

# Summary Report ‘Verkorting doorlooptijden in de jeugdbeschermingsketen’

*Shortening completion periods in child protection. Evaluation pilots Project ‘Gearing Methods in the Child Protection System’ (Programme Better Protected, Ministry of Justice, the Netherlands)*

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Utrecht, July 2007

## ***Evaluation project Gearing Methods in the Child Protection System***

This is a report on the evaluation of the results of the project Gearing Methods in the Child Protection System (the so-called *pilots completion periods*). Commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC, Ministry of Justice) the Netherlands Youth Institute/NJi<sup>1</sup> conducted the evaluation of this project, starting in August 2006. In this project seven pilots, assigned by the Sturgroep Beter Beschermd (steering committee of the programme Better Protected of the Ministry of Justice), develop and gear methods to one another in order to shorten the completion periods in the child protection system.

## ***Cause and context of this study***

In October 2005 an expert meeting took place in which professionals from the child protection system and other experts assessed how long the completion period in the child protection system should actually be. They concluded that the entire decision-making process ought not to exceed 42 working days. Following the expert meeting the steering committee assigned<sup>2</sup> the Project Group Gearing Methods in the Child Protection System to start pilot projects in which the various system partners (Access departments of the Youth Care Offices/BJZ, Advice and Reporting Centres for Child Abuse/AMK, Child Care and Protection Board/RvdK, Courts of Law) participate to develop a method that enables a completion period of 42 workdays at the utmost. Two cities and five provinces submitted a pilot plan for the project Gearing Methods in the System: Amsterdam, Gelderland, Limburg, Overijssel<sup>3</sup>, Rotterdam, West-Brabant and Zeeland. The evaluation of the seven pilot projects should focus on:

1. The results of the pilots with regard to working in accordance with the ambitions formulated by the Steering Committee Better Protected, namely the realisation of shorter completion periods and more efficient methods in the child protection system.
2. The extent to which such sound methods were developed that they would qualify for a regional roll-out and serve as proposals for the Steering Committee in the context of the nation-wide promotion of proved good practices.

On the basis of this evaluation the Project Group Gearing Methods in the Child Protection System will present proposals to the Steering Committee Better Protected, for the nation-wide promotion of proved good practices and for the introduction of a national standard for the completion period.

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<sup>1</sup> As of 1 January 2007 The Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare section Youth (NIZW Youth) and NIZW's International Centre constitute the Netherlands Youth Institute NJi.

<sup>2</sup> For the assignment of the Steering Committee Better Protected see appendix 1 in the report.

<sup>3</sup> In the province of Overijssel two pilots participate: the municipalities Almelo and Zwolle.

## ***Intrinsic problem outline***

In the child protection system the child and his family may encounter five different links: Access departments of the Youth Care Offices (BJZ), Advice and Reporting Centres for Child Abuse (AMK), Child Care and Protection Board (RvdK), the juvenile court magistrate and child protection. The entire period of time available to the organisations in this system for registering the first report to the onset of the execution of a child protection service (such as a supervision order or guardianship) is almost nine months. Furthermore, the actual completion period can be even longer<sup>4</sup>. The expert meeting mentioned before concluded that this period of time is too long.

The five links carry out three core activities: conducting an investigation, giving advice c.q. making a decision and carrying out this decision (the child protection service). Four of the five links are engaged in the core activity conducting an investigation, to a greater or lesser extent. If the system partners do not establish clearly who conducts which part of the investigation, there is a risk that parts of the investigation will be repeated unnecessarily or omitted. Repetitions as well as gaps in the investigation may cause delay in the system. In the second activity too, delay can occur. This is related to the personal decision threshold of the decision-making party, indicating how swiftly a decision-maker is inclined to take action (Dalglish, 1997). Both a high decision threshold and a low one can slow down the system process. Decision-makers with a low decision threshold are prone to take action quickly and may, if they must retrace their footsteps in case of an action not justified, be forced to do part of the investigation again. Decision-makers with high decision thresholds run the risk of continuing the investigation too long before they dare to make a clear decision, thus causing unnecessary delay in the process (Eijgenraam, 2006). The third activity, carrying out (or starting to carry out) the child protection service, marks the end of the completion period of the child protection system and cannot as such cause delay in the process (although its start may be late due to waiting lists).

Both with regard to the core activities and to the period of time certain aspects can be observed that are decisive for the completion period in the child protection system. It is up to the seven pilots to map out bottlenecks regarding the completion period and to tackle them with creative solutions.

## ***Set-up, course and outcome of the study***

As of April 2006 the pilots took off. A few months later NJi was involved in the project to carry out the evaluation. As of mid August 2006 the study could start and contacts were made with the focal points of the pilots, in order to arrive at agreements for all activities and to set dates for the interviews. The evaluation set-up describes the following research tools: per pilot four interviews (three group interviews and one by telephone), gathering registration data and a questionnaire for clients. The evaluation study is divided into three parts: the plan evaluation, the process evaluation and the evaluation of the first results.

### **Measuring baseline and measuring results**

In drawing up the plan for the evaluation of the pilots NJi and WODC departed from the notion that the measuring baseline would not be carried out by the pilots. Therefore the plan provided for a measuring baseline by NJi by means of applying for registration data. It appeared at the start of the evaluation, that the pilots (with the exception of the province of Gelderland) had conducted measuring baselines themselves. However, in most cases the data the pilots had gathered themselves appeared to be unsuitable for use in a measuring baseline, since the data give an overall indication of the average completion

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<sup>4</sup> A *period of time* is the restricted time span in which a specific activity must be carried out (this can be laid down in law or policy rules/-agreements), whereas the *completion period* is the actual time required to complete an activity.

periods, not specifying how they were measured and how they selected a moment for start and finish. In addition it appeared that clear criteria had not been set for data gathering, so that each pilot had gathered data differently, resulting in data that were difficult to compare. Therefore the pilots were requested to provide additional data. Eventually it appeared to be impossible to obtain the necessary data quickly and simply. The reason for this is that four different information systems must be consulted (separately) and that data from one client must be linked manually. In addition it is not always possible to retrieve from the information systems the data necessary for a clear view of the completion period.

For the gathering of data for the later measurements of the results it also appeared a problem to retrieve (reliable and useful) data from the information systems. In order to be able to gather data on the completion periods during the pilots anyway, use was made of the data the pilots had registered manually during the pilot period. But, as with the measuring baseline, these data also appeared to be unsuitable for sound quantitative analyses. We were forced to conclude that both the data on the measuring baseline and the data on the completion periods from the pilots projects were unsuitable for well-founded statements on completion periods.

### **Plan evaluation**

The plan evaluation was aimed at identifying the way in which the pilots wished to achieve their goals. Another important question is why in particular this method should lead to the desired result, in other words: which theory or presupposition is the basis of the expectation that the method will result in shorter completion periods and a more efficient method? In order to establish this the pilot plans were studied and group interviews were conducted in each pilot: with the authors of the plan, about amongst other things the underlying 'theory' behind the plan, with the executive staff of the participating organisations (access BJZ, AMK, RvdK, and sometimes the courts) on their vision on the proposed changes and method.

In studying the plans it appears once more that the set-up of the plans is clear: in the pilot plans a clear distinction is made in goals and suggested method, design of the pilot organisation, communication, measuring baseline and cost of the pilot. It is remarkable that an analysis of the bottlenecks is lacking in most pilots, as a result of which it remains unclear what the goals are based on. Also the method is insufficiently elaborated and a sound foundation or theoretical account of the chosen approach is lacking. Since there was little time for writing the plan, a number of pilots opted for an outline of a plan, later to be presented in further detail. This implies however that the pilot executors were issued with few tools to start the improvement process, whereas a sound plan can be indispensable for a successful start of the process.

The lacking theoretical background was retrieved as much as possible by means of the interviews with the authors of the plan. These showed that Gelderland, Limburg and Rotterdam based themselves on the knowledge and experience present within the organisations. In the other four pilots they also based themselves on experiences gained elsewhere or on evidence from research literature. In Amsterdam the experiences gained in the Justitieel Casusoverleg (JCO, judicial case consultation) were taken as point of departure for the pilot. The JCO is a consultative body of the Public Prosecutor, the police, the Child Care and Protection Board and in many cases also the Juvenile Rehabilitation and HALT. The objective of this consultation is to shorten the completion periods and to improve the quality of decision-making. An evaluation report (Van Poppel, Pranger, Veenma, Bruinsma & Boekhoorn, 2005) shows that it is not clear whether the shortening of the completion periods is the result of the JCO's. In West-Brabant, Zeeland and Overijssel (Zwolle) the so-called British model (Veldkamp, 2005) was used as point of departure. This model refers to the child protection system in Great Britain; this is not (as is the case in The Netherlands) carried out by separate organisations but belongs to the responsibility of one organisation: the Social Services Department (SSD). As a rule, SSD's workers are highly qualified, committed professionals, with a sound theoretical background. A great deal of importance is attached to cooperation with parents on a

voluntary basis, but they do not exercise restraint in involving the courts if a child's safety is at stake. The SSD organisation is set-up to enable the observing of prescribed methods and period of time. Zeeland also used the lecture 'Can the system be shortened?' as a source of inspiration. In this lecture Van Montfoort (2005) advocates to keep the system short and transparent and unequivocal and to use a clear system for research and decision-making.

In Overijssel (Almelo and Zwolle) use was made of the Break Through method in the approach to developing the method (Diephuis, 2004; Van Deur, Diephuis, Oortgiesen & Stienstra, 2006). In Zeeland the testing of improvement points was also realised by means of this method. Break Through is a method from health care that is being used in youth care to eliminate waiting lists and to speed up the completion periods. The core of this method is that scientific and practical knowledge are being combined by a team of experts, which then draws up suggestions for improvement. During work conferences multidisciplinary teams will translate these suggestions for improvement into concrete improvement actions for the benefit of their own organisation(s). These improvement actions are then tested in practice and elaborated in further detail on the basis of the experiences.

The interviews with the authors and executors of the plan have also been used to retrieve the lacking analyses of the bottlenecks. The bottlenecks that were mentioned in the interviews can be subdivided into three categories: bottlenecks referring to gearing and cooperation (overlap of tasks, working after one another instead of along side or with each other, focus on one's own organisation instead of on joint responsibility, cooperation agreements depending on individuals, differences in vision, being unfamiliar with criteria for reporting and child protection service), bottlenecks referring to logistics and transfer (logistical delay, quality of written transfers, dated information, incompatibility of information systems, bureaucracy, waiting time for child protection or care provider) and bottlenecks in the internal work processes (inefficient planning, heavy caseload, a standard insufficiently stimulating). As the bottlenecks referring to the poor compatibility of information systems and waiting time regarding child protection or care provider cannot be changed within the context of the pilot, the majority of interviewed persons advocated tackling this on the national level.

The pilots took over the goals drawn up by the project group (in short: the completion period lasts one week at the maximum, if a preliminary decision has been made then the maximum completion period up to the definitive decision is two months). These goals are concrete and can be measured. This is not the case with the goals the pilots themselves drew up in addition. These goals (such as the improvement of the gearing of tasks, a joint vision/responsibility regarding the protection of children, trust in the expertise of the other system partners, uniformity of methods and use of instruments, careful, endorsed and transparent decision-making, enhanced expertise) have in general not been formulated in accordance with the SMART requirements (specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic and time-related). This makes them difficult to measure. How the results are to be measured, remains unspecified.

The intended method is not or sparingly described in the pilot plans. The plans do indicate how the new method is to be developed: develop it in the process, or devise one first and then test and develop it further).

### **Process evaluation**

The execution of the plans was pivotal in the process evaluation. Key question was how the pilots are being executed in practice and whether this is in accordance with intentions. In each pilot a group interview was conducted with executive workers of the participating organisations (access BJZ, AMK, RvdK, and sometimes the courts) to assess how the method was carried out in practice. In each pilot a number of clients was approached to fill in a questionnaire containing questions on their satisfaction on the pace of the job and the treatment by the organisations.

There are considerable similarities in the developed methods. All pilots have introduced gearing consultations or joint case consultations, in which the various system partners consult on how to deal with the investigation and make joint decisions on task allocation. In a number of pilots experiments were conducted with a quicker pace for taking over tasks, in which the separation between for example AMK and RvdK was less rigidly observed. Whereas in other pilots a strict separation of tasks is adhered to and shortening of completion period is attempted primarily by speeding up the process of task sequence. For exchange and transfer of information practical solutions were at times produced (use of USB storage device and e-mail). A number of pilots considers it advantageous to jointly carry out tasks, such as joint home visits, and a 'warm' transfer<sup>5</sup>. This not only resulted in swifter and better transfer of information, but also in a clearer picture of the type of information a system partner requires. A number of pilots work systematically, by planning court appearances earlier than usual (a side-effect being that the Child Care and Protection Board/RvdK members are forced to work systematically) or by using protocols and instruments. And in a number of pilots a greater use is made of a provisional supervision order, so that the care required can be provided whilst an investigation is still ongoing.

It is hardly possible to assess whether the methods have been carried out according to plan (the so-called programme integrity), because most pilots have not included an elaborated method in their plan. And although some pilots state in their plan that they will produce a described method at the end of the pilot period, no pilot actually succeeded in doing so.

We can however indicate how professionals and clients perceive the (changes in the) cooperation in practice. A number of results are listed below:

- All pilots experience that due to the joint (gearing) consultation there is less working at cross purposes and less duplication. The lines are shorter resulting in the job being done more quickly. In addition it seems that meeting the system partners' staff is an important factor in encouraging and motivating the professionals involved. The focus on speed is considered to be a risk: this must not be at the expense of meticulousness. The experiences of the pilots with the joint case consultations were positive by and large.
- Sometimes the family supervisor or care provider was present at these consultations. Thus the required care could be prepared better and more speedily arranged.
- The pilots that experimented with joint home visits, found that it was possible to speed up the transfer of cases because the staff member about to take over the case was already present. It was felt to be an advantage to share one's cares directly with the system partner. For the client the presence of several system partners can be a disadvantage in the sense that it is not clear which tasks and responsibilities belong to whom. This means that it is necessary to arrive at clear agreements on this.
- Working with laid down agreements or protocols, for example the request for a Child Care and Protection Board/RvdK investigation or to submit a petition was felt to be positive. It is not necessary to re-invent over and over how, where and with whom this must be done.
- The use of modern communication means (e-mail and USB device) prevents the time-consuming transfer of information. A swift exchange of information becomes possible. It is felt to be a disadvantage however that this form of information transfer is liable to abuse.
- Opinions were divided with regard to the use of one single diagnostic instrument by several system partners; it is perceived as an advantage that a more unequivocal method can be developed and that the completeness of the information is better warranted, but it is felt to be a disadvantage that if the instrument is extensive it takes a great deal of time to fill it in. The importance of arriving at agreements in who gathers which information is well established by now. Sound agreements on the use of instruments can prevent that information is gathered several times over.

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<sup>5</sup> This means that data are not merely transferred in writing but also verbally, for example in a face to face talk (if need be in the presence of the client).

- The pilot executors felt that planning of court sessions in advance was a considerable improvement. It appeared from the enquiry that some parents found the preparation time for court sessions inadequate for sessions that were planned at short notice.
- In addition most parents that returned the questionnaire felt they were insufficiently informed by the various system partners on the procedure during the investigation.

Due to the incompleteness and limited reliability of data the results achieved (completion periods) can not be tested. Also the so-called process goals can hardly be tested, because they are not sufficiently SMART (specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic and time-related).

Most pilots feel that the period of time of a week for arriving at a preliminary decision is not feasible. According to some pilots the period of time of two months for a definitive decision is realistic, if there is sufficient capacity in the BJZ and RvdK to carry out investigations and if transfer towards child protection is ensured.

What is particularly remarkable is the great enthusiasm of the executors of the pilots. In general they are positive about the changed method and have the impression that the completion period is shorter because of it. However, whether this is actually the case can not be determined on the basis of the available data. This enthusiasm is perhaps the major incentive behind the pilots: people want the completion period to be shorter and make every effort to achieve this. In addition the face to face meeting with system partner workers (previously known by name only, if at all) will be a factor not to be underestimated, motivating people as well as obliging them to cooperate better and thus achieve even better results. The question remains how long this factor will be effective; will it also work when the experimental phase is over and there is a broad-scale implementation? Because the new methods have not yet been laid down in writing and have not yet been incorporated into a clear structure, their effectiveness is largely dependent on the as yet random combination of individual persons and there is a risk that it will be lost in another setting.

### ***Measuring of first results not possible in chosen project set-up***

During this research it became clear that the results of the pilots can hardly be measured. Therefore it is difficult to come up with answers to many of the original research questions. By commissioning the Project Group Gearing Method in the System to start seven pilots (in order to develop a method in which the completion periods can be shortened drastically) the Steering Committee Better Protected expressly opted for an important role in the execution practice. This choice was made on the assumption that improvements in cooperation can best be devised by professionals that are bothered on a daily basis by obstacles in this cooperation. The question is whether the results of this project can be assessed in the selected project set-up, in accordance with the steering committee's intentions. However, the perception of participating professionals and clients can be assessed in this project. But in the course of the study we were forced to conclude that quantitative research into the completion periods (in accordance with the assignment of the steering committee to the project group c.q. the commission by WODC to NJi) can not be assessed in the chosen set-up of this project. Quantitative research into the completion periods would have been possible if a much stricter schedule for data gathering had been imposed on the pilots. The project group had only outlined which information on completion periods was required, so that each pilot started to gather information as they saw fit. The data thus obtained could hardly be used for the quantitative part of the study because they were too dissimilar. Furthermore, a standard by which to measure progress and/or results was lacking. By the time NJi was commissioned to conduct the evaluation study the pilots had been operational for almost five months and it proved to be impossible in a number of pilots to adjust this way of gathering information.

In addition it transpired during the project that the allocated time span for the project period did not suffice to put to full use the experiments of the project. That is why the Project Group Gearing Methods in

the Child Protection System and the Steering Committee Better Protected decided to follow up this project and to give to the pilots a more specific assignment. For this reason this report is not in the nature of an extensive final report but rather a rendition of the state of affairs with suggestions for the follow up of the project Gearing Methods in the Child Protection System and for the way in which the results of this follow up should be measured.

### ***Suggestions for the follow up of the projects***

On the basis of the experiences of the past months it is possible to make a number of suggestions for the execution of the (follow up) of the pilots:

- In a project such as this, in which several phases and products are evaluated (plan, process/method and results) moments must be incorporated between these various phases in which a go-no go decision on its continuation can be made:
  - when the outcome of the plan evaluation is that the plan ‘meets the requirements’ the decision can be made to start the process;
  - when it appears from the process evaluation that the method is carried out according to plan, the results can be measured.
- In order to achieve that executive staff are given better tools and more guidance in carrying out the pilot, they should be involved in an early stage in the planning process.
- Prior to the start of the new method, a measuring baseline must be conducted.
- More guidance is needed from the project group to focus the pilots on the joint further development of one method (rather than every pilot developing its own method). Proved methods should be given a place in this (for example the Delta method).
- The first phase of this follow up should be spent on the description of a standard working model (if need be by a select group of experts) that is to be further tested and improved in the next phase during several rounds (for example by means of the Break Through method). For the development of a method the following rules of thumb are essential:
  - formulate a common final objective;
  - identify tasks and responsibilities of the various system partners and arrive at clear agreements;
  - ensure system direction;
  - organise systematic reporting.
- It might be possible to experiment with several variations of the gearing consultation (it is not necessary to discuss all matters in a major consultation); findings could be laid down in guidelines.

There are two pilot transcending points of interest that ought to be tackled at the national level:

- The experiences of the pilots should be used in the development of instruments (which the MOgroup<sup>6</sup> is presently engaged in).
- It is necessary that the information systems of the various system partners are compatible.

In order to be able to measure the results of the pilots we make the following suggestions for the set-up of the study:

- Ensure an unequivocal selection of cases.
- Arrive at clear agreements on measuring variables (what, how and when).
- Set a minimum number of cases on which data must be gathered.
- Appoint a focal point who is responsible for communication with the researchers.
- Introduce the researchers to the staff (so that they know who is who and what is to be expected from one another).

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<sup>6</sup> Branche organisation of i.a. youth care

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