



What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**

CARDIFF
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SOUTHAMPTON CHANGE PROJECT: SOCIAL WORKERS IN SCHOOLS

INTERIM REPORT
AUGUST 2019





What Works for Children's Social Care

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the staff at Southampton for their enthusiasm and cooperation in the evaluation to date. Their willingness to be supportive and engaging was invaluable. We would also like to note our gratitude to the busy school staff in all three school clusters who have all made time to speak to us about the intervention. We are aware that it is not always easy to have a researcher observing social work sessions and meetings, or to discuss the difficulties that are the focus of Children's Services intervention; we are therefore most grateful to those who invited us into their schools, offices, and classrooms.

About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In Southampton a social work team has been embedded within a group of schools as part of a pilot intervention for 12 months from 1 April 2019. Five social workers and a team manager have been placed into three school clusters, comprised of two mainstream secondary schools and three Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) provision schools. The aim is to work more closely with school staff to reduce referrals, s.17 involvement, s.47 investigations and the numbers of children entering care.

This interim report is part of an evaluation by Cardiff University for What Works for Children's Social Care. The report explores the initial progress of the pilot, focussing on its feasibility and evidence of promise during the set-up and implementation period. A final report, in March 2020, will examine the remainder of the pilot and consider its short to medium term impact.

Methodology

We are taking a realist approach to understanding the nature of the intervention and the impact it is having. This aids our understanding of the mechanisms and moderators of the intervention, in order to describe how and where it works. This report includes formal and informal interviews, observations and focus groups with professionals from social care and education. The interim findings are based on a thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Key findings to date

The pilot was launched in April 2019 and social workers began working in schools after the school's Easter holidays. Social workers are based in all three clusters, but to date their main interaction has been with secondary schools and not with feeder primaries. The team have experienced a lot of disruption in the early stages of the project (with staff leaving or being absent due to illness), and this has adversely effected implementation.

The pilot has been set up within an existing team - the Protection and Court Team (PACT). Workers in this team focus on complex cases and undertake a lot of child protection and court work. The Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) workers existing posts were gradually back filled. It was anticipated that there would be some caseload adjustments to make in the first three months of the project which has temporarily led to SWIS workers having higher caseloads, as they continuing to work with families who are not involved with schools in the pilot.

Much of the early learning relates to several major challenges which have prevented the pilot from being implemented as intended. Southampton are aware of the challenges and have engaged with us in an open and constructive way about what aspects of the pilot are not going according to plan, why this might be and how the obstacles can be overcome.

Capacity, visibility and work undertaken in schools

Arguably the biggest challenge facing the pilot is the limited capacity of the SWIS team, which means that they are not physically able to perform the school-based role as intended. This was quantified by one Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), who provided the stark indication from their clocking in and



out records that one social worker “was only present for 13% of the school day and on one day came in for 4 minutes”.

Opportunities to build strong relationships through being visible in schools have therefore been missed, and the work social workers can do with children and families from school is limited. As one DSL noted, “...that is not happening, they are not here, have not built a relationship with the students in general ... we are not seeing them”.

As well as workforce issues and sick leave, a main reason for this seems to be that social workers continue to hold the bulk of their existing PACT caseloads, meaning that they are unable to pick up much work within schools. Reflecting on the lack of social work input in the schools, one DSL noted that “All that’s happened to date is that the social workers have been given an office”.

Variation between schools

The availability of SWIS workers has influenced the way the pilot has been implemented across the schools. Other reasons for variation include the physical space available for SWIS in participating schools as well as the needs of each individual school. This has also included access to various areas of the school, such as staff rooms and canteens. Furthermore, communication between education and social care staff has varied between schools, which has also influenced implementation.

Working with the SEMH provision presents further challenges, and with three schools and one social worker, who is new to the city, it has been difficult for the worker to get to know the schools and establish a base at each. To date the social worker has only been able to spend any time in one school, and consequently the others have voiced frustration at the lack of presence. Some suggested the SEMH provision needed more rather than less support, due to the uniquely complex needs of these schools and the children who attend them;

“There are only 40 children in our school and 79% are under social care. [Initially it sounded like a good idea, but then the social worker also got assigned the other two schools]. [One of these] has 100 plus children, all very vulnerable, and would be under a similar situation as the others. (DSL, Focus Group).

Continuation of previous ways of working

Largely a result of the themes discussed above, there is a sense that the pilot is not going as well as it could be, as the service has not changed substantially from how it was before. It has been difficult to establish what work is being undertaken by social workers in schools that differs from their previous PACT work. This is now changing and since the data collection Southampton have begun to make more changes to their schools project and implement the program more extensively. The improving relationships between social workers and schools is the current focus, specifically how the professions are merging operationally and culturally. The SWIS team have been able to consolidate this and work through new ways of engaging and collaborating within school settings. It is anticipated that this will progress from September onwards as time to partner with schools on cases is being increased

Another perspective on the continuity of existing practice can be gained by looking at how schools have experienced the pilot to date. The fact that, as one DSL explained during an interview, “I’m still on the phone for hours on end to PACT and MASH chasing things up, [so] there is no change there” illustrates the enduring nature of some of the issues the project aimed to address.

Developing clarity about roles and responsibilities

There was a consensus among social care staff that the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities had led the first term of implementation to be disjointed. School staff generally wanted the social worker to be a pastoral and safeguarding resource that staff could draw upon. However, social workers



are understandably keen to maintain boundaries of the work they should be doing and want to avoid doing tasks that go beyond the social care remit.

Challenges in the wider context in Southampton

As is the case with many new initiatives, the wider context in Southampton is proving a powerful factor in shaping the implementation of the pilot. Recent changes in response to OFSTED recommendations have effectively lowered thresholds for intensive work and resulted in an influx of work into the PACT team. This has had a knock-on effect on the SWIS workload, who have been experiencing stress and burnout. When we visited for fieldwork in June, two of the original five SWIS social workers had taken time off due to ill-health, and the original team manager had resigned. Their replacement came into post in mid-July.

Discussion

In launching this pilot, Southampton has embarked on an ambitious plan that aims to transform the way social care and education work together. Project leads have already actively engaged with our findings – and their own reflections about the project – in order to shape it into an intervention that has the potential to bring about the changes described in the logic model.

Unfortunately, several challenges have meant that the aspirations set out in the project plan have not yet been realised. We can say that, at best, the pilot has been only partially implemented in Southampton during the first term of its implementation. A range of factors, some outside of the control of the project leads, have severely limited the scope of the pilot and the extent to which it is being implemented. The role of the social workers in schools needs to be clarified and consolidated in coming months. With the new team manager in place, Southampton Council intends to focus on this over the summer holidays in readiness for changes at the start of the autumn term.

Conclusions and next steps

The key finding from this stage of the evaluation is that social workers are not spending enough time in schools, and that – for various reasons – they have been unable to dedicate enough time to working with children and families involved with the schools in the pilot. It is difficult to see how the pilot will have the intended impact on the outcomes identified unless this changes significantly.

In highlighting the difficulties that are being encountered, this report may prove to be a challenging read for those who are working hard to make the pilot a success. The difficulties discussed are primarily systemic issues, and while they are significant and complex to address this should not detract from the good work that individuals are doing. There is an opportunity for Southampton to take stock and re-think how to proceed at this point in the pilot, in light of the interim findings we present here. We hope that revisiting the logic model and considering the following recommendations will prove helpful.

Recommendations

The Southampton team now need to build on this and address the issues raised in this report. Our specific recommendations are as follows:

- Increase the capacity of the SWIS team by recruiting extra staff (this process has begun) in order to;
- Relieve the pressure of non-school based PACT cases on workers in the team by moving these cases to other workers. This seems to be happening to some extent, but the pilot would clearly



benefit from this process being expedited. The senior management team are aware of this and are actively addressing this over the summer.

- Review the demands of duty hours at the Civic Centre and the impact this has on social workers capacity for school-based work by decreasing the number of hours required per month.
- Increase the time workers are spending in schools and establish a social work presence in schools where this has not yet been possible.
- Consider using the beginning of a new school year in September as an opportunity for a formal 're-launch' of the pilot. The learning from the pilot so far could be used constructively and positively to tackle the challenges we have outlined.
- Further develop a shared understanding of what the roles and responsibilities of SWIS workers in collaboration with education staff.

In phase 2 of the evaluation we will explore how the pilot progresses into the new school year, and the impact that the project is having compared to a group of similar schools. We will also include the views and experience of children and families, who by then will have had more extensive experience of social workers in schools. Our final report will be published in March 2020.



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Introduction

Rationale for social workers in schools project

The intervention being evaluated is part of a programme of three projects where social workers are placed into schools in order to address the relatively high numbers of referrals and enquiries made from a small number of schools into children's social care. Similar approaches have been used elsewhere (Rose et al, 2006; Wilkin et al, 2008) but these have typically focused on early intervention and protection, rather than statutory social work.

Schools in Southampton are organised into 12 mainstream 'clusters' of around six to eight schools, with additional specialist provision schools. Each cluster is comprised of a secondary school and feeder primary schools. Social workers have been placed into two mainstream clusters and three specialist provision schools. They aim to work with 18 schools in total. The two mainstream clusters have some of the highest levels of need in the city, and the specialist provision includes three Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) schools, one of which is a pupil referral unit. The aim of the project is to reduce the number of referrals to children's social care, and to reduce Section 17 (s.17) involvement, Section 47 (s.47) enquiries, and care plans.

Background to the project in Southampton

Southampton Council designed an intervention based on social workers in schools (SWIS) and were successful in their bid to receive funding from What Works for Children's Social Care. Southampton Council aim to reduce the number of referrals coming from schools by working with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) at each school. They also aim to use their location within schools to improve working relationships with the senior management team, teachers, parents and pupils, offering them support on safeguarding issues and concerns. They intend to deliver training and support for the schools and provide additional services for vulnerable children and young people where needed.

The intervention is taking place in the Cantell cluster, which is central and north of the city, and the Redbridge cluster, to the west of the city. Both clusters historically have high levels of social care need. The SEMH provision incorporates three individual schools; Compass, Vermont, and Polygon.

The pilot evaluation

The project is a pilot of a new intervention and a feasibility study to explore data collection and the potential for evaluating social workers in schools at scale. Details of the design are available in the evaluation protocol, which was published prior to the start of the project (Westlake, Silverwood, and Forrester, 2019). The pilot evaluation will focus primarily on the process of implementation, but it will also explore evidence of promise and indicators of success.

This interim report focusses on emerging evidence around implementation and feasibility during the early stages of the project. The final report, due for publication in March 2020, will build on these interim findings. It will provide a more detailed exploration of how and why the project was implemented as it was, including an analysis of any barriers and opportunities. It will also consider indicative evidence of the impact of the pilot, through a comparison of the intervention schools and a group of similar schools in Southampton using a difference-in-differences approach. The schools included in the pilot are listed in Table 1.



Table 1: Schools in the Social Workers in Schools Pilot Study

School	Mainstream/ specialist	Size (pupils)	Type
Cantell School (plus 8 feeder primary schools)	Mainstream	1010	Foundation School, Aspire Community Trust
Redbridge Community School (plus 5 feeder primary schools)	Mainstream	992	Maintained community specialist sports school
The Polygon school	Specialist (secondary)	66	SEMH provision for children aged 4-16
Vermont School	Specialist (primary)	40	SEMH provision primary for aged 4-11
Compass School	Pupil Referral Unit (primary and secondary)	63	PRU for boys aged 11-16

Methods

Summary of pilot evaluation design

We are taking a realist approach to understanding the nature and feasibility of the intervention. We aim to have a clear description of it, in the form of a detailed logic model that will be developed from the initial logic model included as Appendix 1 in the evaluation protocol (Westlake, Silverwood and Forrester, 2019). We will also use qualitative and quantitative data to describe the ways the intervention has been applied, and the indications of its impact that are available. The evaluation is structured as three phases; initial theory development, implementation, and progress in relation to short-term outcomes.

The focus of this interim report is on implementation (described as Phase 2 in the evaluation protocol). The way the project is implemented is an important aspect of our evaluation for several reasons. It will be a key point of comparison between this project and two similar projects underway in other local authorities, as each one has designed a different intervention based on local circumstances. It also has clear implications for policymakers and other local authorities who might be interested in commissioning similar interventions, because seemingly minor details of implementation can have significant impacts on overall effectiveness. Finally, implementation issues are at the heart of the realist approach we are adopting in order to understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances (Pawson, 2013). The final report will further examine implementation and progress in terms of outcomes, in order to develop and consolidate the programme theory.

Data used in this report

This report is based on data collected between April and June 2019. It includes administrative data from the local authority, formal and informal interviews and observations with professionals, children and families involved with the intervention, and focus groups involving social workers, managers and



school personnel. Four researchers from Cardiff University completed the fieldwork in Southampton in June 2019. Table 2 details the data collected to date.

Table 2: Data collection June 2019

Data collection type	Number
Focus group with school (5 DSLs from across the five secondary schools)	1
Interviews with head teachers and pastoral teams (1-3 participants per interview)	5
Interviews with school based social workers	5
Focus group with 5 school based social workers and Protection and Court Team (PACT) team manager	1
Focus group with senior management and project support team	1
Observation of core group meeting	1
Observation of social worker meeting with young person	2

In this report we draw on the data above, as well as our learning from our meetings and ongoing communication with service leaders in Southampton.

Research questions addressed in this report

At this stage in the project our focus is on feasibility and early indications of promise, as set out in the evaluation protocol. In terms of feasibility, we consider aspects of initial set up and implementation, specifically:

- Was the scheme implemented as intended (according to the logic model)?
- What processes support delivery and governance; how are decisions made and who is involved?
- To what extent were families included as planned?
- How acceptable is the intervention to social workers and families?
- What are the barriers and facilitators for delivery?
- How does the project delivery vary between schools?

In terms of early evidence of promise, we explore the following questions:

- What potential benefits do stakeholders (e.g. social workers, schools, children, and families) identify?
- Do there appear to be any unintended consequences or negative effects?
- Is there evidence to support the intervention logic model?

Analysis underpinning in this report

Interim findings to date, presented below, were generated through thematic analysis which incorporated the data described above. Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were reviewed by a second researcher (i.e. not the researcher who conducted the interview). They completed a basic thematic coding framework, noting down key themes and transcribing direct quotes that were deemed illustrative of these themes. The framework was then shared with the researcher who conducted the interview, and the analysis was discussed and refined in light of their input.

Overarching themes were brought together by the first and second authors and, in a final stage of analysis, these were discussed and agreed by the whole research team. The discussion incorporated our learning from wider data collection activities, including observations and other informal discussions.



The resulting themes described below give robust early indications of how the social workers in schools project is progressing. We will revisit these in the second phase of data collection in order to refine and develop the evaluation.

Interim findings

Project launch and initial implementation

The pilot was launched in April 2019 and social workers began working in schools after the schools' Easter holidays. Social workers are based in all three clusters, but to date their main interaction has been with secondary schools and not with feeder primaries. They have office space at each of the mainstream secondary schools; two workers each are based in the two secondary schools, and a fifth is based at one of the SEMH schools. This worker is also responsible for the other two SEMH schools. SWIS are also responsible for a number of hours where they are on duty at the Civic Centre, where they are responsible for triaging incoming calls.

The team have experienced a lot of disruption in the early stages of the project, and this has adversely effected implementation. Two workers had been on sickness absence when we arrived to carry out our fieldwork, and while we were there another worker was signed off for ill health. At the time of writing one of the social workers is currently working her notice period and will be leaving the project soon. The original team manager left the project not long after it launched, and a new team manager has taken on this role in recent weeks. Some of the reasons for this tumultuous start become clear from the themes discussed below.

Southampton's proposal outlined the broad approach to working with the school clusters and noted the involvement of the five secondary schools and 13 feeder primaries. During this initial period, they have clearly been grappling with the practicalities of implementing this ambitious plan. A key aspect of this is the extent to which all schools are involved, and the nature of the work done in each. Key issues arising from this are explored in the themes below, however, one of the main factors was the number of cases each SWIS social worker retained, in addition to the staffing issues. Additionally, there is a general sense that the relatively large number of schools involved is challenging. Managers have expressed concerns that this has led to the team being spread too thinly and meant that the focus of the work is currently limited to the secondary schools.

Recruitment, training and set up

Southampton opted to recruit for the SWIS pilot internally to avoid delays associated with recruiting staff externally. The pilot has been set up within an existing team - the Protection and Court Team (PACT). Workers in this team focus on complex cases and undertake a lot of child protection and court work. As such they have a reduced caseload of around 18 families. As the logic model outlined, this is to ensure the pilot is doing statutory work rather than early intervention.

The SWIS workers' existing posts were due to be back filled, but shortage of staff in the department has meant this has not happened. Consequently, while some of their existing families have been allocated to other PACT workers, this has not happened as quickly as intended. This means SWIS workers have higher than anticipated caseloads and continue to work with families who are not involved with schools in the pilot. This is causing concern with both the workers and the schools involved, however increased recruitment of social workers into the SWIS team over the summer months will seek to address this as a priority.



Moreover, the team has a lower than expected allocation of staff time before existing work is accounted for. Two of the social workers work four days a week, rather than the anticipated five days, meaning capacity is reduced by 8%. An underspend due to savings in salaries means that Southampton can address this, and in the summer they will be recruiting a sixth social worker, as well as a family engagement worker, to ameliorate capacity issues.

Training and orientation of varying levels has been offered by the schools in order to familiarise social workers with each school and its policies and procedures. This has included introductions to DSLs and other safeguarding staff in the schools. In terms of physical space, one school has provided kitchen and staff room access and an office on the same corridor as the DSL, and another has provided separate office space without access to staff facilities. Within the SEMH provision the social worker is based predominantly at one school, but this has meant they have less engagement with the others.

Themes identified to date

In this section we discuss key themes identified through our analysis, and explore the challenges and opportunities associated with the pilot to date. In the following sections we consider some overall messages for the initial roll out of the pilot. It is positive sign that there is broad agreement about the potential of the pilot to provide valuable help to schools and children and families. As one DSL noted;

“The idea of having a social worker working within our school would be absolutely ideal and they would be able to speak to the parents, develop that good relationship with parents which is essential, because most of the parents have been through social services before, they sometimes unfortunately have got a negative view, but they shouldn’t” (DSL, Focus Group).

Project leads will want to build on this as the pilot progresses. However, much of the early learning relates to several major challenges which have prevented the pilot from being implemented as intended. Southampton Council and the pilot schools are aware of the challenges and have engaged with us in an open and constructive way about what aspects of the pilot are not going according to plan, why this might be and how the obstacles can be overcome. They are actively working to find solutions that will help bring the pilot back on course in the coming months. In identifying these here, and exploring them further in the discussion that follows, we hope that the report serves as a useful aid in this strategic work.

1. Capacity, visibility and work undertaken in schools

Arguably the biggest challenge facing the pilot is the limited capacity of the SWIS team, which means that they are not physically able to perform the school-based role as intended. This was quantified by one DSL, who provided the stark indication from their clocking in and out records that the worker “was only present for 13% of the school day and on one day came in for 4 minutes”. The sense of frustration about this was clear among school staff in our focus group, one of whom offered the straightforward observation that “to make it work we would have to have them here much more”.

This is problematic for two reasons. The first is that an opportunity to capitalise on the enthusiasm and ambition that stakeholders showed at the outset may have been missed. The visibility and physical presence of the SWIS workers in the schools seems important during the early phase of implementation, because it signals a new way of working and helps build relationships. As one DSL noted;

“...that is not happening, they are not here, have not built a relationship with the students in general. We have arranged for a weekly meeting and we have not had one yet because they are busy with duty...The assigned social worker is superb, they do their job well, but we are not seeing them.” (DSL, focus group)



This quotation is typical of school staff in that it is positive about the individual social workers involved. But it also illustrates that if workers are not in schools regularly, spending a lot of time away from the school doing duty or other casework, or spread too thinly across many schools, then these relationships will be difficult to forge.

The second reason is perhaps even more important. It relates to the work social workers can do with children and families from that school. Due to the limited time the workers have spent within the schools, they have been unable to work extensively with children and young people, or school staff. This has meant DSLs at participating schools are continuing to interact with social care in the way they had done previously. One member of school staff explained the impact of the sickness absence and the limited capacity in the team for school-based work;

“One has been off sick for a while and has just returned in the last couple of weeks. We are at the opposite end of the corridor and sometimes it’s so busy I don’t notice whether they are in there. The other one is generally in a couple of days a week, sometimes only in for about an hour but she will text me to let me know when she will be in or where she is whether on Duty, so we have that communication.” (DSL, focus group)

As well as workforce issues and sick leave, a main reason for this seems to be that social workers continue to hold the bulk of their existing PACT caseloads, meaning that they are unable to pick up much work within schools. DSLs noted that this meant the social workers in their schools are not necessarily working with the school’s children yet. During an interview one DSL pointed out: “Within my year group I know we have one family who one of the [school assigned social workers] is working with”. Another school’s DSL stated;

“One social worker is leaving but was assigned a child protection case from within the school. [The social worker who remains] has heavy workload and could not be given [new school-based cases] (DSL, interview)

Consequently, as this DSL went on to explain, these cases would; “...go back to Duty and are managed by Duty and that’s not going to work. All that’s happened to date is that the social workers have been given an office”.

Project leads have suggested the incoming team manager conduct a time and motion study with the social workers to see how much time is spent on school cases and how much is comprised of other cases, duty work and child protection cases. They also noted the need for consistency among schools in terms of their involvement, commenting that these early difficulties had been compounded by the school’s lack of consistent attendance at monthly project meetings. Since the period of data collection this work has begun.

The inclusion of duty work in the SWIS workload is a specific aspect worth noting. The project plan noted that social workers would continue to do duty work, and social workers felt retaining this aspect of their role was valuable. They were keen to retain duty responsibility as it retained links with the PACT team. This also helped lessen the feeling of isolation they felt when working in schools. However, the demands of duty contribute to limiting their capacity for school-based work, so it is clearly an issue that requires careful thought in the development of the pilot. As one DSL explained;

“...I think the barriers are the fact that they have duty time and the fact that they perhaps, I don’t know what their loads are, but it seems to be enough for them to be out quite a lot, so if they had less of their other cases and more of ours, less duty time, if that’s possible...so it would be better if they had less to no duty and more of our cases and more time.’ (DSL, Focus Group).

2. Variation between schools

The availability of SWIS workers has influenced the way the pilot has been implemented across the schools. Other reasons for variation include the physical space available for SWIS in participating



schools as well as the needs of each individual school. This has also included access to various areas of the school, such as staff rooms and canteens. Furthermore, communication between education and social care staff has varied between school, which has also influenced implementation.

Positive relationships were reported in one school, which operates with one DSL and an assisting team of pastoral support. However, the safeguarding team at another school has a different structure, meaning that the social workers based there have had to get to know different DSLs for each year group. This seems to have frustrated school staff and social workers, and it is exacerbated by the SWIS office base being rather isolated, and the fact the social workers do not have access to the staff room.

Working with the SEMH provision presents further challenges, and with three schools and one social worker, who is new to the city, it has been difficult for the social worker to get to know the schools and establish a base at each. To date the social worker has only been able to spend any time in one school, and consequently the others have voiced frustration at the lack of presence. Some suggested the SEMH provision needed more, rather than less, support, due to the uniquely complex needs of these schools and the children who attend them;

“There are only 40 children in our school and 79% are under social care. [Initially it sounded like a good idea, but then the social worker also got assigned the other two schools]. [One of these] has 100 plus children, all very vulnerable, and would be under a similar situation as the others. (DSL, Focus Group).

All three DSLs for the SEMH schools attend monthly project meetings and seem engaged with the project and eager for it to work. They are also positive about the individual workers involved, but reinforced the point that the amount of social worker capacity dedicated to their schools is insufficient;

“In an ideal world we would not share one social worker among three schools and they would not be bogged down with all the complex matters so could do the early intervention things, do referrals to school nurse, work more closely with teachers... (DSL, Focus Group).

As we mentioned above, this is now in the process of being addressed through the recruitment of an additional social worker to the SWIS team.

3. Continuation of previous ways of working

The sense that there is little difference between the pilot and the previous service is one of the reasons for the widely held view that the pilot is not going as well as it could be. It has been difficult to establish what work is being undertaken by social workers in schools that differs from their previous PACT work which was not school based. This will be discussed in more detail below, but it is an issue that the senior management team, the schools and the social workers all recognised.

Another perspective on the continuity of existing practice can be gained by looking at how schools have experienced the pilot to date. One DSL explained during an interview, “I’m still on the phone for hours on end to PACT and MASH chasing things up, [so] there is no change there.” This illustrates the enduring nature of some of the issues the project aimed to address, which include the more remote relationship between schools and social care, and the high population of young people who have social, emotional and mental health needs within these school clusters. This interviewee went on to emphasise the contrast between the project plan and the reality of implementation so far, when they commented “In theory [the pilot] would work lovely, but from initial idea to implementation, it seems to be two different things”.

4. Developing clarity about roles and responsibilities

Professionals from social care and education reflected on difficulties they faced in negotiating what the role of the social worker would be in schools. School staff generally wanted the social worker to be a pastoral and safeguarding resource that staff could draw upon. However, social workers are



understandably keen to maintain boundaries of the work they should be doing and want to avoid doing tasks that go beyond the social care remit. The social workers and the schools all discussed some of the problems in communicating their responsibilities and ways of working with each other. One worker told us “Realistically schools don’t understand what we do. I had to explain in a meeting”, and another added that their focus on relationships with families has been difficult to communicate to secondary schools, stating that “Making those bridges is hard and you have to meet in the middle, but people have to want to meet in the middle.” Another social worker shared that trust needed to be earned amongst other professionals, which was an additional component in working within schools. Senior staff also recognised the challenges associated with interagency working;

“The most important lesson is bringing those cultures together and understanding the impact of ordinary working relationships and the idea of walking a mile in someone else’s shoes and that’s important to appreciate.” (Senior manager, focus group).

There was a consensus among social care staff that the lack of clarity here had led the first term of implementation to be disjointed. One social worker expressed their hope to feel more confident in September, when the new term might offer a fresh start.

5. Challenges in the wider context in Southampton

As is the case with many new initiatives, the wider context in Southampton is proving a powerful factor in shaping the implementation of the pilot. Some of the issues discussed above seem to arise from the fact the SWIS social workers were recruited from the Protection and Court Team (PACT) team, and not sufficiently transitioned into the SWIS role. The work of the PACT team is known to be highly complex and time consuming, and the team itself is also facing other challenges at present.

Southampton Council has recently undergone extensive changes to their assessment procedures following feedback and advice on thresholds and processes from OFSTED. This has effectively lowered thresholds for intensive work and resulted in an influx of work into the PACT team. Senior managers were keen to express the difficulties this has created for the pilot, one noting during the focus group that “Assessment has had some demand challenges, so that means an increase in the number of cases coming into PACT which has impacted on everybody’s time.”

Meanwhile, the PACT team have also lost a number of social workers due to budget cuts. This has increased stress among the social workers, leading to stress related illness and time away from work. By June, two of the original five SWIS social workers had taken time off work due to illness, leading to increased pressure on the social workers in their assigned schools. The team manager had also resigned by this point, and a replacement came into post in mid-July.

Discussion

In launching this pilot, Southampton has embarked on an ambitious plan that aims to transform the way social care and education work together. Despite a rather difficult start, their experiences to date have generated some valuable learning opportunities. Project leads have already actively engaged with our findings – and their own reflections about the project – in order to shape it into an intervention that has the potential to bring about the changes described in the logic model. Indeed, we found evidence of this constructive attitude among stakeholders across social care and education.

Unfortunately, several challenges have meant that the aspirations set out in the project plan have not yet been realised. We can say that, at best, the pilot has been only partially implemented in Southampton to date. A range of factors, some outside of the control of those involved in delivery, have severely limited the scope of the pilot and the extent to which it is being implemented. As such, there is little evidence to date that could allow us to answer the research questions affirmatively – schools and



families have not been involved as intended, and although there is evidence that school staff find it acceptable in theory, the practical application of the pilot has not proved feasible from their perspective.

Basing the social workers involved in the pilot within the PACT team has some advantages, and fits with the logic of ensuring workers do statutory work within schools. For example, being part of a team that does a lot of child protection and court work may inure against the risk that workers might drift into doing more early intervention work or activities outside of the social work remit. But, equally, workload issues in the PACT team have contributed to the fact that social workers have been unable to prioritise spending time in schools.

A related challenge, over the next period, will be to clarify and consolidate the role of the social workers in schools. The activities they carry out and the points at which their role intersects with those of school pastoral staff is not clear at present, and if the intervention is to be scaled it will need to be more tightly described. As the pilot in Southampton moves beyond the initial implementation stage, project leads will need to develop a consistent understanding of what the SWIS role encapsulates.

Southampton Council hopes that a new team manager, as well as some new social work staff, will reinvigorate the team and help overcome the challenges they are facing during the next academic term. However, this will need to happen swiftly if measurable changes in key outcome indicators are to be present in our quantitative analysis of autumn term data.

Conclusions and next steps

The key finding from this stage of the evaluation is that social workers are not spending enough time in schools, and that – for various reasons – they have been unable to dedicate enough time to working with children and families involved with the schools in the pilot. It is difficult to see how the pilot will have the intended impact on the outcomes identified unless this changes significantly. Workers need to be actively spending time in schools and doing direct work with staff, students and parents. Making this possible should be a clear priority in coming months.

In highlighting the difficulties that are being encountered, this report may prove to be a challenging read for those who are working hard to make the pilot a success. The difficulties discussed are primarily systemic issues, and while they are significant and complex to address, this should not detract from the good work that individuals are doing. The stakeholders we interviewed, from both social care and schools, were positive about the individuals involved, and it was clear from our fieldwork that the groundswell of commitment that has been present from the outset remains intact.

Southampton now have an opportunity to take stock and re-think how to proceed at this point in the pilot, in light of the interim findings we present here. More than one DSL has suggested that a good place to start would be to revisit the logic model;

“...and say actually, what were the original goals of the project? We’re a million miles away from those goals and something has to change for this project to work, if that’s what we want to do and have social workers based in schools something needs to change or we’re all wasting our time...” (DSL, interview)

Based on findings that show how far the project to date has differed from the plan, we agree that going back to basics will be worthwhile. There is already evidence that this is happening, and the new team manager has begun to explore the ways the pilot can be improved immediately after taking up the post only a week ago (at the time of writing).



Recommendations

Often, when new initiatives lose their initial momentum or struggle to signal changes early on, there is a risk that partners lose interest or direct their attention elsewhere. This does not seem to have happened in this pilot, which demonstrates the strength of the collaboration between partners involved. Southampton now need to build on this and address the issues raised in this report. Our specific recommendations are as follows:

- Increase the capacity of the team by recruiting extra staff (this process has begun) in order to;
- Relieve the pressure of non-school based PACT cases on workers in the team by moving these cases to other workers. This seems to be happening to some extent, but the pilot would clearly benefit from this process being expedited.
- Review the demands of duty hours at the Civic Centre and the impact this has on social workers capacity for school-based work by decreasing the number of hours required per month.
- Increase the time workers are spending in schools and establish a social work presence in schools where this has not yet been possible.
- Consider using the beginning of a new school year in September as an opportunity for a formal 're-launch' of the pilot. The learning from the pilot so far could be used constructively and positively to tackle the challenges we have outlined.
- Further develop a shared understanding of what the roles and responsibilities of SWIS workers in collaboration with education staff.

In phase 2 of the evaluation we will explore how the pilot progresses into the new school year, and the impact that the project is having. We will also include the views and experience of children and families, who by then will have had more extensive experience of social workers in schools. As noted in the protocol, we will compare outcomes across the schools with those of a group of similar schools using difference-in-differences analysis. This will provide a robust counterfactual, in order to provide an indication of the impact the pilot is having. Our final report will be published in March 2020.



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