovation Programme the Department had a process in place to review and approve higher-value and sensitive project evaluation plans and to oversee the progress and quality of evaluations. It contracted with a single research partner in Round One (the Rees Centre), and another for Rounds Two and Three (Opcit Research), to help support the individual project evaluations and to produce an overall evaluation of the entire round. In each round the Department operated an evaluation steering group or advisory board. Comprising departmental officials, these groups liaised with evaluation partners on the progress of project evaluations, critically reviewing a selection of higher-value or more sensitive project evaluation plans for approval (paragraphs 2.8 and 2.11 to 2.13).

16 The Department commissioned and published independent overall assessments of Round One, and of Rounds Two and Three together, which were carried out by its research partners. These gave critical assessments, highlighting a number of significant challenges and common limitations of the evaluations carried out on individual projects. The independent reviewers noted that project evaluations were affected by brief timescales for measuring impacts, small sample sizes, a lack of genuine comparison groups and a lack of high-quality data. They also concluded that variations in project and evaluation design meant it was impossible to compare projects' relative costs and benefits. The Department and What Works for Children's Social Care point to practical challenges to implementing robust evaluation during the Innovation Programme, including the lack of a culture of evaluation within the sector. They suggest that the experience of the Innovation Programme has nevertheless helped to build stronger evaluation into its successor programmes (paragraphs 2.12 to 2.17).

17 The Department has not monitored the longer-term outcomes from projects in the Innovation Programme after their funding came to an end or assessed the extent to which the reported good practices have spread across the sector. The Department required Innovation Programme projects to demonstrate how they would sustain benefits beyond the period of funding. In general, however, it has not revisited projects since the completion of the Innovation Programme to track how many have been maintained by local authorities in the absence of grant funding, and whether any benefits delivered during the programme have been maintained. Equally, while the Department and its Innovation Programme delivery partner have promoted learning from innovation projects (a function which What Works for Children's Social Care has now begun to take on), the Department has not sought to assess the wider influence of learning from projects on other local authorities which it did not fund (paragraph 2.18).

Building on learning from the Innovation Programme in subsequent schemes

18 Following the Innovation Programme, the Department has continued to fund children's social care innovation projects and evaluations with a further £120.2 million. Successor programmes have included:

- **Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (Strengthening Families):** a programme testing the wider adoption of three 'whole system' Innovation Programme projects across 17 further local authorities over five years from 2019-20. This scheme specifically focused on testing these innovations in authorities rated by Ofsted as 'requiring improvement' and with high and rising demand. The Department is providing £77.4 million in project funding, £1.6 million for evaluation partners and £2.5 million for Strengthening Families delivery partner support; and
- **Supporting Families: Investing in Practice (Supporting Families):** a programme testing the wider adoption of three 'targeted' projects from the Innovation Programme across more than 40 further local authority areas over two years from 2019-20. The Department is providing £16.1 million in project funding and £1.6 million for support from evaluation partners.

In April 2020 the Department also provided £13.7 million through an Innovation Programme Continuation Fund to allow 17 other Innovation Programme projects to continue work and publish learning. In July 2021 it further provided £7.3 million through its wider COVID-19 Regional Recovery Fund to 27 projects supporting local authorities to explore adoption of some 17 Innovation Programme models (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6 and Figure 2).

19 The Department used learning from the Innovation Programme in selecting projects for the two successor programmes. The Department made decisions about which Innovation Programme projects to support through Strengthening Families and Supporting Families in 2018-19. By that point it had published evaluations available for all Round One projects, although none for Rounds Two and Three projects. The Department took into account a range of factors when selecting the most promising projects to support through these programmes:

- **Strengthening Families:** The Department considered the candidate projects' impact, as reported in evaluations, and the quality of those evaluations. It also looked at whether projects displayed seven common elements of good practice that the Department and the Innovation Programme delivery partner had identified during the first round of the programme. Documents we saw suggest the Department considered a shortlist of five Round One projects.

- Supporting Families: the Department and What Works for Children's Social Care considered the strength of evidence and impact from each project's evaluation, as well as the sector's appetite for the change, the capacity of the original innovating organisations to support roll-out and the project's fit with government policy and evaluation priorities. Seven Round One projects were shortlisted for this assessment (paragraphs 3.7 and 3.8).

20 The Department has also used learning from the Innovation Programme to design more sophisticated evaluations of projects in the successor programmes.

The Department wanted the evaluation of Strengthening Families to be as robust as possible to provide an evidence base sufficient to say with greater certainty whether the projects work, and in what conditions. It therefore decided to roll out and evaluate Supporting Families in partnership with What Works for Children's Social Care and meet the Centre's standards of evidence. Examples of the increased sophistication of the evaluation are:

- the Department implementing each of the three projects in the Strengthening Families programme in waves to allow for a 'stepped wedge' randomised control trial and an implementation and process evaluation. Under this approach, the start dates for local authorities beginning their projects will be staggered, allowing for comparisons in outcomes between early and later starters. Programme funding will end by March 2024, with evaluations led by What Works for Children's Social Care reporting in 2026 and 2027. The Department also let a contract for a new delivery partner for Strengthening Families to provide project support, including spreading learning between programme participants and out to the wider sector; and
- in the Supporting Families programme, the Department is using a randomised control trial in one project and other types of comparison groups in the remaining two. The Department expects projects to continue until June 2022, with evaluations reporting between October 2022 and May 2023. What Works for Children's Social Care is overseeing the evaluation and has outsourced the work to three independent providers (paragraphs 3.10 to 3.12 and Figure 2).

Concluding remarks

21 The Department's Innovation Programme was a positive step in its aim of funding new ways of working and evidence-based practice, with a commitment to evaluation at its heart. Evaluation can identify where local authorities can make the greatest difference for children and their families. The Department showed good practice in embedding evaluation into the projects it funded from an early stage and in publishing academic assessments, which were often critical of the quality of these evaluations. While the Department has faced practical challenges to securing robust evaluations of its interventions, working with What Works for Children's Social Care it has been able to improve the sophistication of its evaluations over time and demonstrate its long-term commitment to evaluation. It has also been able to draw on the evidence from the Innovation Programme to select a number of more promising projects for wider roll-out within the sector.

22 Evaluating innovation and building that into decision-making is fundamental to good spending of public money. The Department's approach provides an example of using evaluation within a cycle of policy development which will be of wider value for other departments to study. We encourage the Department to continue, expand and share its approach to evidence-informed decision-making. Where the Department may need to go further is in demonstrating how its funding of innovation in select local authorities will lead to:

- the building of greater local evaluative capacity;
- better use of public money;
- wider dissemination of good practice across the sector; and
- ultimately, improved outcomes for children in and around the care system.