

English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2022:35

From social assistance to self-reliance

Better living conditions for
disadvantaged families with children
in receipt of social assistance

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Figures from Statistics Norway show that 11.7 per cent of children in Norway are living in persistently low-income households (Epland & Normann, 2021). The proportion was 3 per cent in the period 1999–2001 (Kirkeberg et al., 2012), and it has been rising steadily since then. The proportion of children who grow up in low-income households is particularly high in Oslo, but the low-income problems vary considerably across the different districts in the capital city. Growing up in a low-income household has numerous negative consequences, and research has demonstrated a relationship (although not necessarily a causal relationship) between low income and various indicators of social exclusion, for example participation in leisure activities, contact with friends, bullying and loneliness.

The problems that result from growing up in a low-income household have been addressed in a number of action plans and initiative plans. Low income is a risk factor that has repercussions for children and young people and the environment they grow up in. Several local authorities have drawn up specific poverty plans, or included the topic in general plans, such as municipal plans, living conditions plans or public health plans. A number of initiatives have been introduced at both a local and national level to strengthen the local authorities' efforts to reduce the scope of low income, and to reduce the consequences of poverty for children.

Living conditions evaluation project 2018–2019

In 2017, Oslo City Council decided to initiate a living conditions project with the aim of preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion among children, young people and families with children. The project was carried out in 2018 and 2019, and had a resource-oriented approach and a methodology that considers the whole family. The project must be seen in light of Norway's international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and particularly Article 27 on the right of every child to have an adequate standard of living.

In a letter to the city districts, the project was described as follows:

The aim of the efforts aimed at disadvantaged families with children is as follows: From social assistance to self-reliance: Better living conditions for disadvantaged families with children in receipt of social assistance.

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Sub-goals:

- Strengthen the capacity and potential of disadvantaged families with children for self-reliance through active participation.
- Protect the rights of children and young people in disadvantaged families under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, by means of, inter alia, participation, engagement and socially acceptable living conditions.
- Promote self-reliance by facilitating work, activity and education or by securing rights to welfare benefits of a more permanent nature where this is appropriate.
- Promote improved living conditions through an interagency approach.
- Provide adequate housing and healthy living environments for families with children, starting with vulnerable municipal housing tenants.

The efforts will take place over two years, and three different concepts will be applied. (Oslo City Government, Department of Health, Ageing and Municipal Services, Letter dated 8 January 2018.)

In the letter, the districts were invited to take part in projects under three different concepts. In Concept 1, districts were invited to design projects aimed at reducing social assistance or promoting self-reliance for families with children with a precarious living situation. A specific requirement was that the children's perspective and situation must be clarified in the same way as for the adults. Applications were received and three districts were selected. These districts subsequently received grants to carry out their respective projects. The districts were given the freedom to organise the projects as they saw fit.

Concept 2 focused on developing a working method for assessing new service users of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) that considers the whole family and maps the family's situation. The purpose, as stated in the City Government's letter, is to provide the right measures and ensure that help is given at an earlier stage. The development work must be carried out in all districts. For this concept, a working group was established, consisting of representatives from the Department of Health, Ageing and Municipal Services, the Department of Education and Child Services, Oslo Welfare Administration and NAV Oslo.

The third concept is radical innovation, and this is less specific than concepts 1 and 2. Here the districts were invited to design projects related to open, innovative work. Applications were received and two districts were selected to carry out their respective projects.

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Research question

In the spring of 2019, Fafo was commissioned by Oslo City Government to evaluate the initiative. As the projects were already more than halfway complete, it was clear that this had to take the form of a post-evaluation. The primary research question in the evaluation was as follows:

How effective are the three concepts aimed at strengthening efforts vis-à-vis disadvantaged families with children in Oslo?

In order to shed light on the primary research question, we drew up a set of secondary research questions linked to each of the three concepts.

- How have the living conditions project and concepts been implemented?
- What specific working methods, measures and forms of cooperation have been used?
- What barriers do the service providers see as particular obstacles to goal achievement?
- How can the experiences from practice be systematised in order to establish a knowledge base to further develop the services?

The specific secondary research questions linked to each concept are described in more detail below.

Method

The methodological approach consisted of quantitative and qualitative research methods, which in combination provide an optimum basis for assessing efforts and outcomes in the three concepts.

- Document studies of relevant documents and correspondence between the Department of Health, Ageing and Municipal Services and the districts in relation to the living conditions project
- Interviews with key players in the project's development group
- Interviews with managers and other employees in the districts' concept projects
- Interviews with service users who participated in the districts' concept projects
- Survey of all managers and others employees in NAV in Oslo municipality

We briefly discuss below the concept projects' execution, methods, forms of cooperation and challenges, and the experiences gained and lessons learned.

Concept 1: Large families

Efforts in Concept 1 – Large families – were aimed at reducing social assistance or promoting self-reliance for large families with a precarious living situation.

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Applications were received, and the districts of Gamle Oslo, Stovner and Søndre Nordstrand were selected to participate in this part of the project. All districts engaged family coordinators as project members, and worked actively with the follow-up of families with a large number of children living at home. A 'large family' was defined as a family with more than four children under the age of 18 living at home. The project was to include parents in receipt of full or supplementary social assistance.

Two of the projects had one project manager, while the third project took some time to get up and running, and more staff were therefore put in place. This project has therefore had three project managers. There has been activity related to the execution of the project in all three districts.

The invitation from the Department of Health, Ageing and Municipal Services states the following: 'The work is aimed at a sample of large families who receive full or supplementary social assistance'. In order to meet this criterion, all three projects made a list of families from their own records for inclusion in the project. In one of the districts, the families with the most children were chosen, and the selection criteria were more discretionary, based on assessed needs. The family coordinators were responsible for following up around 20 families each, with a total of more than 100 children. The parents in the families participating in the project mainly had an immigrant background. A common feature of all three projects is that they included service users who were well outside the margins of the regular labour market. They had low levels of education and proficiency in Norwegian, and limited IT skills. In some of the families, the mothers were single parents.

The methodological approach in all three concepts builds on the model for the Comprehensive Follow-up of Low-Income Families (HOLF). All three districts participated in this project, and were therefore familiar with this methodology. In the HOLF model, the focus and efforts are aimed at four areas: employment, housing, finances and the children's situation. These are areas that have also been prioritised in the execution of the three concept projects. The family coordinators had mapped the situation of the families, and the situation of the mothers was particularly highlighted. When mapping the families' situations, how the families spent their time was recorded in detail.

In all three projects, the long-term goal for the follow-up of the families was financial independence through paid work. Since many of the families are well outside the margins of the regular labour market, this is obviously a very long-term effort. Nevertheless, much of the work in the projects was aimed at understanding how the families divided their time between various family activities and participation in language and skills training courses.

The invitation from Oslo City Council stipulated the following:

‘The efforts must be aimed at all members of the household. A dialogue must take place with all family members and the family must feel that they own their situation. The children’s perspective and situation must be clarified in the same way as for the adults.’

This criterion was met in one of the three concept projects, where the aim was to systematically meet the families at home and talk to the children about their situation and experiences. In the other two concept projects, it was the parents who were asked about the children’s situation. Involving children and giving them the opportunity to express their own views is part of Norway’s obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It is clear from the project work that the children’s access to leisure facilities, activities and holidays is a low priority in many cases due to the family’s difficult financial situation. We see examples in the three concept projects of the family coordinators following up on the children’s leisure time situation.

The invitation from the Department of Health, Ageing and Municipal Services states that: ‘Comprehensive and coordinated efforts are an important dimension’. How this is implemented varies across the three concept projects. In one of the projects, very few collaborative relationships were developed with other agencies in the district, with capacity problems being cited as the reason for this. In one of the districts, the collaboration between NAV and child welfare services was further developed through participation in meetings and the exchange of information on relevant cases. This helped to clarify cases quicker than normal, to the benefit of both the families and the services. In one of the projects, a joint leadership forum was established to collaborate on the Better Interdisciplinary Efforts (Bedre Tverrfaglig Innsats (BTI)) model. Members of the Barnehjernet programme, Oslohjelpa service and participants in the Concept 1 project were all part of the forum.

The experiences from the Concept 1 project in the three districts show that they all largely worked according to the same basic model, but made different priorities as the project progressed.

Obtaining qualifications for employment was a core part of all three projects, and the family coordinators refer to considerable efforts to map and clarify how the families divided their time between various activities. There are individual examples of participants receiving help to get their qualifications from their homeland approved, and then securing paid work and no longer requiring social assistance. However, this involves longterm and painstaking efforts, and the results are difficult to see. Efforts of this type therefore need to be viewed in a much longer perspective than one or two years.

Mapping the children's situation represented a valuable experience in the Concept 1 project, but this was only systematically carried out in one of the three projects. In the other two projects, this was difficult to achieve due to practical reasons, in terms of both time and capacity. The experiences are highlighted in the interviews with the adults, children and young people who participated in the project. Service users and children we interviewed described how they were taken seriously and involved. Practices across the three projects appear to differ, however, as does the amount of focus this was given. In the project where a dialogue was held with the children, the impression is that the families were mostly interviewed at home, making it easier to find the time and space to meet the children. The prioritisation of domiciliary, proactive social work over time appears to constitute valuable experience from the project.

The experiences from the Concept 1 project also show a variation in the extent to which the projects meet the criterion of comprehensive and coordinated efforts. While one of the districts established a joint leadership forum to coordinate its efforts in several related projects, the other districts formed a closer cooperation with the child welfare services. These differing approaches demonstrate how prioritisation and a firm foundation in the leadership are also prerequisites for cross-sector efforts in this area.

Concept 2: Assessing new service users in NAV

This concept concerns NAV's attitudes and practices in its work with families with children, and includes all NAV offices in Oslo municipality. The invitation sent to the districts explained the concept as follows:

'Developing a working method for assessing new service users in NAV that considers the whole family and maps the family's situation will enable more people to receive the right measures and help at an earlier stage.'

The invitation further explains:

'A good working method for assessing new service users will help NAV to identify families with children who can quickly be transferred to other measures, and families with a particular need for follow-up, regardless of whether they apply for state benefits or financial support from the local authority. This requires systematic and methodical mapping.'

The attitudes, norms and practices that govern the assessing of new service users in the NAV offices are crucial for the assessments and professional day-to-day work. Established routines and working methods are also important tools in the interaction with service users. We measured this in a survey of managers and other employees in NAV. We did not have the opportunity to conduct before and after surveys, and the answers therefore represent the status at the time the sur-

vey was conducted. The results can nevertheless serve as a baseline if the survey is repeated.

Not unexpectedly, it is mostly the senior managers and middle managers in the organisation who are familiar with Oslo City Council's initiative, with 73 per cent of surveyed managers giving this response. Among other employees, the corresponding figure was 33 per cent. In response to our questions about methodology and working methods used in interactions with service users who have children, and in the follow-up work with families with children, it is the methodology from the HOLF project that most respondents report is used as a working method in their office.

The invitation to participate in the Concept 2 project stipulates the expectation that NAV 'sees the whole family' in its assessing of new service users. We therefore included questions about the methods used to assess the needs of children and young people when the service user has children under the age of 18.

The main method was to talk to the service users, not their children. Forty-nine per cent of respondents replied 'Always or often' to the question of how often they only talk to the parents, and 34 per cent replied 'Occasionally'. Four per cent of employees who assess the children's needs by talking to them directly do so 'Always or often' and 11 per cent do so 'Occasionally'. The ambition of the City Council's project is for the mapping to take place by talking to the children directly, as provided for in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The circular to the Act relating to Social Services in NAV states that 'if the service provision involves children, their needs and any points of view must, as a general rule, be conveyed by their parents and guardians', and it is this practice that seems to have been adopted (section 42).

We also posed questions about which aspects of the children's situation are included in the assessing of new service users in NAV. It was interesting to note that the conditions that are most often mapped are objective conditions, such as the need for a place in kindergarten or an activity school and participation in leisure activities. The aspects of life that are more difficult to quantify, such as contact with friends, health problems, the need for help with homework, or exposure to violence and abuse are covered to a far lesser extent. This is interesting because it may reflect the fact that it is the parents and not the children themselves who are being asked, and it may also be a reflection of the attitudes and competence among NAV staff in relation to mapping this type of information.

When employees were asked what they consider to be the key prerequisites for following up families with children when assessing new service users, it was primarily time that they reported to be the most scarce commodity in their working day.

The results of the survey show that implementing a new practice is a major undertaking in a large organisation such as NAV, with many different occupational groups and a complex assortment of tasks. The work on mapping attitudes that has been initiated in various project and development activities can be an important source of information for stimulating long-term change, but it requires systematic follow-up over time.

Concept 3: Radical innovation

The efforts in this concept have been linked to attempts at citizen participation. The invitation to the districts states the following:

The districts are invited to work with people in the target group to propose priority areas. Active participation by people in the target group is required.

The criteria in this third concept are more open than in concepts 1 and 2, and there has therefore been greater scope for the districts to design the content of the project. The districts of Sagene and Nordstrand applied and were subsequently invited to participate in their respective projects. The district of Nordstrand had established a system of family helpers. The district of Sagene had established a cooperative model.

Through our evaluations, we have tried to track the work in the two projects, but have only managed to identify minor, limited results. It has not always been possible to find the people who were directly involved in the projects. Consequently, we did not have sufficient data to draw conclusions about the experience gained in this part of the project. In the report, Concept 3 is therefore only described in summary form.

As in other development work, there must also be the possibility here to understand that the project has not been carried out as originally planned. Unfortunate circumstances, including personnel changes and diminishing support for the projects, appear to be the explanations for Concept 3 not going according to plan.