

Evaluation of a self-help support project for rural lone parents

Substantial numbers of lone parents live in rural areas. The project evaluated employed a Rural Co-ordinator to run drop-ins (with volunteer help) in small towns with rural catchment areas in North Yorkshire and Humberside where (at the 1991 Census) 30% and 12% respectively of lone parents lived in rural areas. The co-ordinator also made home visits and provided advice and advocacy work by telephone.

f The project found that lone parents in rural areas face many of the problems common to lone parents generally, such as poverty, social isolation and lack of respite from childcare, plus additional problems of geographical isolation, more hostile social attitudes, and especially lack of access to transport.

f Drop-in centres worked best when:

- run relatively frequently at a regular time, in comfortable premises connected to the wider community, with a worker with welfare benefits knowledge and group facilitation skills attending regularly;
- a crèche worker was present;
- there was support from local agencies.

f Lone parents who made use of such groups could benefit in ways which helped them to feel more positive and confident.

f Despite adopting a self-help approach, none of the groups in the study was able to become independent of the parent project. The extent and diversity of needs meant that ongoing support from a worker was necessary, whether or not volunteers emerged to help.

f Where the needs were greatest, volunteers were least likely to emerge.

Background

The project evaluated was established by One Parent Families (York) in August 1991. The evaluation covered its first three years, to July 1994. This period was funded primarily by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for a limited period to end October 1994. It was an experimental project, developing an innovative model of provision to bring services to lone parents in rural areas, offering 'drop-ins' at a small number of areas in North Yorkshire and Humberside, home visits for lone parents unable to come to drop-ins or to supplement them, and advice and information by telephone from the York base. It employed one worker, a Rural Co-ordinator, for twenty-four hours a week. The project continues to date, having secured funding until April 1998.

The Census of 1991 indicates that there are about 2,191 lone parent households in rural areas of North Yorkshire and 1,636 lone parent households in rural areas of Humberside. In the areas covered by the project, there were approximately 1,190 lone parent households. 93 lone parents made contact with the project during its first three years. The travel times involved in rural work and the extent of some individuals' needs meant that an apparently small number of users kept the project worker more than fully occupied.

The characteristics of those using the service

Rural lone parenthood shares many of the characteristics of lone parenthood generally, although with some advantages (a greater sense of safety and community) and some additional disadvantages (created both by geographical isolation and the nature of rural communities). The distance from services and amenities, together with the irregularity and expense of public transport, creates extra costs in terms of time, money and effort. Social attitudes, at least in some rural communities, are significantly more hostile and stigmatising to lone parents than elsewhere.

While users were all lone parents, they varied in numerous other ways, in sex, age, number and age of children, educational background, employment and housing circumstances, route into and attitude towards lone parenthood. Their use of the project was similarly diverse, ranging from a single telephone call for information and advice through intensive casework for help with housing or benefit problems to regular attendance at drop-ins and/or becoming a volunteer.

Ninety per cent of users were women, 9% men. The majority (77%) were aged between 20 and 39. 71% of users were in receipt of income support. 62% of

users said they found it hard or very difficult to manage on their weekly income, while only 2% considered themselves financially well off or comfortable. These patterns are very similar to those found in a nationally representative sample of lone parents.

Seventy-three per cent of users had previously been married and were currently separated, divorced or widowed. This is somewhat higher than the equivalent figure amongst lone parents nationally (64%).

Users had relatively low levels of social contact. Thirty-five per cent had fewer than 5 other people they were in regular (i.e. weekly) contact with, and a further 38% had between 5 and 10. Nearly half (47%) had fewer social contacts than before they became lone parents, because of either financial constraints or social attitudes. The remainder had the same or more. The majority (71%) had no regular contact with any other voluntary organisation, groups or clubs. Over a half (52%) were wholly reliant on public transport, while only around a third (36%) had access to a car. Over a quarter (27%) had no telephone.

Parents' experience of the service

The most common problems cited by users were low income, loneliness and coping with their own emotional needs. The project was reported to be most helpful in relation to users' problems of loneliness and coping with their own emotional needs, and also in relation to legal problems and benefits advice. It was reported to be least helpful in relation to the problem of low income, and also in relation to lack of time off from childcare and handling children's behaviour.

Users contacted the project for a variety of reasons, most commonly for information and advice, to meet people to talk to, to make contact with other lone parents, and to enable their children to mix with other children and participate in activities.

Users who attended drop-ins valued them for company, meeting others in the same situation, and for offering somewhere to go, something to look forward to and opportunities for their children to play with others. Organised contact with other lone parents could engender a more positive attitude towards their own status as lone parents, and the mutual support and access to information could increase their confidence.

Sources of dissatisfaction fell into two groups: 'not enough' (worker time, meetings, other lone parents involved) complaints and complaints regarding group composition and dynamics (members not being alike enough in needs or characteristics, the group being unwelcoming or uncomfortable in atmosphere).

Users varied widely in the extent of their participation in the project, and in their level of participation over time, reflecting the variability and flux in their own circumstances and the varied and changing nature of the groups. Some of the reasons given for non-use of the project were amenable to change with increased or different worker input (e.g. transport difficulties, costs, nature of activities and to an extent timing and group dynamics). Others were not (e.g. being too busy, having no need, 'moving on' to education, employment, marriage or a new location, and to an extent inconvenient timing).

Sixty per cent of users said the project had been important or fairly important to them. Some also appreciated knowing the project was there, despite not needing or wishing to make use of it themselves at that time.

Running the project

The project planned initially to work in eight areas, and in the end worked in seven and in a maximum of five at a time. It was originally thought that the worker would work intensively in each area for a short period, then partially withdraw once a group was established and volunteers emerged within it. However, users wanted more rather than less worker input, and on a continuous basis.

Groups developed in diverse ways, influenced both by factors external to the project (including the characteristics of the area, the availability and attitudes of local agencies, the existence of other provision specifically for lone parents, the availability of transport and the nature of available premises), and by factors internal to the project (including the character of each group, the involvement of volunteers, the worker's role and the frequency and timing of meetings).

Groups ran for varying lengths of time, from one session to four years (and continuing). Given the fluctuating needs and circumstances of lone parents, longevity is not necessarily an appropriate measure of success. A group could flourish for a time then reach a point when regular members were ready to move on to different activities. A break may be appropriate before a new group forms.

Groups were more likely to 'take off' in areas which people identified as rural, where there was a gap in provision specifically for lone parents and relatively supportive other services, where a youth or community centre with an interested leader could be used to provide comfortable space and connection to the community, where a volunteer or volunteers were available and willing to take on some responsibility within the group (and the project was

ready to provide them with the opportunities they sought), and when they met at a regular time (preferably in the morning), weekly or fortnightly, with the project worker and a crèche worker attending regularly. They were more likely to run smoothly where users were consulted about changes and helped to negotiate the diverse and changing needs and interests amongst them.

Volunteers did not emerge in all groups, and were least likely to emerge where the levels of need amongst users were high. Users who volunteered did so for a variety of reasons, including for something to do while at the group and/or with spare time, to learn something and gain experience useful to future work, to 'give something back' to the group and/or make a difference to it in some particular way.

Volunteers varied in the activities they undertook and the extent of their commitment to the role. The opportunity to volunteer could enhance people's enjoyment of the project and contribute to a growth in self-confidence which benefited them beyond it. However, volunteers also had difficulty establishing the legitimacy of their role within the groups and, once established, in setting boundaries to it. The complexity of group dynamics and the temporary and flexible nature of voluntary commitment meant they needed ongoing support and back-up from the project worker. Volunteers could supplement but could not substitute for the project worker's role.

Conclusion

The project worked with a self-help philosophy, aiming to empower users both individually and collectively. The extent and nature of users' needs meant many needed particular services rather than self-help groups as such. While a period of service provision by the worker could enable a group to move towards self-help (and two developed plans for becoming autonomous of the project), for some, service provision remained the group's need. None of the groups became fully autonomous of the project. The support the project offered, however, enabled individuals and groups to find the place most appropriate to their needs on a continuum between self-help and service provision. The model it developed may therefore be useful to organisations working with other client groups who wish to offer the benefits of self-help groups while avoiding developing unrealistic expectations of them.

The evaluation suggests that the transport needs of rural lone parents may not be adequately met by current proposals for rural policy, which place a strong emphasis on private transport and look to

voluntary/community schemes to meet the needs of those without cars. Users of the project were considerably less likely to have access to a car than the average rural household (77% of rural households have access to a car). They were also sometimes discriminated against in access to voluntary schemes. Such discrimination, which may intensify the isolation of already marginalised groups, needs to be redressed in voluntary and community provision.

About the study

The evaluation is based on a postal questionnaire circulated to all users, semi-structured interviews with 18 users (including 4 volunteers), one or two interviews with the project worker about each area worked in, examination of all project records, and attendance at meetings throughout the life of the project (line management of the worker, management committee of OPF (York) and JRF advisory group meetings). Comparative statistics for the national sample of lone parents are taken from J. Bradshaw & J. Millar (1991), *Lone Parent Families in the UK* (DSS, Research Report no. 6, HMSO, London).

Further information

Further information about the project is given in **A practical guide to working with rural lone parents** by Karen Richardson, One Parent Families (York), available from the National Council for One Parent Families, 255 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2LX.

A full report of the evaluation, **Rural lone parents: the evaluation of a self-help support project** by Carol Ann Hooper, is published by York Publishing Services Ltd. (ISBN 1 899987 35 5, price £9.95 plus £1.50 p&p).

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The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 72** The difficulties of setting up home for young single mothers (Feb 95)
- 80** Social backgrounds and post-birth experiences of young parents (Jul 95)
- 84** Single lone mothers (Oct 95)
- 96** Lone mothers and work (May 96)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 615905 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



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