

An evaluation of projects supporting individualised opportunities for young people with disabilities

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Context

The policy context in which Day Care Services for people with disabilities operate has changed substantially in recent years. The 'New Directions' reportⁱ recommends a move away from group-based day care service provision within sheltered workshops towards a more community and employment focused approach. In addition, the New Directions report strongly recommends a move towards individualised planning and delivery of services. These are both key themes of the 15 projects funded under Genio's 2012 Grant Stream 3 – 'Supporting School Leavers'.

The Value for Money Reportⁱⁱ (VFM), which points to the need to assess the costs of new approaches to service provision, is another key element of the policy context.

These changes in the policy context allow for a radically different approach to be taken to service provision. In their different ways, the 15 projects under review have embraced this challenge and though they have disparate aims, diverse participants and operate on different scales, they provide fascinating insights into how services for school leavers with disabilities may look in the future.

Aims of the evaluation

This study documented and evaluated the activities and outcomes of 15 projects funded by Genio in 2012, including interviews with 39 individuals from these projects and a further 19 individuals from comparison projects. The projects intended to explore alternative ways of meeting the work, education, training and recreation needs of young people with disabilities through mainstream services, and be located in 'real' community settings. The projects aimed to:

- Provide innovative responses to delivering individualised supports to prepare school leavers for independent lives
- Provide work-focused supports, job-focused training or further education
- Create, opportunities to socialise and engage in desired recreational activities in the community

The research questions for the study were:

- What is the impact of an individualised model of service with a focus on supporting mainstream employment, education, training and recreational opportunities?
- How did the services implement this model?
- What are the direct costs of this model?

Headlines

A number of key findings emerged from the evaluation study.

Mainstream community based activities are central to the success of projects in the eyes of participants:

- Projects that undertook or provided community based activities were more highly rated than projects where this was just an aspiration.
- Projects that tried to develop community resources were more highly rated by participants - activities such as awareness raising with targeted mainstream resources such as libraries, sports facilities and others are important here.

The new approaches to service delivery and organisation were highly valued by participants:

- Participants consistently rated the Genio-supported projects more highly than comparison services.
- Significantly better outcomes were achieved in the areas concerning citizenship, employability, social inclusion and overall quality of life.

Project costs were generally lower when compared to comparable projects

- Direct pay costs per client were generally lower in 10 out of 13 projects in the study for whom data was available.

The sample

All 15 projects were invited to take part in the study. In each of the projects, information was provided by project staff as well as project clients. Key features of the sample were:

- 15 projects were funded
- 14 projects provided information on their activities (information on costs was available from 13 projects)
- Between 1 and 62 service users took part in the projects
- Service users predominantly had learning disabilities or autism – a minority had a physical disability
- 58 service users were interviewed – 39 from the 14 projects and 19 from comparison projects

The comparison group was not a control group – they were users of services that the project participants would have been attending had they not been in the new projects. They were similar in terms of age and disability status, but they were not matched to the new project participants.

Not all participants were school leavers. Although the original intention was that the projects would engage with clients that had just left school, this was not always possible and in some cases participants had some years of experience of more traditional services. In this situation legacy issues, e.g. where service users may have become comfortable under the old service have to some degree influenced their attitudes towards the new service.

Methodology

Data collection instruments

The project used a multi-method approach, gathering information from both participants and project staff. The data collected from participants related to their levels of satisfaction with the impact their service has on a range of dimensions of quality of life.

From staff, information was collected in relation to:

- The direct costs of undertaking the project
- The aims, activities, processes and intended outcomes of the project
- The nature and complexity of supports that participants required

The main data collection tools used in the study were:

- > The Quality Of Life Impact of Services Questionnaire (QOLIS)ⁱⁱⁱ
- > Programme Logic Models^{iv}
- > A measure of direct project costs^v
- > A Person Needs Profile^{vi}

Approach to the study

The study was cross-sectional in nature – the fact that projects varied in duration between 12 and 36 months prevented a longitudinal approach.

The main comparison group for the 14 projects which took part in the study were sourced from a set of four services that provided information on more traditional approaches to service provision. Information was available from these projects in relation to Person Needs Profiles and also from a sample of clients who completed QOLIS interviews.

Comparisons were made between the project Programme Logic Models and Logic Models developed in previous work^{vii} on rehabilitative training services and therapeutic work services. A programme theory is a theoretical hypothesis about how a programme is expected to work in terms of the way it produces its intended outcomes. A logic model is a visual representation of the logical relationships between the elements of the programme and its outcomes and impacts. It illustrates the assumptions underlying the programme and the links and interdependencies between the elements of the programme in order that it can meet its objectives. Effectively, the logic model describes the relationship between the programme's activities and its outputs, immediate outcomes, and long-term outcomes. The elements of a logic model are often specified in a flow diagram in which the boxes specify the components of the model and the causal relationships are represented by arrows.

The costs information gathered in the study were compared to the costs cited in the VFM study for comparable services.

The purpose of the evaluation was formative rather than summative. In essence, the study did not set to assign a value to each project on the basis of the extent to which it delivered on the project objectives, but to identify the elements of projects that were valued by participants and that could inform good practice.

The findings

The findings below are arranged in relation to the major research questions of the evaluation study, these were:

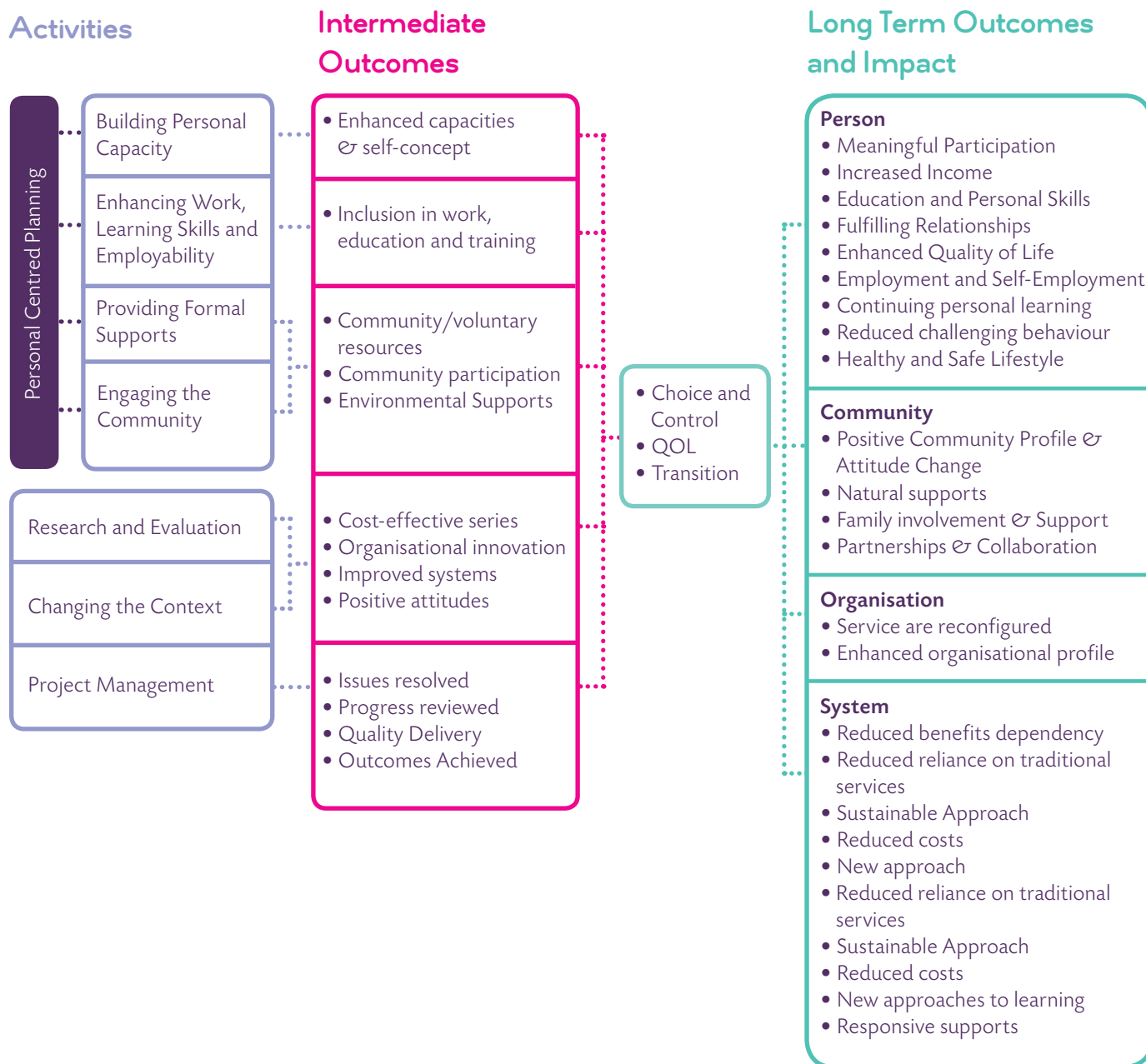
- Activities of projects
- Costs of projects
- The support needs of clients
- Client's perceptions of projects

Activities of projects

A major element of data collection concerned the description of the activities that projects undertook, the resources they devoted to them, the aims and objectives of the activities and their intended outcomes. This information was then transformed into a set of Programme Logic Models – one for each project. The Logic models pointed to a number of commonly occurring activities that are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

The projects reported that individual needs assessment and planning took place while activities aimed at promoting individual independence were also common. Many projects had further education and training activities while proactively developing community resources such as volunteering were also relatively common. Other common activities related to learning and education, work placement and using community based mainstream resources. Relatively few activities were specified in relation to such areas as project management and research related activities.

Figure 1: Overview of the programme theory derived from the logic models of the projects



Costs of projects

The study also examined the issue of the direct costs (labour and non-labour) for the projects. This was done in order to gain an initial assessment of these costs and to point to cost areas where there is variation between traditional modes of service delivery and the new projects.

The data generated by the evaluation study only allowed for comparison of direct pay costs. Comparisons were made with services which participants would have attended, if they were not in the projects and with comparable services from the VFM study.

The main finding was that direct pay costs per client per month were generally lower – in 10 out of 13 projects costs were somewhat or appreciably lower in comparison to VFM study as shown in Figure 2.

Comparisons between the new projects and the services in which participants would have taken part revealed no clear picture – the new projects were cheaper in 4 out of 8 cases.

Many projects had significant inputs by volunteer service providers – parents, community based organisations and mainstream services. However, some projects reported little or no input from this source. In practice, much of the ‘volunteering’ comes from community and mainstream services which take on much of the activity formerly provided by traditional services.

The support needs of clients

The intensity of support needs catered for by the projects was assessed in order to enable a level of comparison between Genio supported and comparison services. In addition, this profile was used to help categorise the projects in relation to the projects summarised in the VFM study of costs. The intensity and complexity of support needs varied widely.

The needs profiles generated for the projects varied widely and included projects where support needs were estimated to be moderate in all domains and projects for which high intensity support was considered to be required for all domains. Figure 3 shows a comparison between two of the projects and the comparison services in terms of support needs. People with a range of support needs; low, moderate and high, were supported across the 15 projects.

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Figure 2: Direct pay costs per client per month compared with the VFM study

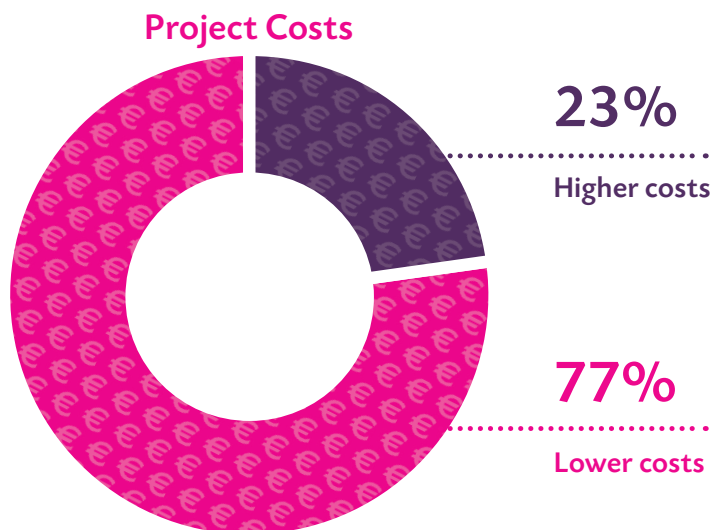


Figure 3: Comparison of support needs between two projects and comparison group services

Domains of Competence											
		Personal and Social				Work					
Project Code	Intensity of Support Needs	Health	Self-care	Communication & Cognitive	Social & Emotional	Vocational Potential	Physical	Vocational	Psychological	Social	Overall Work Readiness
Comparator	Low										
	Mod	■	■		■	■	■				■
	High			■				■	■	■	
Project A	Low	■	■								
	Mod			■	■	■	■				
	High						■				
Project B	Low		■	■	■		■				
	Mod	■				■		■	■	■	■
	High										

Client’s perceptions of projects

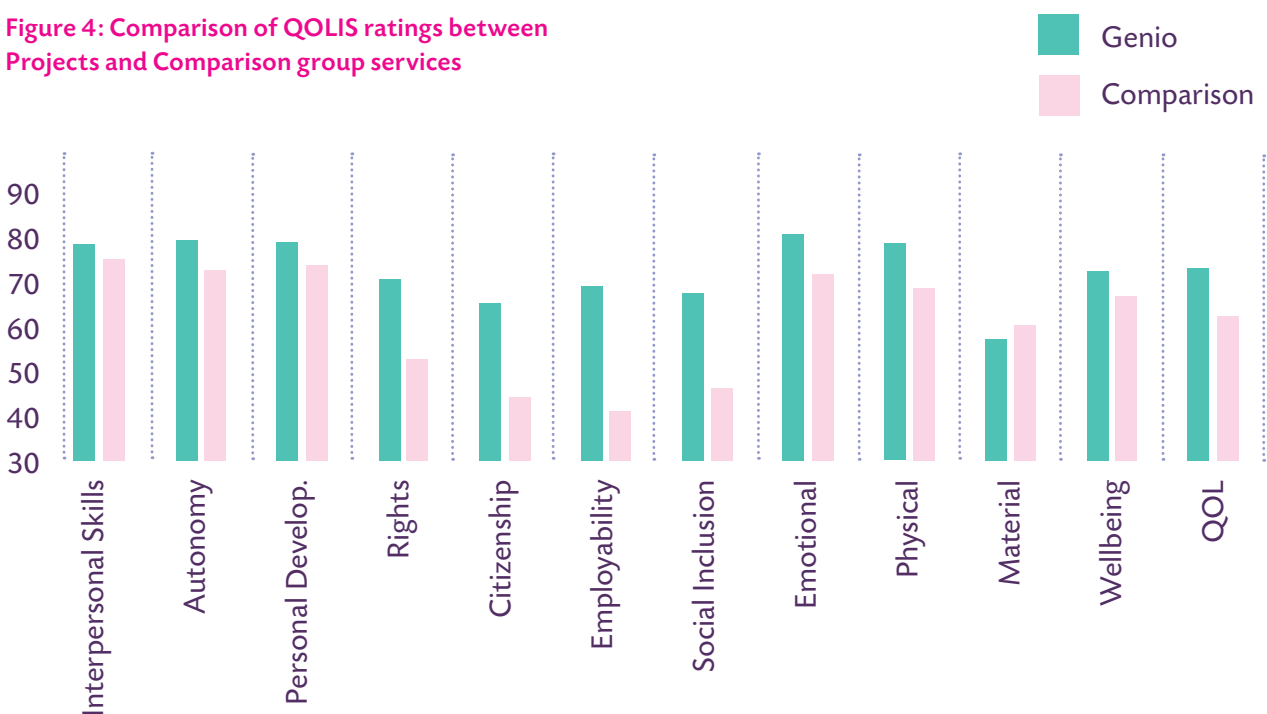
The participants’ perception of projects was measured using the QOLIS instrument. This interview protocol yields measures of 9 separate scales and 4 composite indices of the impact of services on Quality of Life.

How did participants rate the services they were receiving from projects?

Figure 4 compares the ratings participants made of project services with those of more traditional services. Generally, participants in the 14 projects rated the services they received quite highly, especially in relation to participants in the comparator services. In particular:

- Participants tended to rate the projects more positively than comparison services on 11 out of 12 dimensions of quality of life impact
- Statistically significant differences were found in:
 - Citizenship
 - Employability
 - Social Inclusion
 - Overall Quality of Life Impact

Figure 4: Comparison of QOLIS ratings between Projects and Comparison group services



These findings support the view that, at least on the basis of the perceptions of participants, projects had a greater potential to impact mainstreaming and employment than comparison services.

Were these higher ratings due to differences in levels of support needs?

The relationship between participants' perceptions of quality of life impact and complexity of support needs was examined to see if the higher ratings of the new projects were related to the level of need of clients. The findings here were:

- The intensity of support needs in the comparison service covered a wide range across the domains
- Projects with lower support needs profiles than comparison services were not consistently rated more positively
- Projects with equivalent or higher support needs profiles were in some cases rated significantly more positively

These findings are conclusive – the higher ratings of Genio supported projects were not due to differences in the support needs of participants.

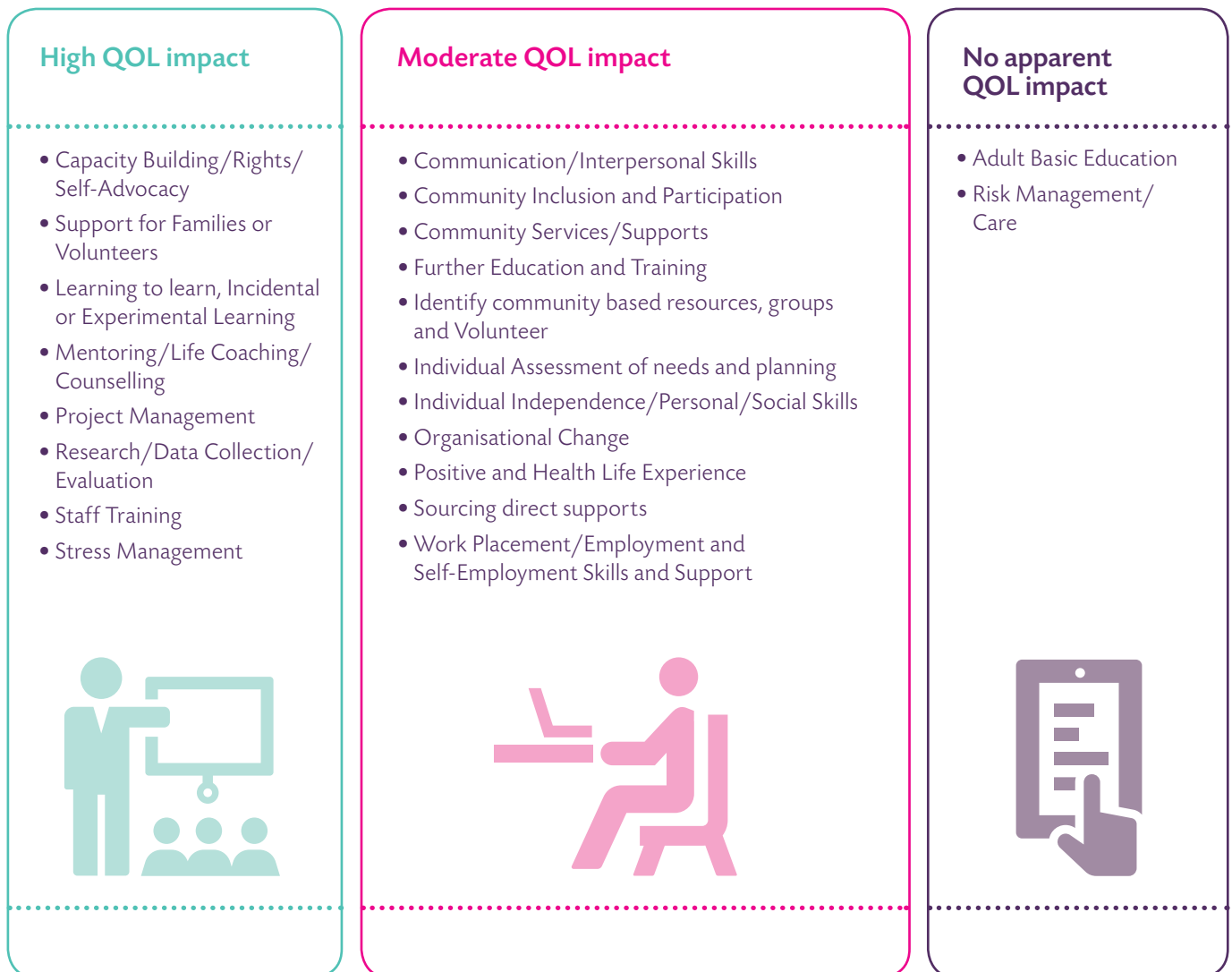
Were higher spending projects rated more highly?

It was possible to imagine that higher spending projects received higher client ratings on the QOLIS dimensions. However, many of the projects for which quality of life impact ratings were higher than comparison services, were estimated to be lower in cost terms compared to VFM estimates. In addition, projects that had similar QOLIS ratings to comparison services were less costly than the costs reported in the VFM study.

What project activities were rated most highly?

One analysis carried out sought to identify the project activities that were most associated with high ratings of impact on quality of life. This analysis is suggestive only, as the data did not allow for a full test of statistical significance. However, the analysis points towards some interesting findings. Figure 5 below shows the results of this analysis where the projects were benchmarked to comparator services.

Figure 5: QOLIS ratings and project activities



Strengths and limitations of the evaluation

In assessing these results, the following issues are relevant:

- Small number of projects and project participants - this precludes using quantitative statistical analysis in most cases.
- Differing aims of the projects – projects aimed to achieve different ends. For example, some sought to provide educational opportunities, others were more focused on social activities, while others were more focused on the development of employment opportunities for clients. This diversity meant, inter alia, that comparing project outcomes was difficult, and comparing activities between projects is difficult.
- Nature of the activities undertaken – projects undertook quite different activities, both in terms of their nature, duration and intensity. The amount of activity per client per week varied, with some projects providing full time services and others much less than that.
- Control groups – high levels of experimental control were not possible for a variety of reasons concerning schedule, numbers of clients and the nature of the activities being undertaken. Instead a number of distinct comparisons were made. In the case of project activities, these were made with data from previous work on day services; in the case of perceptions of service impact, these were made with participants in traditional services; while in the case of project support needs profiles, these were made with profiles of traditional services.

Despite these limitations, the study has a number of strengths. In particular, the use of Programme Logic Modelling to describe the aims, resources, activities and intended outputs of the projects allows for identification of similar activities and processes across projects. When combined with client ratings of services, it allows for the identification of the key elements of projects that contribute to impacts on the quality of life of participants.

Conclusions

The study generated evidence that participants valued the quality of impact of the projects more positively than participants in comparison services. A number of specific components and project characteristics were identified as being instrumental in these more positive ratings. The projects were viewed significantly more positively than comparison services in the domain of Social Inclusion and in particular in terms of Rights, Citizenship and Employability.

Other conclusions were:

1. Individual needs assessment and planning are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for achieving positive quality of life impacts. Some projects that included person-centred planning in their programme theory were not rated more positively by participants on a number of dimensions and some comparison services included person-centred planning in their programme specifications.
2. The projects adopted a more biopsychosocial approach than comparison services and documented the person's needs and strengths not only in relation to their functional capacity and activity limitations, but also in terms of their environment.
3. Rather than viewing participation in mainstream and community activities as an aspiration, the projects used participation as an inherent part of their interventions.
4. Activities of three different kinds were associated with positive outcomes. Activities directed towards the individual (person-facing processes), actions targeted at the development of community supports (environment-facing processes) and actions that sought to change the system (system-facing processes).

The challenges for the organisations that sponsored the projects moving into the future, include finding ways to use the knowledge gained to respond to the requirements of New Directions; scaling up the projects themselves so that they can cater for a greater number of participants; finding a basis for their sustainability; and deploying the knowledge gained internally within the organisation and externally throughout the sector.

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- i. New directions (2012). Review of HSE day services and implementation plan 2012 - 2016 personal support services for adults with disabilities. <http://www.lenus.ie/hse/handle/10147/215139>
 - ii. Department of Health (2012). Value for money and policy review of disability services in Ireland. <http://www.lenus.ie/hse/handle/10147/263329>
 - iii. Schalock, R. L., & Verdugo, M. A. (2002). Handbook on quality of life for human service practitioners. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.
 - iv. For example: Julian, D. (1997). "The utilization of the logic model as a system level planning and evaluation device." Evaluation and Program Planning 20(3): 251-257.
 - v. Developed within the project
 - vi. European Platform for Rehabilitation Outcome Measurement in Vocational Rehabilitation Benchmarking Group <http://www.epr.eu/index.php/activities/professional-development/262-outcome-measurement-in-vocational-rehabilitation>
 - vii. Wynne, R. & McAnaney, D. (2010) HSE day service review of work and employment provision for people with disabilities. Dublin: Work Research Centre

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About Genio

Founded in 2008, Genio is an independent organisation based in Ireland. We are driven by a vision of a society that benefits by valuing all of its citizens. Genio brings together Government and philanthropy to help develop and scale, cost-effective citizen-centred services so that everyone has the chance to live full lives in their communities.

Genio is supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies in collaboration with the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive. We work in partnership with all stakeholders to re-configure resources to reform services, in order that they reflect national policy and international best practice.

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