

Transition Support Pilot Evaluation

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| Delivery Organisations | Hartlepool Borough Council |
| Evaluator | NatCen Social Research |
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| Type of Study | Pilot, mixed-methods |
| Age or Status of Participants | Year 6-Year 7 pupils (aged 10 to 12 years), and all staff in participating schools |
| Number of Participating Schools | 8 primary schools and 2 secondary schools |
| Number of Participating Local Authorities | 1 LA |
| Number of Children and Families | ~100 children (tbc) |
| Contextual Factors | COVID-19, school closures and disruption |
| Protocol Date | 19 February 2021 |
| Version | 1 |

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Summary

The *Transition Support Pilot*, developed by Hartlepool Borough Council, will provide support to children with a social worker during their transition from primary to secondary school. The pilot will run from spring/summer 2021 (when participating children are at the end of Year 6) to autumn 2021 (when children have started Year 7).

This pilot evaluation aims to evaluate the early implementation of the new *Transition Support* programme, to:

- Understand how it is implemented in practice
- Measure progress towards the stated outcomes
- Consider whether refinements are required to the programme, ahead of programme scale-up and a larger trial to assess its impact.

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the pilot evaluation will involve observations of training sessions and person centred planning meetings; interviews with teachers, social workers and child; a pupil survey and analysis of administrative data (Transition Planning Profile Tool data). The pilot programme will run from January to December 2021 and the pilot evaluation will run from December 2020 and conclude in March 2022.

This protocol outlines the background to the *Transition Support Pilot*, key information about the intervention including its theory of change, and detailed information about the evaluation (including research questions, methods, ethics, data protection, the study team and timelines).

Project background

This programme focuses on all children, however this NatCen-led pilot evaluation focuses on those who are supported by local authority children's social care and have a social worker. These children have additional safeguarding and welfare needs, including:

- children on Child in Need (CiN) plans
- children on Child Protection (CP) plans

This pilot evaluation will not specifically focus on children looked after (CLA) or disabled children who have a social worker. The Transition Support pilot also is being evaluated, for all children, through Opportunity North East.

Transition from primary to secondary school is a period of considerable change for all children. Primary schools are typically smaller and offer predictability, with one teacher and one classroom for most children throughout the year. Secondary schools are larger, with classes delivered by subject teachers and often requiring a new, longer commute to school. A difficult transition can have a negative impact on children's wellbeing and academic achievement (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2020). While there is currently a lack of evidence on the specific experiences of school transition among children with a social worker, transition may lead to difficulties for children with additional vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities may include special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health difficulties including anxiety, behavioural challenges, and limited parental support (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2020).

The *Transition Support* pilot programme has been developed by Hartlepool Borough Council. The pilot aims to develop a borough-wide approach to better support children with a social worker moving from primary to secondary school. The programme involves a combination of

whole-school training in primary and secondary schools¹, targeted teacher training and multi-agency working with social care teams. Through these activities, the programme seeks to enable schools to identify children's needs and plan personalised support accordingly to mitigate the risks of a difficult school transition and secondary school engagement. By facilitating improved secondary school transition, the programme also aims to improve the academic progress of children with a social worker, in the longer-term.

Why: theory/rationale

Challenges faced by children with a social worker during school transition

As noted above, transition from primary to secondary school is a period of considerable change for children, and a difficult transition can have a negative impact on children's wellbeing and academic achievement (Rice et al., 2015). Transitions for children with a social worker can be additionally difficult, due to their wider experiences of trauma or adversity. Children in Need are more likely to live in chaotic circumstances, experience (or be at risk of) abuse, neglect and exploitation, and lack support outside of school (DfE, 2018a). The long-term impact of trauma or adversity Children in Need have experienced is compounded by the frequency of transitions these children commonly experience, for example between homes, caregivers and social workers (DfE, 2018a).

These factors may be barriers to attendance, learning, good behaviour and wellbeing at school, that can also lead to poorer educational outcomes. On average, children with a social worker have lower educational attainment compared to their peers: in 2019, only half (48%) of Children in Need achieved the expected standard in mathematics at Key Stage 2, compared with 79% of their peers without a social worker (DfE, 2020). Additionally, educational interventions do not always have the same impact for children in these groups. A re-analysis of randomised controlled trials funded by the Education Endowment Foundation found the average effect sizes of school-based interventions were smaller for children with a social worker (Sanders et al., 2020).

A recent Department for Education (DfE) review (2018a) on Children in Need explored the reasons behind differing educational outcomes between Children in Need and their peers. The review concluded:

"[There is] no single reason for their poorer educational outcomes, [but] children who need help and protection from children's social care are likely to have, or have had, complex family circumstances that will result in them experiencing trauma or adversity, contributing to why they struggle to achieve good educational outcomes".

(DfE 2018a)

School support for children with a social worker during school transition

The strategies and responses of schools are important factors which shape Children in Need's educational attainment (Berridge et al., 2020). Nuffield Foundation (Berridge et al., 2020) highlighted the need for schools to have a flexible and understanding approach to the challenges Children in Need face with behaviours, learning, attendance and wellbeing. There are important differences between primary and secondary schools in their responses to Children in Need, which can exacerbate challenges during transition. Primary schools are usually smaller and can offer more flexible and inclusive pastoral approaches, and as a

¹ Delivery of whole-school training will depend on schools' capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic.

result better able to respond to the needs of Children in Need. Whereas secondary schools are usually larger and can have a greater focus on academic excellence and disciplinary codes, and variation in how teachers sympathise and respond to challenges that pupils face. This evidence suggests secondary schools may benefit from support to meet the needs of children with a social worker, in particular during the transition to Year 7.

There is evidence to suggest greater education and training for teachers is needed to ensure Children in Need are appropriately supported at school. One recent study highlighted that schools and teachers are not always aware of the Children in Need among their pupil population and are therefore not always able to respond to these children's needs (Berridge et al., , 2020). The Children in Need Review (2018) also recommended improving teachers' skills and understanding of children's behaviour. While there is a lack of evidence on the experiences of transition among children with a social worker, wider studies have shown that teachers' attitudes towards the child is an important factor which affects transition (Scot. Gov., 2019). One intervention sought to promote attachment awareness in relation to children's behaviour and learning. The evaluation found that the intervention made the school environment more nurturing and improved the school staff's attitudes and behaviours (Sebba et al., 2018).

Guidance from the DfE (2018b), while not specific to supporting Children in Need during transition, highlights school staff's crucial role in providing individualised support for Children in Need:

"It is key school staff are aware of how these children's experiences, and their high prevalence of special educational needs and mental health needs, can impact on their behaviour and education. They should be able to reflect this in the design and application of behaviour policies, including through individualised graduated responses, balanced with the needs of the whole school community and its physical and mental health".

(DfE, 2018b)

The DfE guidance also notes the importance of a child 's allocated social worker as a source of 'appropriately shared information about wider developmental needs, child protection concerns and parental, familial and contextual circumstances' (2018b). Their recommendation is therefore to support 'effective multi-agency working between schools and social care' to allow schools to assess children's educational and mental health needs (DfE, 2018b). This evidence suggests that identifying and responding to children's individual needs is a crucial factor to support a positive transition from primary to secondary school.

Transition Support pilot programme

The *Transition Support* pilot programme aims to address the issues and concerns identified in the above evidence, by providing schools with whole-school training, targeted staff training and resources to improve their ability to support children with a social worker during their transition to secondary school. The Transition Planning Profile Tool aims to help schools better understand Children in Need's vulnerabilities and needs, while the person-centred approach to meetings aims to facilitate individualised plans and responses based on these needs. The Transition Support pilot programme team will work alongside schools, children, parents/carers and social workers to ensure an effective multi-agency approach to support children with a social worker, and ensure best practice is carried out and shared across schools in Hartlepool.

What: procedures

Transition Support builds on a new Local Authority-wide approach to transition, and aims to provide additional resource and learning about supporting vulnerable children with increased risk of a difficult secondary transition. The programme has different levels of intervention to improve the universal school offer for transition, through building knowledge, awareness and skills of school staff (and social care teams), while also ensuring individualised support for the target group of children. This approach aims to create a sustainable offer and ways of working after the lifetime of the pilot programme funding.

Transition Leads

A Transition Lead will be identified at each school, in discussion between the programme pilot team and the school's senior leadership team. The Transition Lead will typically be a Year 6 school teacher in primary schools or a Head of Year 7 in secondary schools. The Transition Lead is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the programme in the school, cascading training information to all school staff, and overseeing that children's needs are being met to support transition. A network of Transition Leads across schools will attend virtual meetings to share best practice and share learning with each other, and to ensure a consistent approach across the borough. They will work closely with the pilot programme team (e.g. Educational Psychologist and Virtual School Head) throughout the pilot for support and guidance.

Teacher and social worker information and training

Whole-school training and targeted training for key staff will be delivered by the pilot programme team by the specialist teacher within the Virtual School and/or the Educational Psychologist.

Whole-school training will focus on the principles of 'Attachment Aware Schools', 'Trauma Informed Schools', 'Resilience & Wellbeing' and 'Social & Emotional Competencies'. There will be a blended learning approach with a mix of face to face and online learning and opportunities for staff to join networks to share best practice and problem solve with colleagues. Delivery of face-to-face training and to the whole school may not be possible due to COVID-19 restrictions and associated pressures on schools.

Targeted training for key staff will focus on 'Trusted Adult' principles, 'Emotion Coaching' and 'Person-centred Planning'.

Social workers will receive information and training about the Transition Support pilot programme, and the evidence about the factors that contribute to a positive school transition.

Planning personalised transition support

The individual needs of the children in the cohort will be identified through:

- A new Transition Planning Profile Tool
- Multi-agency core group meetings using person-centred planning techniques.

Transition Planning Profile Tool seeks to help schools to identify and prioritise vulnerable children as they transition from primary to secondary school. It draws on the Pyramid of

Need developed as part of the Academic Resilience Approach² (BoingBoing, 2017). The tool should be completed by a small group of staff who know the children well. This may include present and former class teachers, support staff, senior leaders, the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead, SENDCo and Parental Support Adviser. The tool is completed for each Year 5 and Year 6 children in the school, and is divided into demographic information, school and individual indicators of need (e.g. school attendance, social and emotional needs) and for each indicator a set of descriptors (possible answers) are pre-identified. Using the professional judgement of the group, the primary school should select the correct descriptor for each pupil, using the 'best fit approach'. The tool has an in-built colour coding system, automatically highlighting indicators of strengths and vulnerabilities for each child. Any score of three in any indicator is a 'red flag' that warrants a conversation between schools to enable planning. The tool will identify the level of need, and will inform conversations. Completing the tool is the beginning of a professional dialogue to aid the transition of each individual child.

Person-centred meetings will focus on a child's educational needs and social and emotional development. Separate meetings are held to discuss individual children. These meetings will also follow a 'see one, do one, teach one' model (Miller, 1990). After Transition Leads have been trained, this involves:

- A specialist teacher from the Virtual School or the Educational Psychologist modelling the person-centred approach at the first meeting ('see one')
- The Transition Lead leading a meeting of their own, with a specialist teacher from the Virtual School or the Educational Psychologist present to provide support if needed ('do one')
- The Transition Lead cascading the training to other relevant members of school staff, once the Lead has reached a sufficient level of competence and confidence ('teach one'), as assessed by the Educational Psychologist and Virtual School Lead.

The specialist teacher within the Virtual School and/or Educational Psychologist will then support class teachers with the planning and implementation of appropriate **evidence-based interventions for children, before and during transition**. A range of interventions will be offered, including targeted group resilience building interventions delivered by the school (or their approved providers) or one-to-one therapeutic work delivered by the Educational psychologist or Virtual school team. Additionally, a one-page person profile will be created that highlights the key things to know about the child and how secondary school can best support them. Each child will also have a Transition Passport, which will be developed in collaboration with primary and secondary schools. The pilot team will then offer support to secondary schools about how they can best develop a whole-school approach to using information within Transition Passports to support pupils. Again, the range of activities will involve modelling the approach, building confidence and competence to ensure the school can implement appropriate support for future cohorts. Such support will ensure the programme theory is translated into everyday school practice, so children experience trusted

² Academic Resilience is an approach for schools devised by Professor Angie Hart and Lisa Williams, and adopted by YoungMinds. It is based on Professor Hart's collaborative resilience work at the University of Brighton.

adult relationships in a culture and environment that is calm, predictable and responsive to need.

The identification of individual needs for each child in the cohort, including through a personal education plan, will ensure better use of existing resources such as Pupil Premium and Mental Health Support Teams in schools.

What: materials

Key materials necessary for delivering the intervention include:

- Training materials for schools/teachers
- Transition Planning Profile Toolkit, manual and tool (Excel document), per school
- A room or appropriate technology (if held virtually) for Transition Lead network meeting and multi-agency person-centred meetings
- Transition Passport with the personal education plan (a paper document) per child

Who: recipients

The target group for this programme will consist of children with a social worker. This pilot will include children with Child in Need plans, or Child Protection Plans. Children in the study cohort will be aged 9 – 13 years (Year 5/6 – Year 6/7), before and during their transition to secondary school. The children will be from 2 school clusters (2 secondary schools and 8 partner primary schools, 10 schools in total).

Who: provider

The Transition Support pilot programme (or provider) team is led by a Principal Educational Psychologist and the Virtual Headteacher at Hartlepool Borough Council, with support from a Specialist Teacher with the Virtual School and the Social Care Team Manager.

Where: location

The pilot will take place in Hartlepool Borough Council across all schools, but the pilot evaluation will focus on 10 schools, 2 secondary and 8 primary schools who agree to participate in the study.

Hartlepool is a town of ~94,000 people in the coastal North East of England. In March 2019, there were ~1,400 Children in Need in Hartlepool, which is a rate of 698 per 10,000 children. This is higher than the rate nationally (334) and in the North East (445). There were also 129 children subject to a Child Protection Plan; a rate of 65 per 10,000 children – higher than the national average (44) but similar to the North East (63) (DfE, 2019).

When and how much: dosage

The pilot has been developed by Hartlepool Borough Council and is being introduced for the first time. The Transition Support pilot was due to start in January 2021. However, due to COVID-19 related school closures, the programme is currently scheduled to start on 22 February 2021. This start date may change if school closures are extended beyond this date.

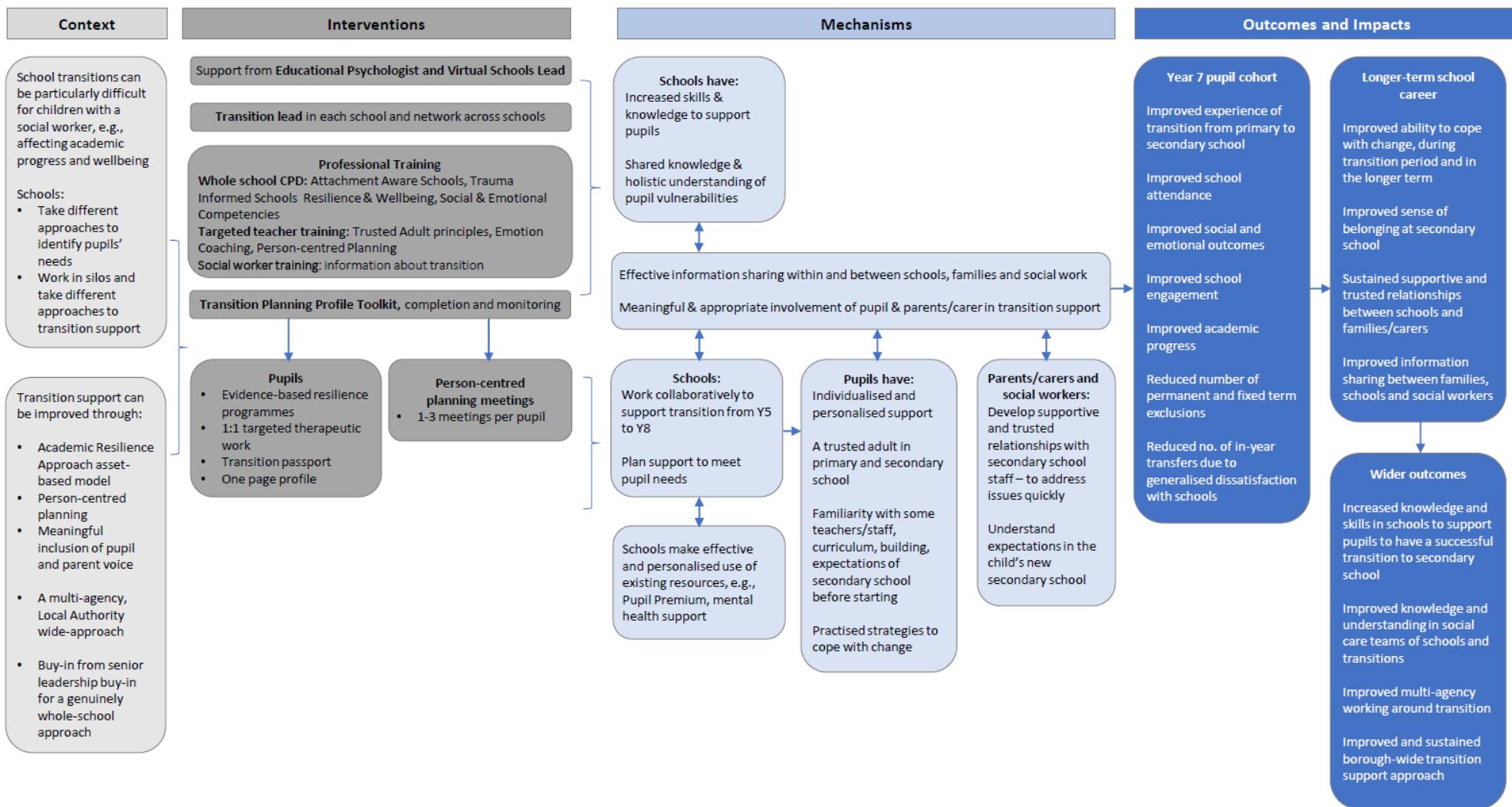
Whole-school and targeted teacher training are one-off sessions and vary in length.

The Transition Planning Profile Tool should be completed by the school at two time points: at the start of the programme, and once secondary school allocations have been made (usually March).

Each child should have between one to three person-centred planning meetings, depending on their needs. The first and second meetings take place in primary school and a final meeting may take place once transition has happened. The meetings last approximately 60-90 minutes depending on school capacity and level of need.

As the support provided is bespoke and tailored to each child's needs, the duration and frequency of interventions for children will therefore vary.

Figure 1: Transition Support logic model



Pilot evaluation aims

The purpose of the pilot evaluation (taking an implementation and process evaluation (IPE) methods approach) is to explore delivery of the *Transition Support* pilot programme. The IPE activities will provide an assessment of how the programme is implemented in practice, to inform learning for future delivery and future large-scale evaluation of programme effectiveness.

The IPE will capture qualitative data from stakeholders and recipients involved in the programme. By capturing these different perspectives, the IPE will provide a holistic understanding of programme delivery and early indicators of perceived impact.

Administrative and child survey data will be collected and analysed to explore any evidence of promising outcomes. In this pilot evaluation, we will focus on a cohort of approximately 100 children who are in Year 6 in academic year 2020/2021 and will be transitioning to Year 7 in 2021/2022.

Research questions

The evaluation design brings together quantitative and qualitative data collection activities to address research questions under three key IPE dimensions: evidence of feasibility, evidence of promise and readiness for trial:

Evidence of feasibility

- How is transition support implemented in practice, and what adaptations are made to delivery?
- What are the challenges and enablers to delivering the support as intended?
- What is the teacher and child reach and dosage?
- Is transition support acceptable to teachers and children? How engaged are teachers and children to the support provided?

Evidence of promise

- What changes, if any, are made to teacher practice and school support for transition as a result of the programme?
- What is the change in children's attainment and social and emotional outcomes?
- Are there any adverse or unintended consequences?

Readiness for trial

- What changes, if any are needed to the theory or change?
- Can transition support be delivered at scale?
- What changes are required to optimise delivery?
- Have suitable outcome measures been identified?

Table 1 (below) presents the research questions and linked evaluation activities for each IPE dimension.

Table 1: Research questions and evaluation activities

| IPE dimension | Research questions | Evaluation activities | | | | | | Quantitative | Review of logic model | |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------------|----------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|---|
| | | Qualitative | | Interviews | | | | | | |
| | | Observations | Teacher training | Person-centred planning meetings | Pilot team | Teachers | Social workers | Children | | |
| Evidence of Feasibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is transition support implemented in practice, and what adaptations are made to delivery? What are the challenges and enablers to delivering the support as intended? What is the teacher and child reach and dosage? Is transition support acceptable to teachers and children? How engaged are teachers and children to the support provided? | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Evidence of promise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What changes, if any, are made to teacher practice and school support for transition as a result of the programme? What is the change in children's attainment and social and emotional outcomes? Are there any adverse or unintended consequences? | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Readiness for trial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What changes, if any are needed to the theory or change? Can transition support be delivered at scale? What changes are required to optimise delivery? Have suitable outcome measures been identified? | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Methods

The research design primarily uses qualitative methods, and draws on quantitative administrative and survey data. The components are discussed in turn below, and (where relevant) the sub-sections include details about sampling, data collection methods and timing. Please note that all timings are indicative, and are based on the assumption that schools in Hartlepool will re-open after February half-term 2021 (in line with government advice at the time of writing). The timings are subject to change based on school closures and subsequent changes to the delivery timeline.

Sample selection, recruitment and data collection

Observations of teacher training

Observations of whole-school training and targeted training for key staff will seek to understand delivery logistics, training content and teacher responsiveness/engagement. We plan to conduct four virtual observations: two observations of whole-school training, and two observations of targeted training for key staff. An observation template will be developed to ensure a consistent approach and data collection across observations. We have assumed that training will be delivered virtually, to comply with social distancing requirements during the coronavirus pandemic. The selection of training courses to be observed will be agreed with the Transition Support programme leads. Training observations will take place in March-April 2021.

Observations of person-centred planning meetings

Observations of person-centred planning meetings will aim to understand delivery logistics, how the multi-agency team discuss child needs and agree support plans, and importantly how child and parent voice are included and considered. We plan to conduct three virtual observations, which will each last for the duration of the meeting (expected to be 60 minutes). An observation template will be developed for consistency of approach and data collection across observations. We have assumed that meetings will be held virtually, to comply with social distancing requirements during the coronavirus pandemic. Appropriate selection of meetings to be observed will be agreed with the Transition Support programme leads to ensure each focuses on a different child and involves different schools.

Observations will take place between May – October 2021.

Interviews with the Transition Support pilot programme leads

Interviews of the Educational Psychologist and Virtual School Lead will provide insight into the overall programme implementation as intended. We plan to conduct interviews at two points. The first interview in March 2021 will seek to understand early implementation, including training delivery, school/teacher engagement and changes and adaptions that have been made to planned pilot programme activity due to COVID-19 school closures. The second interview in November 2021 will seek reflections on programme implementation and ongoing delivery, support provided to teachers (and social care teams) leading up to and after the transition to secondary school, challenges and enablers to implementation of the Transition Planning Profile Tool, person-centred planning meetings, and personalised support for children, as well as suggestions for programme refinements. The interviews will take place online via MS Teams. The discussions will be guided by a topic guide, and will

last approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will be digitally audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

Interviews with teachers

Interviews with teachers, over two time points, will aim to understand implementation and early indicators of success from the school perspective.

Round 1 interviews in summer term 2021 (before transition takes place) will focus on early implementation, including views of the programme, the training, and challenges and enablers for implementation, particularly in the context of COVID-19 school disruptions. We will collect early insights on outcomes for schools and pupils, including perceived changes in practice when working with children with a social worker. These interviews will also cover 'business-as-usual' within schools and participation in other interventions delivered to target children. Twelve teachers involved in transition planning will be interviewed: 8 primary teachers (from 4 schools) and 4 secondary teachers (from 2 schools). At each selected school, two key staff will be interviewed (e.g. a Year 5 or 6 teacher, a Head of Year 7 or 8, a Key Stage 2 or 3 phase leader, or the designated safeguarding lead). Interviews will take place in June-July 2021, online or via telephone, and will last 60 minutes. Interviews will be guided by topic guides and will be digitally audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

Round 2 interviews will explore staff experiences of supporting Year 7 children with transition from primary to secondary school, perceptions of how the transition support programme has shaped usual practice, views on outcomes for schools and children as well as for the sustainability of the approach. These interviews will follow up with the four secondary school teachers interviewed at Round 1. Round 2 interviews will be conducted in October-November 2021, face-to-face if possible (online or via telephone if not), and will last 60 minutes. Interviews will be guided by topic guides and will be digitally audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

The four primary schools will be sampled to achieve diversity in characteristics expected to affect experiences of the programme and implementation (e.g. school size, number of Children in Need or subject to Children in Need a Child Protection Plan.) Both secondary schools participating in the pilot evaluation will be invited to take part in interviews. Selection and recruitment will happen in discussion with the Transition Support programme leads.

Interviews with social workers

Interviews with social workers, over two time points, will provide a social care team perspective on the pilot programme.

Round 1 interviews will seek insights into the training and information social workers received about the programme, as well as their views on early implementation for example their involvement in person-centred planning meetings. Interviews will take place in June-July 2021, online via MS Teams and last 60 minutes. Interviews will be guided by topic guides and will be digitally audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

Round 2 interviews will aim to understand social worker involvement in the programme, as well as their perspective on the cooperation, collaboration and information sharing between schools and local authorities to support transition. Interviews will seek to understand the

social worker's perspective on the benefits of the programme for multi-agency working, how this differs from usual practice, and outcomes for children and families. Interviews will take place in October-November 2021, face-to-face if possible (online or via telephone if not), and will last 60 minutes. Interviews will be guided by topic guides and will be digitally audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Two social workers will be interviewed at each round. Selection and recruitment of social workers will happen in discussion with the Transition Support programme leads. Social workers will be invited to take part in interviews for children and families they support in the programme.

Interviews with children

Interviews with Year 7 children will explore their perceptions of the transition support they received. Children will be encouraged to discuss their experience of transitioning from primary to secondary school and support they received including involvement in person-centred planning meetings, transition passport and any other support offered, how they feel about secondary school and current support and the perceived impacts this has on academic progress, as well as social and emotional needs. We will explore any unmet needs they feel school could support them better with.

The discussion with children will be focused on the experiences of school; we will avoid discussions about home and personal circumstances to safeguard against discomfort and disclosures. However, it is possible that the children will bring up sensitive information about their home or school life on their own accord during the interview. We will have procedures in place to safeguard children's wellbeing during and after the interview and also for disclosures.

We will interview eight children in Year 7 (four children from each of the two secondary schools). Children will be sampled across Children in Need and CP groups, and to reflect a range of attainment levels. We will work with the Transition Support programme leads and School Transition Leads to identify eligible children who are willing to take part. Interviews will take place in October-November 2021, face-to-face if possible (online while the child is in school if not), and will last up to 45 minutes.

Pre and post survey with children

A pre and post survey of all children in the Year 6 – 7 transition cohort will aim to measure social and emotional outcomes and school engagement. The pre- and post-surveys will both consist of the following measures:

- The **Me and My Feelings questionnaire** will be used to provide an indicative measure of children's social and emotional outcomes. This is a measure of child mental health, covering two broad domains: emotional and behavioural difficulties. The measure consists of 16 items, typically takes under 10 minutes to complete, and is designed to be completed by children aged 8 and over (Deighton et al., 2013).
- The **Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MLSS) 'school' subscale** will be used to measure the children's feelings about and satisfaction with school. The subscale measure consists of 8 items, typically takes under 5 minutes to complete, and is designed to be completed by children and young people aged between 8-18 (Huebner, 2001).

Both surveys will be administered online, to be completed in school under the supervision of a member of school staff. The surveys will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Each child will be issued with a unique password to enter at the start of the survey, so that their pre and post survey responses can be linked. All children in the cohort (expected to be around 100 children) will be invited to take part across all participating schools. The pre-survey will be administered in March-April 2021, and the post-survey in October-November 2021. However, if school closures are extended in the 2020/21 academic year, the pre-survey will not be conducted.

Administrative data

The completed Transition Planning Profile Tool will be anonymised and shared with the evaluator for contextual information and analysis purposes. The dataset will provide information about the number of children involved in the programme, demographic information, level of social care involvement, school indicators (e.g. attendance, exclusions) as well as children's identified needs. The Transition Support programme leads will share the dataset securely, at two timepoints, in July and November 2021.

Analysis

Qualitative data

All interviews will be audio-recorded (with participants' permission) and transcribed verbatim. We will use Framework in NVivo to facilitate thematic analysis of qualitative data. This approach involves summarising data from each interview within an analysis matrix (where columns represent the key sub-themes or topics and the rows represent participants). This allows the data to be ordered systematically, and ensures the analysis is grounded in participants' accounts. Analysis will look for patterns, consistencies and inconsistencies in data collected from different participants to help answer the research questions.

Quantitative data

The team will manage and analyse child survey data and administrative data in Stata 16 SE-64. We will conduct descriptive analysis to establish how many pupils completed the intervention (reach) and identify any cohort-level changes in key outcome variables over the pilot period (direction of travel for using child survey data; attendance, exclusions, and academic progress using the administrative data).

Child survey responses will be used to calculate:

- emotional difficulties score: 0-9 'expected level of difficulty'; 10-11 'borderline difficulty'; 12-20 'elevated difficulty'
- behavioural difficulties score: 0-5 'expected level of difficulty'; 6 'borderline difficulty'; 7-12 'elevated difficulty'
- school engagement score: 8 'low school engagement'- 32 'highest school engagement'

We do not expect large proportions of missing data from the administrative data, there is, however, a greater risk of missing data in child survey data. In the case of missing data in child surveys, we will conduct mean imputation. This process will be followed for each survey independently.

- For the emotional difficulties (10 items) and school engagement measures (8 items) - if a child has two or less missing items in a survey measure, the mean of the observed item scores will be calculated and imputed for the missing items. If a child has three or more missing items in a survey measure, the mean imputation will not be followed and the scores will not be calculated.
- For the behavioural difficulties measure (6 items) - if a child has one missing item, the mean of the observed item scores will be calculated and imputed for the missing item. If a child has two or more missing items in a survey measure, the mean imputation will not be followed, and the scores will not be calculated.

If pre and post surveys are completed, and there is a large enough sample size (at least 50 matched responses), we will conduct 2 tailed T-tests to assess whether the mean change between per intervention (time 1) and post intervention (time 2) is significant for each survey measure. We will also perform regression analyses to understand the association between programme participation and child survey measures, controlling for demographic characteristics and other covariates that may affect outcomes (e.g. gender and attendance). We will report all results with a measure of uncertainty (such as confidence intervals or standard errors). This will allow us to understand whether programme participation is significantly associated with changes in outcomes. In case of smaller sample sizes or in the event of the pre-survey not being completed at all, we will provide descriptive analysis of these scores, indicating the range, and mean scores.

Where possible, we will conduct child-level sub-group analysis. However, the small number of children receiving the programme (n=100) means that sub-group analysis may not be feasible. The transient nature of the target population (e.g. children moving out of borough or to a school outside of the pilot schools) and the likelihood of attrition may also reduce the sample size further. Depending on sample sizes, sub-group analysis will be performed to assess how effects vary across different groups of participants, such as by gender, Children in Need status and being subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Data synthesis

We will triangulate and synthesise IPE data according to our research questions and IPE domains (see Table 1). This will enable us to provide a comprehensive assessment of implementation, and to report findings against the finalised logic model.

The following steps will be taken to ensure rigorous qualitative and quantitative analysis and reporting:

- We will present examples of participant responses using quotes, and triangulate responses from different participant groups, to ensure reported findings are an accurate reflection of participants' views and experiences
- We will consider the extent to which findings are transferable through a description of contextual factors, and by drawing out similarities and differences between participants with different characteristics (e.g. in primary and secondary settings) to reflect a range of perspectives.
- We will highlight and reflect upon contrasting and inconsistent accounts when interpreting findings.
- We will list administrative data sources, report sample base sizes, and we will not report cell sizes under 10, to minimise the risk of reporting identifiable respondent information.
- We will be transparent about our research and analytical methods when reporting, to ensure the study methods are clear and replicable.

Ethics & Participation

NatCen's Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study on 17 February 2021 (REF: P15653). Some of the key ethical considerations for the study are outlined below.

Child welfare

The target children selected for the programme are likely to be particularly vulnerable. We will liaise with School Transition Leads regarding children's support needs that should be considered during data collection for example, if they should be accompanied by support staff when completing the survey or participating in an interview. We will request that school pastoral staff are informed about data collection activities and are available to provide support to the child, if needed. Children will be informed that they do not have to share any information they do not wish to and that they can stop taking part at any time, without having to provide a reason. To safeguard against children feeling singled out to take part in this pilot research activities, we will discuss the timing of research activities with Transition Support leads. A key focus of our planning will be to discuss with the Transition Lead the best way to ensure children do not have to miss academic lesson time to take part in the survey or interviews or that their participation in the study is not inadvertently disclosed to others. We will request that research activities take place in suitable spaces where children's survey responses cannot be seen by others, or interview discussions overheard.

Consent to participate

Care will be taken to ensure that all research participants are informed about evaluation activities including the sharing of administrative data and participation in the survey, interviews or observations. Information leaflets will be created for each participant group. During selection and recruitment, we will seek verbal consent from adults (the Transition Support team, teachers, social workers) to take part. For children, we will ensure that parent/carers are informed about pilot evaluation activities that may involve their child, and provide them the opportunity to ask more questions of the school or research team, and the possibility to withdraw their child from these activities. Providing parents/carers do not withdraw their child, we will additionally seek child assent for participation. Consent and assent will be treated as continuous, with participants able to opt-out at any point before, during and immediately after data collection

Accessibility

All information sheets will be written in plain English and presented in a clear, accessible format. Information sheets for children will be written in age-appropriate language. To improve accessibility for children with lower literacy levels, Transition Leads will be asked to review information sheets individually with children prior to data collection activities to ensure children understand what they are being asked to do and why.

Safeguarding

With support from the Transition Support programme leads, we will identify and follow local safeguarding procedures, should we encounter a disclosure or something that makes us concerned for the participants during the pilot evaluation. At the beginning and end of all research encounters, we will explain that while we seek to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of participants in the research process, there may be exceptions to this. For

instance, if we hear anything that presents a risk of harm to the participant or to others, we may have to inform a local safeguarding lead (e.g. school safeguarding lead or Local Authority Designated Officer, LADO).

Researchers will be briefed thoroughly before interviews and observations. This will include information on safeguarding and disclosure procedures, to make sure researchers are clear on the process to follow in the event of disclosure.

Research burden

In the context of COVID-19 school closures and disruptions, schools, teachers, social workers, children and their parents/carers may be under high-levels of stress. We will aim to minimise the burden placed on participants by the pilot evaluation. In partnership with the Transition Support programme leads and WWCSC, we will continue to assess the situation for all participant groups, report concerns and agree required changes to evaluation activities to minimise research burden. For example, the child pre-survey may need to be cancelled if school closures continue beyond February 2021 half term. To comply with ethical research practice, the survey must be administered under supervision in a school setting, due to the sensitive nature of the survey content. Similarly, if it is not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with children in October-November 2021, virtual interviews will only be conducted while children are in school and when pastoral staff members (and any other support staff required) are available.

Registration

The final version of the protocol will be published on Open Science Framework (OSF).

Data Handling

NatCen will be the data processor and data controller on this evaluation. Hartlepool Borough Council will be data controller for the administrative data provided as part of the IPE. It is the responsibility of the data controller to decide on the legal basis for data sharing. At this stage we anticipate that the legal basis for data sharing is “Consent”. NatCen will be the data controller for personal data collected during the qualitative research activities that form part of the implementation and process evaluation (IPE). Participants will receive a link to the privacy notice available on the NatCen website which will provide further information on how we will use the data we collect for the IPE, what their rights are as research participants and how they can withdraw their data from the study if they wish. The process for secure data transfer will be set out in a signed Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) between NatCen and Hartlepool Borough Council.

Personnel

| Delivery team | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Name | Title | Role |
| Jacqui Braithwaite | Principal Educational Psychologist | Educational Psychologist |
| Emma Rutherford | Virtual Schools Lead | Training and support for schools |

| Evaluation team | | |
|-----------------|--|----------------------------|
| Name | Title | Role |
| Valdeep Gill | Research Director, Children and Families | Principle investigator |
| Enes Duysak | Senior Researcher, Evaluation and Analysis | Day-to-day project manager |
| Padmini Iyer | Senior Researcher, Children and Families | IPE |
| Helena Takala | Researcher, Children and Families | IPE |
| Tom Bristow | Researcher, Children and Families | IPE |

Risks

This section outlines the risks to the anticipated risks that may arise and steps that will be taken to mitigate against these.

| Risk | Mitigation |
|--|---|
| Recruitment of children into the programme High risk <p>It might be difficult to recruit the 100 children originally planned, the Hartlepool Borough council requires opt-in parent/carer consent for the child to participate in the programme.</p> | <p>In agreement with WWCSC, NatCen can advise the Transition Support team on the minimum number of children that will be needed to be recruited and retained to secure large enough sample size for the pilot to be meaningful.</p> <p>The Transition Support team are reviewing the legal basis for data processing and the option of 'Public Task' which will secure the intended child sample size</p> |
| COVID-19 related risks High risk <p>Additional pressures on school and families due to the Covid-19 pandemic (including school closures for most children and remote learning) may create additional and new risks for programme delivery and pilot evaluation. These include: increased risk of school withdrawal from the pilot; reduced school capacity to deliver the programme as intended; increased school absences reducing dosage; challenges to intended data collection e.g. in-person training observations and person centred planning meetings; and completing the child survey in school.</p> | <p>The evaluation team will take steps to minimise research burden on schools and children, and conduct evaluation activities remotely and monitor these risks closely.</p> <p>All changes to delivery and pilot activities will be agreed with WWCSC and transparently documented in the final report.</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Non-participation in pre and post-programme child survey</p> <p>Medium risk</p> <p>The child survey must be completed in school under staff supervision, due to the potentially sensitive nature of questions. There is a risk that schools are unable to participate in administering the pre and/or post-intervention child survey due to school closures.</p> | <p>This will be addressed by setting out clearly the requirements for the pilot in the school information leaflet which will highlight the value of this data collection. We will provide schools with clear instructions at the start of the project on what needs to be done and when.</p> <p>Additional considerations are whether to delay or cancel the pre-survey depending on whether school reopen to all children.</p> <p>The post-survey data can still be completed if the pre-survey is not, as it will provide valuable information about child wellbeing and school engagement after transition.</p> |
| <p>High levels of pupil withdrawal / attrition</p> <p>Medium risk</p> <p>It is possible that parents/carers may not want their child to participate in the evaluation, or a large number of withdrawals are received within certain schools.</p> | <p>Parents/carers and pupils will receive pilot information and separate withdrawal forms for the survey and interviews. The information will outline the value of taking part in this pilot, and invite them to discuss concerns with schools or the evaluators.</p> <p>The evaluation team has assumed that a small number of families will return these forms based on other pilot responses. This is not typically a problem in school based trials, but the evaluation team will monitor this closely.</p> |

Timeline

Please note that all timings below are indicative and are based on the assumption that schools in Hartlepool will re-open on 8 March 2021 (in line with government advice at the time of writing). The timings for evaluation activities are indicative, and subject to change based on school closures and subsequent changes to the delivery timeline.

| Dates | Activity | Staff responsible / leading |
|-----------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| December 2020 | Kick-off meeting | Valdeep Gill |
| January 2021 | Logic model development | Valdeep Gill |
| February 2021 | Ethical approval | Padmini Iyer |
| | Protocol and OSF registry | Valdeep Gill |
| March-April 2021 | Round 1 interviews: pilot programme leads | Padmini Iyer |
| | Observations of teacher training | Valdeep Gill |
| | Pupil pre-survey | Enes Duysak |
| June-July 2021 | Round 1 interviews: teachers | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 1 interviews: social workers | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 1 observations: planning meetings | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 1 Transition Planning Profile Tool data | Enes Duysak |
| September 2021 | Presentation of Round 1 findings | Valdeep Gill |
| October-November 2021 | Round 2 interviews: pilot programme leads | Padmini Iyer |
| | Round 2 interviews: teachers | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 2 interviews: social workers | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 2 interviews: pupils | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 2 observations: planning meetings | Valdeep Gill |
| | Round 2 Transition Planning Profile Tool data | Enes Duysak |
| | Pupil post-survey | Enes Duysak |
| | Update on Round 2 findings | Valdeep Gill |
| March 2022 | Final report | Valdeep Gill |

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