

## LEARNING SUMMARY #3

# IMPLEMENTING SYSTEMIC MODELS OF SOCIAL WORK

This summary is intended for use by anyone in children's social care looking to lead the implementation of whole-system models of social work. The summary aims to provide thought-provoking ideas and insights from the DfE's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, including what we know is working, with reference to the places and people that are trying new approaches. The summary draws on the evaluations of Innovation Programme projects published in 2017; on Programme learning events on social work practice and systems; and on the on-the-ground experiences of projects.

References to evaluations, key material and reports can be found on the final page, with a full list of links and contact details on the Spring Consortium website [www.springconsortium.com](http://www.springconsortium.com)



## The challenge

The challenge for everyone in children's services is how to achieve positive outcomes for children and families in the context of rising demand and reductions in resources.

We know that what makes the difference to young people's lives is the quality of the relationships they have with the carers and practitioners around them; and we know that front-line practice must be supported by coherent and co-ordinated systems, structures, processes and teams. How can local authorities be confident that they are investing in the models that will best enable practitioners to do the most effective direct work with families?

## New systemic approaches

Different social work models are based on a range of theories and approaches, including systemic practice, restorative practice and motivational interviewing, and models such as Signs of Safety, PACE and Family Group Conferencing. The approaches with the best evidence of positive impact are based on systemic theoretical models, where children and families are viewed as part of a wider set of systems and relationships.

While different models may be more or less appropriate to local contexts, the evidence shows that there are **key common features that can be adopted by any system**, and that implementing a whole-system approach is in itself beneficial in improving experiences for young people and families. A whole system approach goes beyond the day-to-day work of individual practitioners. It creates **a unifying methodology, language and understanding** that supports multi-disciplinary working and promotes consistency in families' experience. It **empowers professionals to use their own judgement** in the approaches they believe will be the most powerful. And, crucially, it reaches beyond social work, to encompass the wider workforce, young people, families and communities.

# Whole-system social work models in action

## HARROW COUNCIL

### Embedding the Reclaiming Social Work Model

Harrow Council are **embedding the Reclaiming Social Work model first developed in Hackney**. The work focusses on overcoming systemic barriers to practice and includes:

1. The recruitment and development of consultant social workers who lead small, multi-RSW units trained in systemic practice, with shared case-loads and systemic case discussions.
2. Implementation of a Keeping Families Together unit to support families to stay together by targeting teenagers on the edge of care.
3. Reduce the administrative burden inherent within social work teams by streamlining administrative processes. This includes an **RSW unit co-ordinator to free up practitioner time to spend on direct work with families**.

Harrow are supported by Morning Lane Associates who have worked with several Local Authorities to scale the model (including Derbyshire and Hull Councils where the model continues to be developed), in partnership with the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and the University of Bedfordshire.

**Impact evaluation across 5 participating Local Authorities** (Harrow, Derbyshire, Hull, Buckinghamshire, and Southwark)

Remained at home

79%

Subsequently received care

21%

Evaluation of the first year of the programme demonstrated that training in systemic practice was significantly associated with greater worker skill, with children and families responding positively to their interactions with practitioners. If the 119 children referred to the service, 79% remained at home. This has contributed to estimated potential cost savings of £1.3 million across the five local authorities.

## LEEDS CITY COUNCIL

### Family Valued: creating a restorative system

Leeds' Family Valued programme is a package of resources **embedding restorative practice** as the ethos across all services interacting with young people in the city, while developing Family Group Conferencing as a core offer to families in circumstances including domestic violence.

All families who are subject to an Initial Child Protection Conference are now offered a Family Group Conference as an alternative, with 660 conferences held in 2016. Leeds' Restorative Practice team has delivered training to over 6,000 practitioners across the children's workforce and beyond, including the NHS, police, youth offending teams, housing and social work, 800 school staff and 500 staff from the third sector. **Weekly data on progress is displayed visibly across the council** to inspire and motivate staff. In the first year reductions were seen in the number of children looked after, with falls of 13% in child protection plans and children in need. The use of Family Group Conferencing has resulted in estimated savings of £755 per family, as a consequence of reduced average time spent in the social care system (from 34 weeks to 24 weeks).

Since 2010, 25 locality-based 'clusters' – local multi-agency children's services partnerships – have been in place across Leeds. Family Valued identified just six of these as providing 50% of the referrals received by social care. Targeted 'deep dive' training in restorative practice, senior social workers back-filled from their teams to build relationships and stronger cross-service links including schools has seen the number of children in need in these clusters falling at a faster rate than the city average.



## HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

### Family Safeguarding: multi-disciplinary teams to tackle multiple vulnerabilities

Hertfordshire County Council has created 22 **co-located, multi-disciplinary Family Safeguarding Teams** to tackle domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental mental ill-health.

The Family Safeguarding Partnership is part of a whole-system change approach that includes the county council, CCGs, police, probation, recovery service and mental health trust. **Adult specialists** – including social workers, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health workers – operate alongside children's specialists under a **unified management structure**, with posts funded by all partners. Teams share motivational interviewing as a core practice, and information sharing is enabled at strategic and operational levels.

In the first 12 months of the programme, 280 staff worked with adults and children in 940 families, 44% of which were experiencing domestic abuse. The programme has seen reductions in the number of children in need and child protection cases, and a reduction of more than half in days spent in care. Family Safeguarding is achieving an estimated annual cost saving for children's services of £2.6m, with additional estimated savings of £107,000 to the police due primarily to decreased incidents of domestic abuse and £200,000 to the NHS due to a 53% reduction in emergency admissions. **Hertfordshire** is now expanding its virtual school to children in need and child protection cases, and bringing CAMHS into the Family Safeguarding partnership. In addition, it is supporting Luton, Peterborough, Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire to adopt the Family Safeguarding approach.

Estimated cost saving to children's services

£2.6m

# What do we know about what's working?

**Learning from the Innovation Programme supports the wider evidence base in suggesting that shared models of social work may improve the experience of engaging with services for children and families – an important indicator for improved outcomes. There are some core features that sit at the heart of successful social work models.**

When they share these features, locally designed models are as likely to improve experiences as proprietary models. [Ealing's Brighter Futures](#) programme created a bespoke practice model and reshaped service delivery for fostering according to the specific needs of complex adolescents, resulting in improved placement stability and significant cost savings.

## High intensity and consistent support

Provision of high intensity and consistent support from a key practitioner improves young people's outcomes. Their experience is better when they are able to work with a single adult and build a relationship over time. Young people and their primary relationships need to be placed at the centre of support, with help being organised around the needs of the family, not the convenience or limitations of services.

## Focussing on families and using strengths based practice frameworks

Taking a whole family approach means that adult behaviours and needs are seen as important to address alongside those of the child. Many models also take a strengths based approach to working with whole families, where families are seen as part of the solution and not part of the problem, being actively brought in to co-develop solutions with professionals. Relationships are prioritised over transactions, and the strength and qualities of relationships promoted within families must be mirrored in those between families and services, and within practitioner teams.

## Multidisciplinary, not just multiagency

Different models require different team composition and emphasise different roles, including social workers, educational psychologists, domestic violence navigators, clinical psychologists and youth workers. Some include the police, probation and youth offending teams, and specialists such as drug and alcohol misuse workers and speech and

language therapists. All these models include genuinely multi-disciplinary working, specifically teams of practitioners from different sectors and services who are co-located and working together day-to-day to support the same children and families. This is different to, but supported by, multi-agency working, with senior commitment to sharing resources and expertise at a strategic level.

In [Stockport](#), physical reorganisation through locality-based working and co-location has supported culture change to establish an aligned, restorative focus. [Hampshire and the Isle of Wight's](#) Family Intervention Teams include specialists in domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health practitioners positioned alongside a trained and dedicated network of volunteers, with substantial increases in family engagement.

## Increased time for direct contact

Shared models of social work practice prioritise time spent with children and families. Trained volunteers, alternatively qualified practitioners (for example, those with backgrounds in teaching, nursing or the police) and highly skilled administrators are proving to be effective in freeing up social workers' time, enabling an increase in the intensity and consistency of support to families. In [Hampshire and the Isle of Wight](#), recruiting a skilled administrator resulted in savings of £27,000 and increased social work time with families from 34% to 58%. In [Cheshire East's Project Crewe](#), using qualified family practitioners alongside peer mentors and volunteers has seen a threefold increase in family visits.

## Sharing risk and support through Group Case Discussion

Group supervision and group case discussion is helping practitioner teams to make collaborative decisions and share collective responsibility. Through shared learning experiences and the exchange of professional opinion and insight, practice is developed and quality assured. Group supervision across agencies that includes all professionals working with the family, as in [Hertfordshire's Family Safeguarding](#) teams, is particularly powerful. Crucially, these models are not about creating one way of doing things but acknowledging the strengths of different specialisms and developing a shared language, context and understanding.



## Measuring what matters

It takes a long time for the effects of social work for children and families to make themselves known. Context and causality are key. Many 'common sense' long-term measures may not, in the short term, be an indicator of good outcomes. Practitioner turnover may increase during the implementation phase, as staff 'self-select' out of the new culture. Caseload may not be a helpful way to think about how social workers spend their time, simply because the most complex cases take much longer. Similarly, cases kept open for longer but satisfactorily resolved are better than cases closed too quickly.

In the short-term, evaluation can most usefully focus on children and families' experience of engaging with services, and practitioners' experiences of their ability and time to work closely with families and each other. Measures such as families' satisfaction with their social worker can be helpful in evaluating the effects of shared models. [Ealing's Brighter Futures](#) model focuses on giving families a role and choice in decision making, resulting in the majority of parents and young people perceiving professionals to be responsive and committed to building effective working relationships.

## A whole-system culture of collaboration and learning

Sustainable change requires bold and ambitious leadership and practice at all levels, not just a few dynamic individuals. A comprehensive approach to culture and skills building engages the whole workforce in developing capabilities in (and through) supervision, coaching and performance management. [Islington](#) has overhauled its recruitment and continual assessment processes of practitioners and supervisors, using observations, graded feedback and strict recruitment thresholds against scenario-based competencies including empathy and flexibility. Coaching on live cases and group supervision enhance practice reflection and focus on professional accountability. Every family is interviewed about their experiences of interactions with practitioners, with the data amalgamated across the service to help each team reflect on what's going well and what could be improved. [Newcastle's Family Insights](#) team has developed a bespoke Newcastle Curriculum to instil a culture of teaching and learning, contributing to a 20% increase in staff who feel they get the training they need to do their jobs well.

## Other projects and places looking at new models of social work practice

**Islington's Doing What Counts and Measuring What Matters:** embedding motivational social work and using values-based tools, monitoring, recruitment and evaluation that includes families in the assessment of practice.

**West Berkshire's Building Community Together:** training 1,000 staff and 400 young people in restorative practice and creating a Tier 2 Emotional Health Academy for young people and families.

**Tri-borough's Focus on Practice:** systemic practice training for 660 practitioners across three London boroughs, improving staff retention and reducing the number of looked-after children by 10% in one borough.

**Newcastle City Council's Family Insights:** segmenting social work teams by need, leading to twice as many young people returning to their families from care.

**Hampshire and the Isle of Wight's Active Agents for Change:** rethinking the system response to early intervention and child protection, including multi-practitioner Family Intervention Teams.

**Munro, Turnell and Murphy (MTM):** 7,000 social workers trained in the first two years to implement Signs Of Safety across 10 local authorities.

**Stockport Family:** co-location, restorative practice and partnership working across Stockport, contributing to £1.2m savings for looked after children.

**Hertfordshire Family Safeguarding:** 22 co-located, multi-disciplinary teams to tackle domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental mental ill-health.



## Resources projects have found useful

### Innovation Programme materials:

- 'What have we learned about good social work systems and practice?', Innovation Programme thematic evaluation report by the Rees Centre, July 2017
- Whole-service Change Programmes Workshop, hosted by Spring Consortium, January 2017
- Family Group Conferencing workshop, hosted by Spring Consortium, January 2017
- Reimagining the Child Welfare System for the 21st Century, international conference hosted by Leeds, November 2016
- Innovation Programme Interim Learning Report, January 2016

### Wider research:

- Brown, 'A Lasting Legacy? Sustaining Innovation in a Social Work Context', *British Journal of Social Work*, 45, 2015
- Mason, 'Social work and the art of relationship: parents' perspectives on an intensive family support project', *Child and Family Social Work*, 17, 2012
- Brown, 'Balancing risk and innovation to improve social work practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 2010
- Leeds 'One Minute Guides' to Restorative Practice, Family Valued and Child Friendly Leeds

Evaluation reports for all projects in the Innovation Programme, contact details for projects mentioned and further learning and research materials can be found at [www.springconsortium.com/evidence-learning](http://www.springconsortium.com/evidence-learning)

## Five things to consider when implementing a new model of social work practice

1

Models of practice that improve experiences for young people and families all share a specific set of core features and principles. Developing or choosing any particular model should therefore focus on the fit with local context and priorities.

2

Training together in a shared model focuses and inspires multi-disciplinary teams, bringing coherence, consistency and a shared understanding, language and view of best practice.

3

Effective multi-disciplinary teams wrap around families to provide expertise and consistent relationships. Alternatively qualified staff, including skilled administrators and trained volunteers, enable social workers to significantly increase direct work with families.

4

Whole-system approaches must spread further than professionals, to include leadership and management styles and, crucially, bring families inside practice norms and ways of working together.

5

Introducing a shared model is a long-term commitment requiring culture change and ongoing investment to sustain. In-depth, ongoing training is crucial but not enough.