ACTION FOR CHILDREN

ROOTS OF EMPATHY

Case study

**About the project**

**Funding awarded:** £992,133  
**Duration of funding:** 4 years  
**Number of beneficiaries:** 5,208 young people aged 10 to 12  
**Areas of delivery:** Cardiff, Neath Port Talbot, Vale of Glamorgan, Caerphilly, Denbighshire, Newcastle, Northumberland and Durham

*Action for Children* (AfC) supports and speaks out for the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK. In Realising Ambition the organisation delivered *Roots of Empathy* (RoE), in which a mother and baby regularly visit a classroom. Through observing the baby's development, children learn to understand the baby's needs and emotions and gain understanding of how to care for a baby safely. Each visit is preceded and followed by a session led by an instructor who helps prepare the children and reinforces learning through group discussions, artwork, maths, drama and writing. The programme significantly decreases children's aggressive behaviour and increases their pro-social behaviour.

**Lessons learnt**

AfC's experience shows how important the context of delivery is for the sustainability of services, even with the most highly evidenced services. AfC's experience also suggests that it is more difficult to attract funding for programmes which have been delivered for free once the initial funding comes to a close.

RoE is a well established, evidence-based programme that AfC is highly experienced at delivering. Delivery had a positive impact and exceeded delivery targets in both the North-East of England and Wales. Sustainability in both replication areas has, however, been difficult to achieve, despite the organisation being successful in securing funding to deliver the programme elsewhere. It is felt that this is due to several factors. One is that RoE is too expensive for an individual school to purchase and pressures on public sector budgets in both areas have reduced the opportunities for it to be commissioned or funded at scale there. Another is that RoE had such thorough coverage and effective delivery in the replication areas that the majority of schools in these areas embedded the behavioural culture encouraged by the programme. This suggests that it has run its natural course in these areas. This is especially true in Wales where Realising Ambition funding was used to train school staff to deliver the programme. Lastly, the programme has been free at the point of delivery during the Realising Ambition funded replication and, consequently, there has been reluctance to begin to pay for the programme subsequently.

**Five key ingredients of successful replication**

The Realising Ambition consortium has mapped each project’s journey against our five key ingredients of successful replication. The key points from this follow below. Find out more about these ingredients.

- **A tightly defined and replicable service:** RoE is a tightly defined service: it is underpinned by a strong logic model, manuals and training. It has a history of empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness. This gives practitioners and commissioners confidence in the programme.

- **That is effectively and faithfully delivered to those that need it:** RoE is a universal programme, however AfC targeted areas and schools of higher need for delivery of the programme.
Case study

**Evidence is used to learn and adapt, as required:** RoE is a highly prescribed programme and scope to adapt it at local level is limited. Variations that do exist tend to be focussed on delivery logistics and AfC has developed good links between the teams delivering RoE to help them share lessons on delivery.

**There is confidence that outcomes have improved:** Most young people in receipt of RoE tended to maintain low levels of aggression and misbehaviour and experience low levels of bullying throughout delivery, which is desirable and realistic for less intensive prevention programmes.

**The service is cost-beneficial and sustainable:** AfC has delivered RoE more efficiently than originally envisaged, making the delivery cost per head lower than anticipated. While the programme has not yet been sustained in the two Realising Ambition replication areas, AfC has secured funding for RoE in several other UK areas.

### Outcomes for beneficiaries

Each organisation has sought to monitor the outcomes of children and young people prior to and after service delivery. Find out more about outcome measurement in Realising Ambition.

AfC delivered RoE to 2,341 young people across Cardiff, Neath Port Talbot, Vale of Glamorgan, Caerphilly, and Denbighshire, and to 2,867 young people across Newcastle, Northumberland, and Durham over a period of four years. Due to the high number of programme recipients, a 25% subsample was selected to complete pre- and post-test questionnaires.

For the most part, analysis of these outcomes indicate stability in young people’s peer relations, their aggression and misbehaviour, levels of hyperactivity, pro-social behaviour, and the impact of their difficulties on everyday life. In Wales, scores tended to start and end in the ‘normal’ threshold ranges of need, with a greater proportion of the North East England recipients beginning and ending in the higher threshold ranges of need. In Wales, improvement was seen in the overall mental health and well-being of recipients of the programme, with 84% of children demonstrating either stability or improvement in their threshold category (moving from higher to lower risk) between pre- and post-test. In North East England, improvements were seen in emotional wellbeing and bullying victimisation, with over half (56%) of the young people who began the programme in the high need threshold for emotional difficulties, finishing the programme in a lower threshold of need.

The lack of a comparison group means that any improvement in outcomes cannot directly be attributable to RoE. However, the majority of young people in receipt of the programme tended to maintain low levels of aggression and misbehaviour and experience low levels of bullying throughout delivery, with improvements seen in overall mental health and wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, and bullying victimisation. This is both desirable and realistic for less intensive prevention programmes. Unfortunately, due to the low proportion of recipients who filled in questionnaires across both replication sites, the results must be interpreted with caution and do not necessarily represent all of the young people who took part.

### What next

AfC continues to deliver RoE within its suite of services and the organisation is seeking grant funding for the programme in both of the Realising Ambition funded replication areas and beyond.

Find out more

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