

## Signs of Safety in 10 pilots - Evaluation Summary

### Background

Signs of Safety (SoS) is a strengths-based, safety-organised approach to child protection work that was developed in Western Australia. It was implemented in 10 English local authority pilot areas as part of the Munro, Turnell and Murphy Child Protection Consulting (MTM) team 'Transforming children's services with Signs of Safety at the centre' project. The 10 areas included beginners with either no or less than a year's previous experience of Signs of Safety, those with up to 2 years' experience, and those with more than 2 years' experience.

### Aims and objectives

The project aimed to achieve whole-system change in the local authorities by establishing supportive organisational cultures and a commitment at all levels to the SoS practice framework. MTM's transformational framework covered structural arrangements, learning strategies, leadership requirements and sustainability. Their input covered training for social workers and other professionals; bi-monthly events for key staff in the pilots, for them to network and learn from each other; establishment of subgroups to explore SoS in relation to key elements of child protection practice, and the provision of strategic support to the pilots.

### Evaluation

The evaluation was designed to examine the implementation of SoS and its costs, as well as outcomes for children and young people. The mixed methods approach included site visits and interviews with approximately 50 strategic leaders and those with responsibility for implementing SoS, at the start of the project and repeated between 15 and 18 months later; interviews and focus groups, surveys and time diaries, involving a total of 471 social workers; a self-profiling instrument developed with the 10 pilots; interviews with 270 families in the 10 pilot areas, including the use of standardised measures, and scrutiny of case records at two points in time; an examination of 24 key performance indicators for pilots and their statistical nearest neighbours (SNNs), as well as expenditure ratios derived from Section 251 (S251)<sup>1</sup> data over a 4-year period (2012/13–2015/16) and a cost study examining resources, outputs and expenditure across the pilots.

### Findings

**For families** there were indications that SoS had helped social workers involve families more by supporting better understanding between them and a more focused approach to goals. Where families said they had been involved in goal planning, they were more likely to report that their goals had been achieved, but the numbers are too small to draw firm conclusions. However, some areas of practice need improvement. Just over half of the families said they had not been given information about the criteria by which their progress

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<sup>1</sup> Section 251 is part of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 that requires local authorities (LAs) to submit statements about their planned and actual expenditure on education and children's social care.

would be assessed. Parents were also more likely to say that social workers worked with their strengths when they were first interviewed, which may indicate that early planning was not being used effectively as the case proceeded. An analysis of the standardized measures used with children found limited evidence on outcomes for children as a result of SoS but this may be because it was too soon to achieve changes.

**An examination of family case records** indicated that SoS tools were being widely used and 60% of the recordings of SoS practice were graded as 'reasonable' or 'good' by the research team with an increase in the proportions graded as such for those recruited later to the study, indicating improvement as time went on. There were indications, however, that too many assessments were not of a sufficiently high quality and where supporting tools, approaches and additional training may have helped.

**An analysis of key performance indicators**, including comparison with statistical nearest neighbours (comparable local authorities) found some statistically significant differences including lower average rate of assessments per 10,000 children, shorter timescales for conducting assessments, lower average rate of Initial Child Protection Plans (ICPCs) per 10,000 children and lower average rate of children becoming the subject of a child protection plan per 10,000 children.

**The greatest progress** was reported in relation to embedding an organisational commitment to SoS; using plain language that could be understood by families; using tools to engage children and young people; mapping cases; using safety plans across initial and review child protection conferences; providing advanced 5-day training for all managers; embedding SoS approaches across all training for those in children's social care; aligning initial child protection conferences with SoS and establishing practice leadership and supervision processes to support SoS.

**The weakest areas of reported change** were in relation to improvement in constructive working relationships between professionals and families; spending the necessary direct contact time with adults in families; confidence that the service was intervening at the right time; creating a culture where it is permissible to admit mistakes; supporting social workers with administrative tasks and recruiting high-quality staff.

**Social workers reported** a reasonably high level of confidence in using SoS as a framework and its associated tools; increased use of safety planning and mapping over the course of the evaluation; a belief that the quality of their assessments had improved since the adoption of the SoS framework; that safety planning helped to identify and manage risk and that SoS helped to achieve better communication with families, including greater inclusion of children and young people. But there were also comments from social workers that they did not have the time to apply the approach as thoroughly as they would wish.

**The costs study** examined resources, outputs and expenditure and produced strong indications that suggest the SoS initiative is becoming embedded in pilots. It was estimated implementing SoS amounted to a full-time commitment of one person in each pilot. An analysis of expenditure ratios provided no evidence that SoS had brought about sufficient practice and system change to influence expenditure patterns.

## Recommendations

The evidence shows that the SoS framework is workable where authorities make the necessary commitment of trust in their staff at all levels, backed up by resources and time. However, there may be scope for other tools to be incorporated to support practice, particularly in relation to assessments.

This evaluation study was carried out between January 2015 and March 2016 by the Social Care Workforce Research Unit, The Policy Institute, King's College London.

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