Signs of Safety: 10 pilots, 10 lessons

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Background

Programme included Transforming Children’s Services with Signs of Safety Practice at the Centre from Munro, Turnell & Murphy Child Protection Consulting (MTM)

- 10 pilot local authorities
- Internal (MTM) and external evaluation (King’s College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit)
What is Signs of Safety?

But you knew that already!
Internal evaluation

Eileen Munro, Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy
Evaluation of Signs of Safety in 10 pilots

Research report

July 2017

Independent evaluation

Mary Baginsky, Jo Moriarty, Jill Manthorpe, Jennifer Beecham and Ben Hickman
10 pilot areas

New (less than 1 year)
Wakefield, Norfolk, Wokingham, Bristol

2 years
Suffolk, Lincolnshire, London Borough of Brent

More than 2 years
West Sussex, Leicestershire, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Top tip! Don’t use this map to address a letter
Realistic evaluation

• Because outcomes are created by how people respond to resources or opportunities provided by an intervention, not the intervention itself

Longitudinal

• Because changes can be observed at individual and group level over time

Multiple types of data

• Because all methods of data collection have their limitations – especially important when looking at complex situations
Data collected at Times 1 & 2

- Interviews and self-profiling data from key informants
- Interviews and focus groups with 185 social workers
- Survey 165 social workers
- Interviews with 270 families (recruited in 2 cohorts)

**Time 1**
- Analysis of 262 case records*

**Time 2**
- Interviews and self-profiling data from key informants
- Time diaries completed by 121 social workers
- Re-interviews with 187 families
- Analysis of 30 performance indicators
- Reanalysis of case records

* Some analysis of case records overlapped with Time 2
Summary

Managers and social workers in the 10 pilots were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of Signs of Safety as a practice framework

Signs of Safety did seem to bring about practice and system change but not so much as to influence overall expenditure patterns

Challenges in establishing the necessary direct contact time with families

Not a ‘magic bullet’ but has the potential to help improve services for children and young people
Today

Link to the full report included at the end of the presentation.

You can also read the appendices here: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/res/knowledge/signsofsafety.aspx#out

Concentrating on some findings that will feed into our table discussions
1. Organisational commitment

Need high levels of organisational commitment in order to achieve whole systems change

► Importance of having individuals with a clear remit for implementing changes and acting as ‘product champions’

► Training is an important means for ensuring the wider adoption of innovations across organisations but this needs to be accompanied by other types of ongoing learning (such as practice networks and team meetings)

► Views of practitioners, managers, parents, and children and young people do not always coincide and systems are needed to ensure that one-sided perspectives on progress do not predominate
2. Leadership and support

Pilots regarded participation in an Innovations Programme Project as overwhelmingly positive

- Each of the three consultants had links with different pilots and provided a fixed amount of advice and support
- Leadership days were held every couple of months or so which gave participants a chance to meet and develop networks
- However, people often had long distances to travel and wanted to feel they got the maximum benefit from a day away from the office
- Appointing an overall project manager might have helped with project planning – some pilots used some of their DfE funding for project management
3. Challenges of the wider context

Pilots experienced different recruitment and retention rates and use of agency staff

- At least 204 of the 270 families had at least one previous referral to children’s services investigated
- Just under two-thirds of families had a change of social worker between their initial contact with children’s services and the Time 1 interview
- By Time 2, over a third of the 165 families who were re-interviewed and who still had a social worker had experienced at least one change of social worker
  - Most understood why this happened but felt that handovers could be improved
4. Importance of shared understanding

Signs of Safety aims to achieve increases in positive relationships between workers and parents and parental engagement and cooperation

- At Time 1, nearly three-quarters of families said they agreed with their social worker about the changes that were needed and that they had discussed these changes with him/her
- Few thought their social worker had negative goals for them but at Time & Time 2 over a quarter said the social worker did not understand what goals were important for them
- Higher proportions of agreement in the most experienced pilot areas
5. Initial child protection conferences

Pilots reported progress in aligning initial child protection conferences with Signs of Safety

► Levels of support for Signs of Safety from those chairing initial child protection conferences grew during the 15 months of the pilot

► Danger statements, mapping and safety plans were used across initial and review child protection conferences
  ◦ But good mapping and planning for an ICPC did not guarantee these would be followed through in reviews and their use was less apparent in review child protection conferences

► Introduction of Family Network Meetings (FNMs) intended to draw family members into decision-making on how to keep children safe and develop plans to do so, were not used in all pilots, although there was progress over time
  ◦ The minority of social workers who used them were positive about them
6. Creating a culture of critical inquiry

Airline model of safety investigation always held up as the gold standard but not always implemented in practice

- Creating a culture of reflective practice – time diaries completed by social workers showed some evidence of increased time in supervision compared with 2009
  - At the same time, pressurised working weeks – multiple codes used for same time period!
- Some thought that in the Signs of Safety training too much time was being spent on mapping and not enough on danger statements and safety planning
- Challenges of ensuring all staff have had 2 or 5 day training – especially where turnover rates were high
7. Progress is never linear

Pressure from government, local councils and regulators to show progress

► In a few pilots with most experience of Signs of Safety practice, changes seemed to have slowed down or even regressed

► Implementing innovations requires change at the practice, organisation and system levels. These changes will proceed at different paces
  ◦ Only a problem if progress gets ‘stuck’

► Need a joined up approach to reorganisation and Signs of Safety

► Who is involved in assessing progress?
  ◦ What should be the systems for consultation – parents, children, practitioners, other organisations and sectors
8. Balance of resources

Resources in Children’s (and Adult Social Care) frontloaded into assessment

- Pilots had a statistically significant lower average rate of assessments per 10,000 children (362) than their Statistical Nearest Neighbours (SNNs) (497) in 2015/16

- Average duration of assessments in 2015/16 was 19 days in pilot sites, which was significantly shorter than in SNNs, where the average duration was 28 days

- Of course pilots had more flexibility over assessments and quicker may not mean better but there is potential to look at this further
9. Quality of assessments

Assessment seen as a key social work task but very little research on what makes a good assessment (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013)

- Where Signs of Safety mapping was done well, it provided the basis for good, evidence-informed assessments and reviews
- However, signs that improvements were required to the quality of assessments
- Why was there a mismatch between the quality of mapping and quality of assessments?
  - Some IT challenges but can’t explain everything
- Beyond the scope of this evaluation but needs investigating
Children’s voices

‘Invisibility’ of children in child protection social work (Ferguson, 2016). Researchers and social workers often in a similar position

- At Time 1, 111 children from 95 families interviewed but we did not interview children under 5
- At Time 2, 61 children from 52 families
- Challenges of timing visits – especially in term time and if more than one child needs to be seen
- Some children did not like social workers seeing them at school
- Social workers had varying views about the usefulness of the Three Houses tool when talking to children aged 14 and over
Quotation from MTM report

‘This project has reaffirmed that transformation of child protection must be grounded in practice: how practitioners actually do the direct work with children and families. The problem with so much past reform work, from national reviews and local strategies, is that they have addressed structures and professional development without addressing the question of how the work actually occurs with families.’
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(MTM report)
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