LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

Doing What Counts and Measuring What Matters
A new purpose for social work that empowers professionals, children and families

Challenge
Young people and social workers in Islington tell us that they want more time and support to build consistent and strong relationships with one another. We want to work more intensively, more skilfully and more effectively with the families who need our services. Our challenge is to transform the way we work so that every part of it - from training and supervision to culture and vision - supports workers to spend more time with families and young people.

Innovation
Islington Council is undertaking whole service transformation designed to make social work practice more skilled, purposeful and collaborative. The project has two strands to realise this vision: Doing What Counts by embedding Motivational Social Work and values-based tools to make sure we are Measuring What Matters to children and families.

Partners Involved
Doing What Counts and Measuring What Matters is a cross-agency partnership led by the London Borough of Islington and the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire. The programme board includes:
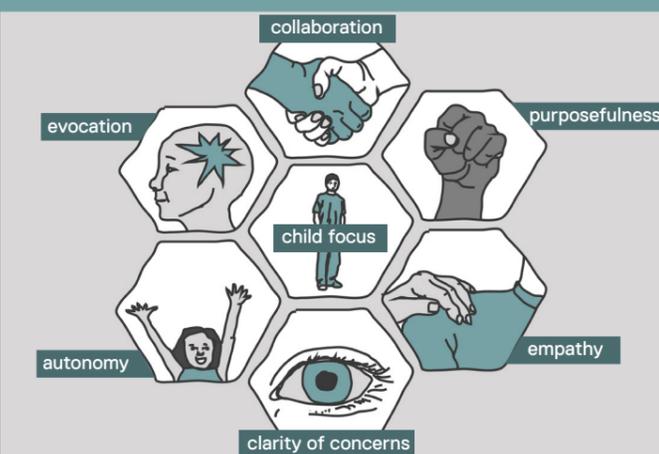
- Whittington Health CAMHS
- The Anna Freud Centre
- Islington Clinical Commissioning Group

Our Innovation   May 2016

A clear purpose: the success and wellbeing of every child and family

What we're doing

At the heart of the new practice model is setting a clear purpose for work with families and young people. This includes shared, co-created goals for each family.

What's changed

Doing What Counts
Doing What Counts is embedding Motivational Interviewing (MI), a form of counselling initially developed in relation to alcohol problems that looks at reducing people's resistance to accepting help.

MI is grounded in a combination of motivational interviewing, task-centred social work and motivational risk assessment and management. It aims to strike the right balance between risk, strengths and solutions, focusing on helping the client find their own motivation for change.

Measuring What Matters
We are focusing on performance managing the right things and asking the right questions. To what extent is a social worker able to help the family identify its own strengths and gaps? Is there evidence of collaborative problem solving?

This includes new ways of generating data and evidence. Practice evaluators are embedded in social work teams to observe social workers with families to understand the helpfulness of the involvement and whether the family achieved the desired goal.

Creating the conditions for new practice by giving social workers the ability to make change happen

Spreading innovation requires the right conditions for practice. For Islington, this has meant adopting a new philosophy; lowering caseloads; establishing access to a multidisciplinary team; improving admin support; and simplifying the case recording system.

Action-focused learning
Motivational Interviewing is now part of the core training for social workers. It moves away from theoretical training to action-focused learning: what does this look like in different contexts? Following initial intensive training, social workers spend a day a month on learning. A new 'line supervision' approach is focused on an open culture of sharing best practice and seeking feedback.

Reducing dependency on external agencies
Motivational Social Work positions social workers as the key agents of change within their professional network, with the aim of releasing pressure on social workers and reducing their dependency on external agencies and experts. The social worker role is supported through reflective group supervision and access to in-house multi-disciplinary input.

Values-based recruitment
We are using the MSW framework in recruitment, which has been critical to finding the right people who can intellectually and emotionally engage with the new approach. Recruitment processes focus on self-awareness, understanding each client's perception and using skills that enhance relationship building.

Encouraging staff to do the right things rather than do things right

The ways in which Islington previously measured practice told us how quickly we were responding to families but nothing about the quality of that support. We now measure the skills we have used in supporting families and whether families think we have made a difference.

Creating effective data learning tools
Data and monitoring have also been given a clear purpose of supporting reflective practice: to provide prompts for questions and discussion, rather than performance assessment. Accountability is focused on effective goal delivery and outcomes. Social workers are audio taped five to six times during the year to evaluate the extent to which they demonstrate the seven key principles of motivational social work: evocation, empathy, purposefulness, autonomy, collaboration, child focus and clarity of concern. Embedded evaluators use a coding tool to evaluate social workers' practice, which forms the basis of discussions between social workers and practice coaches around areas of good practice and support needs. The data is amalgamated to give a picture of service delivery overall, which helps each team reflect on what's going well and what could be improved.

Learning on behalf of the sector
We are developing a new tool to assess supervision and build understanding of what makes for effective supervision. This will look at how to baseline the quality of supervision and track improvement at an individual social worker level. The team will share the learning generated throughout the project with the wider sector, and discuss its potential use for Ofsted inspections.

Emotionally intelligent leadership, governance and supervision

An emotionally intelligent style of social work requires an emotionally intelligent style of leadership, governance and supervision. Leaders are creating the conditions for change by modelling a shared purpose, vision and values and engaging others to act.

Aligning values and principles across the organisation
Growing this work has meant systematic spreading of MSW principles in everything we do from working with families, to supervision and meetings. This incorporates a new model of supervision, which is stimulating broader conversations around what other internal interactions look like in an MSW culture. Aligning workforce culture takes time, and the project team has been paying close attention to the anxieties of non-social work professionals in how changes will affect them. It has been vital to acknowledge the importance of such fears and facilitate open conversations between all parts of the organisation – even those who are not directly involved in the new model.

Aligning management and systems with the vision
Taking on board lessons from earlier testing of MSW techniques, we are changing approaches to management, recruitment and supervision. In particular, this requires a supervision style that steers away from directive, accountability focused supervision to provide a more reflective space to support practice and develop robust interventions. In addition, we are changing the way in which we conduct meetings and reviews, as well as re-assessing quality frameworks and risk assessment.

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"Doing the work that counts with families to achieve meaningful and sustainable change. Evaluating our success by the outcomes we achieve with families, rather than what is easy to count."

Challenging assumptions about social work

Focusing on purpose has meant challenging assumptions about the role of social work. This has shifted from one of co-ordinating help to doing direct work with families to help them make sense of their situation and achieve their goals.

All social work should helpfully contribute to the safety of the child and achievement of the family's goals. Social workers ask themselves three questions on a daily basis to evaluate whether their work is helpfully contributing to achieving the overall goals for change, which also provide a framework for group supervision and reflection:

- Am I clear on the purpose of what I'm doing?
- Is the family clear?
- Is my manager clear?

Smaller caseloads are a key enabler

Smaller caseloads means each family can be seen more frequently for longer. Reflective practice requires time for reflection and preparation. Combined with fast access to clinical expertise when cases are complex, this results in improved engagement with families, improved quality of assessments and plans, timely and purposeful interventions and improved decision-making.

Learning from past innovation and early implementation

Our project has been informed by previous work to trial Motivational Interviewing and the early implementation phase of MSW. Despite the positive reception to MI training by staff and improved engagement with families, a randomised control trial did not show significant change in outcomes for children and young people. However, Islington generated three important lessons from this work:

1) MI alone is not enough and other theoretical principles must be embedded to impact on outcomes;
2) the value of action research as a learning tool to improve social work practice on an on-going basis; and
3) the early implementation stage has shown that a focus on practice is not enough, a more emotionally intelligent style of practice requires a different style of supervision and leadership.

Admin and IT matter too

It's crucial to create the right conditions for the practice when asking people to do things differently. In addition to training and practice development, social workers have been supported by increased admin support and replacing IT systems to reduce seven forms down to one assessment. These changes have enabled social workers to focus on doing the work that counts.

Building relationships

Anecdotal evidence from social workers reflects that they are building relationships and learning more from families, which informs their risk assessments and enables faster decisions. As staff have come into post the intensity of the interventions has increased, especially for new cases.

Findings from the University of Bedfordshire show that 79% of the Islington families who were interviewed reported being pleased with the help they have received from social services.

Co-producing practice with families

MSW is grounded in principles of self-determination, which promotes the belief that service users are the experts in their own lives, and that only they can make change and take the decisions about how the kinds of support they need.

The team has sought to engage families in every step of the planning and delivery model for new practices and approaches. This includes interviews with every parent or family about their experiences of interactions with practitioners, as a way to gather large-scale data around priority practice areas.

Commitment, not compliance

Embedding this new culture encourages and requires commitment, not compliance. A move towards commitment involves striving to achieve a shared vision for social work that demonstrates our values in practice through purposeful work with families and measures success by the outcomes of families.

This represents an investment in *why* and *how* we achieve good practice, and a move away from the *what* and *when* of a compliance culture mentality. This ambition requires a move away from a culture that measures success through metrics that tell us nothing about the quality of practice or safety and well being of the child.

However, letting go of compliance is hard. There is an illusion in social work that bureaucracy creates safety. We're making sure that monitoring in Islington scrutinises the right things and relies on feedback to help workforce to develop, adapt and learn. One of the benefits of this approach has been a shift from the programme team driving development of the innovation, to the service being able to take ownership of its implementation.

Personal stories

Laura and Amy

Laura and her daughter Amy became involved with social services when Amy, aged 12, was showing signs of an anxiety disorder that was having a major impact on her quality of life. Laura had difficulty managing this and for a period of time Amy went into foster care and then to a specialist mental health placement. When she returned home the family worked with Islington's multi-disciplinary team for about six months. They did a lot of direct work with both Laura and Amy, which helped them identify what they wanted to change.

Laura gained strategies in managing the situation and the positive results she started to see boosted her confidence in her parenting. Amy learned how to understand her emotions and express them in healthier ways. She feels more supported by her mum now when she becomes anxious and her mum is able to keep calm and help her utilise the strategies she's learned.

For the social worker, the intensity of twice weekly visits was crucial in helping them get back on track as it gave Laura the opportunity to talk about how things were going and work through the difficulties. She felt listened to and having a support network around them felt like she did not have to face this on her own. Amy still battles with her illness but the impact on her quality of life is now minimal and her relationship with Laura is better. They are now able to manage without specialist support.

Melanie, social worker

Social worker Melanie used Motivational Social Work techniques and some direct work tools to support Linda and Mike to think about how they can manage conflict in their relationship and how conflict may impact on their children's emotional and behavioural development. By creating an environment where they could explore the difficulties in their relationship, Linda and Mike were able to identify triggers for conflict.

Using evocation skills Melanie helped them to tap into their intrinsic motivation for change – that the children had begun to mimic their behaviours and that this upset them. From this conversation they were able to visualise what life would look like if things got better or worse and set goals for change.

Through this purposeful conversation Linda and Mike were able to develop a better understanding of how their relationship impacted on their children and identify what they wanted to change about their life. Melanie learned that Linda and Mike have the capacity to change and identified a goal to support them to achieve.

All names have been changed to protect identities.