



Focus on Practice Evaluation Summary

Background

'Focus on Practice' introduced systemic practice, an evidence based therapeutic approach based on systemic concepts and theory training, and systems level changes, to family social work in three London Boroughs - London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF), Westminster City Council (WCC) and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). The boroughs employed clinicians (family therapists and clinical psychologists), embarked on a programme of training for over 500 social workers, over 160 supervising practitioners and senior managers and made changes to recording. They invested in a coaching and observation programme, parenting programmes and Signs of Safety.

Aims and objectives

The project was designed to bring greater coherence and confidence to social work practice, embed a new culture based on systems thinking and reduce the number of re-referrals of family cases and number of children in care. The main idea is that social work should be encouraging families to seek solutions for themselves, through the support of practitioners.

Evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to assess whether the intended outcomes of the change programme were achieved in the short term (up to March 2016), with provision for medium term outcomes to be assessed in early 2017. This mixed method evaluation included practice scenarios to ascertain the extent to which respondents aligned their work with the intended learning outcomes of the training, alongside interviews designed to elicit perspectives and experiences. Families' views were also investigated through interviews, network maps and a family functioning tool called SCORE-15. Administrative data was used to assess child and cost outcomes and changes in how time was spent were assessed using a survey.

Findings

The Ofsted inspection of January 2016 found that Focus on Practice was making an effective contribution to practice. By March 2016, 276 staff and 90 supervisors had completed training with a further 203 staff and 65 supervisors set to finish by the end of 2016.

- Targets on the numbers of families engaged in services and the numbers of children in care are not expected to be met until 2017-18 but reductions have occurred.
- Decreasing use of agency staff in LBHF (29 to 18 FTE) and WCC (16 to 0 FTE) (Local Authority Children's Social Work Workforce Data) one year into the project.
- Social worker turnover rate varied across the boroughs - the evaluation suggests reasons for this.
- 18 out of 25 family social workers thought that the children who were in the study were safer since Focus on Practice started.
- Staff absence due to sickness (as an indicator of lack of wellbeing) show that social worker days of absence for sickness in both LBHF and RBKC halved and there was a 25% drop in WCC.

- 22 out of 25 family social workers referred to planning prior to visits, 17 mentioned engaging children and/or parents and using a range of techniques to do so and 11 referred to review and reflection. Some didn't know what to do with their reflective logs.
- The clinician posts appeared to be making a difference to social work practice. They were seen as authentic experts, an extra resource to help resolve 'stuck' cases. They were embedded in teams and provided SWs with systemic ways of addressing problems.
- Only 10 out of 24 assessment social workers reported change in practice towards systemic supervision, the remaining 14 thought there had been no change, or very little.
- Social Workers did not think less time was spent on recording. Some were double recording: writing both summaries and descriptive records due to perceptions of requirements for court practices and responsibility for risks.
- Some families complained about poor and patronizing communication and wanted direct involvement, for example, in discussions about what resources were available and how they could be used.

Two types of social work assessment delivery were compared:

- In two boroughs, the assessment teams constituted a 'front door' for accessing social work services. Cases were transferred from this team to locality teams, staffed by different social workers and others.
- In the third borough, social work services were integrated, with social workers located in neighbourhood teams, taking turns to do 'duty', and keeping cases for as long as they remained open.
- The integrated model was more effective and better aligned with the Focus on Practice ethos. In the transferral model there was a tendency to defer application of the new techniques and ways of thinking until after the assessment phase.

Cost benefits

- Placement costs reduced over two years since baseline, but staff salary costs increased.
- Reduced use of agency staff and reduced rate of staff sickness indicating better value for money.

Recommendations

- Continue to employ clinicians embedded in teams so they are flexibly available to social workers.
- Rethink structure of service to an integrated model to reduce changes of practitioners and maximize opportunities to build relationships with families.
- Invest in supporting changes to recording to maximize time saved and aid analytic thinking.
- Consolidate changes in practice and refocus on specific types of case where the systems approach might help reduce re-referral rate.

Changes made in services in response to evaluation findings

- The boroughs are undertaking further work on the data relating to domestic violence and responses to it to inform their guidelines on working with domestic violence from a Focus on Practice perspective.
- Changes in use of recording methods were addressed earlier in newsletters and consultations.

This evaluation study was carried out between May 2015 and March 2016 by Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. Some follow up findings will be available in April 2017.

The DFE's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme funded this project and its independent evaluation. Co-ordination of the evaluation was undertaken by the Rees Centre from the University of Oxford (www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk.) A full copy of this report can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications