



The Islington “Doing What Counts /Measuring What Matters” Evaluation Summary

Background

The Islington ‘Doing What Counts (DWC) /Measuring What Matters (MWM)’ project used a new approach to improve social work practice and performance management to achieve positive outcomes for children and families referred for a statutory assessment of ‘need’ (s17 and s47 Children Act 1989). It was intended that more effective practice would reduce the need for extended and/or repeated social work intervention. The local authority worked in collaboration with an embedded research team based at the Tilda Goldberg Centre, University of Bedfordshire.

Aims and Objectives

To design and implement a bespoke ‘Motivational Social Work’ (MSW) practice methodology in the CIN service during the first year of the project (to March 2016). MSW integrated Motivational Interviewing (MI) skills with task-centred casework principles and goal focused risk assessment. Reduced caseloads and additional business support were intended to create more social work time with support for complex cases by an in-house multi-professional team; to evaluate MSW via an embedded research team who would inform practice improvement through regular reports on practice quality and impact and the coaching of staff.

Evaluation

The role of the independent external evaluation team was to validate and enhance internal evidence of project progress in the first 15 months to July 2016. The evaluation sought to confirm that:

- MSW could be an effective method of achieving child outcomes (DWC);
- Embedded researchers could help a local authority develop and mainstream methods of practice measurement and improvement (MWM).

Findings

There are three main findings:

- Child outcomes: Key indicators of child impact following MSW had yet to be shown directly by the end of the initial project period to July 2016, partly due to limited findings from the embedded researcher. Nonetheless, demonstrable improvements in MSW practice skill and parent engagement were reported, suggesting that MSW might be an effective approach to enhancing practice impact for children in their family and wider social lives. Project design and implementation did not enable that impact to be tracked effectively, nor demonstrate any association with enhanced skill.

- Child service status: Numbers of children ‘looked after’ reduced one year after project inception. Standard performance indicators suggested safeguarding might have become more focused, permanence planning perhaps less so;
- Improved service capacity: Combined evaluation results from internal and external research teams provide a qualified endorsement of DWC: MWM project theory and methods. First, practitioner trust in the efficacy of MSW principles, theory of change and practice methodology (DWC) and self-confidence in working in the new way developed significantly but unevenly across the CIN service in the transition stage to full model implementation. Established agency culture and climate was facilitating as well as inhibiting active engagement by practitioners and supervisors on the ground. Second, testing the efficacy of the MWM model took longer than anticipated but this enabled plans to be refined, new evaluation questions to be identified and LPIR methods reviewed.

Cost Benefits

Cashable cost savings associated with project impact to date had yet to be realised. The number of children ‘looked after’ by the local authority remained the same at the end of the initial project year to March 2016. Early indications were that although numbers began to fall thereafter this was not likely to be the result of project impact. Meanwhile, demand for the CIN service remained very high and were changing in their nature as peer on peer violence escalated. A funding gap developed due to the need for the TGC embedded research and local authority project teams to be retained longer than anticipated to complete implementation.

Key Recommendations

Careful attention to the detail of change management is required to enable practitioner trust in the legitimacy and effectiveness of their direct practice to be secured in the face of anxiety about safeguarding children effectively.

- The DWC/MWM practice model should be given a further period of time (at least one year) to be tested fully for its efficacy. Meanwhile, it should not be introduced in other local authorities until the findings of the extended internal evaluation are published. This is consistent with the original intention of project leads;
- All future practice system innovations should include a specification of how practitioner (and child and parent) involvement in service re-design, implementation and review is to be secured from the outset and sustained;
- Current policy and practice focus on intra-familial risk should be revised, to include consideration of extra-familial dynamics of exclusion and exploitation experienced by children and parents

The study was carried out between July 2015 and September 2016 by the Centre for Social Work Innovation and Research and Centre for Innovation and Childhood and Youth, University of Sussex, Brighton, England.

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