

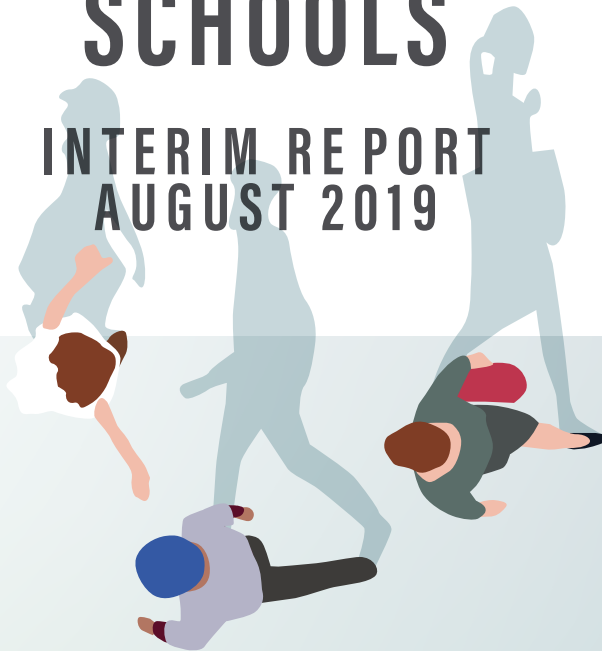


What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**

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STOCKPORT CHANGE PROJECT: SOCIAL WORKERS IN SCHOOLS

INTERIM REPORT
AUGUST 2019





What Works for Children's Social Care

Authors

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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

accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In Stockport a social work team have been embedded within a group of schools as part of a pilot intervention. Six social workers, three senior practitioners, a team leader and a business support officer have been placed across two secondary schools and eight primary schools in East Stockport for a period of 12 months from 29 April 2019. One other primary school has not yet been fully involved, but Stockport hope that a social worker will be embedded in this school soon. The aim is to work more closely with school staff to reduce referrals to children's social care, s.17 involvement, s.47 investigations and 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 key findings of this interim report can be summarised into six themes.

Variations in implementation

The pilot has been implemented differently across the schools. Variations in the physical space available, the culture of the schools, and the lines of communication between education and social care staff have all impacted on how the team has engaged with each school. Whether a school was a primary or secondary provision was another key feature influencing the implementation of the pilot. Primary school staff felt that it was important for the workers to be known to parents and carers and be visible and available on the playground. Work in both secondary schools involved less day-to-day contact with families, but more direct work with children and young people. Parents were also involved with the social workers in the secondary school, but they were likely to be involved with them at their home than in the school.

Mobile working challenges

In common with the other two SWIS Change projects, Stockport had early issues with technology (internet access, Wi-Fi and internet security), which impeded their everyday work and made mobile working difficult. The need for this IT support is important because social care staff needed remote access to their own systems and databases, and ensuring technical support is adequate is a key implementation lesson from the pilot. These issues were resolved in the week prior to data collection and the social workers were noting the improvements made here in the days before our visit.



Roles and relationships

Many of the social workers and school staff interviewed discussed difficulties they had faced in negotiating what the role of the school and the social worker would be. In general, schools want to use the social worker as a pastoral and safeguarding resource in the school to assist their existing staff. However, social workers have noted the need to maintain boundaries of the work they should be doing and not take on too many pastoral duties, such as playground duty.

The pilot was thought to be improving relationships between social care, schools and families. One education professional described the pilot as evidence of social care "...interacting in a wholly different way with the school staff and also importantly with children and families" The social workers in turn were noticing improving relationships with each school as their understanding of each other's work increased. The quality of the resulting relationships between social care and school staff seems crucial in the success of the pilot. There is some evidence that positive relationships are being built between schools and social care, and the level of support offered to both school staff and social workers appears to be high.

Workload challenges

The burden of workloads was an issue that was raised by social care and school staff. We only interviewed a small number of social workers involved, and their experiences may not represent the team. However, there was a strong sense among those we did interview that the workload was difficult to manage. One worker described being "run off [their] feet" and another talked about being "run ragged". They also noted the challenges of balancing the time they spend in the schools with other social work tasks that take place in other places (such as court work or home visits). School staff lent support to the notion that social workers had a heavy burden of work, and head teachers noted that ensuring social workers are not "overloaded" by keeping workloads manageable would be a crucial factor in the success of the pilot.

A related issue was the existing cases that some workers retained at the start of the pilot. One senior member of staff said this could mean "their presence in school would not be that powerful". Although project leads clarified that this was only the case for 3 of the workers, who brought 6, 15, and 22 children respectively, this does seem to have exacerbated workload issues for some workers. One worker described their case load as "inhibiting" and explained;

"I came up from half term on Friday, and I spent all day just on case recording, PLO stuff for existing cases that aren't even on our cluster...still working on locality case work" (Social worker, interview)

To some degree a period of transition is to be expected, and our fieldwork took place at a relatively early stage in the pilot. Over the course of the early months, work with some of these families has been completed or passed on to other workers, but at the time of writing seven families remain allocated to workers in the team. Senior management were aware of this and stressed that they were making efforts to reduce existing caseloads. At the steering group meeting we observed this reassurance was well-received by many of the schools, who are keen to see social worker presence in the schools increased. Some workers are understandably keen to continue working with families with whom they had developed relationships, and Stockport gave a strong sense that their priority was what was best for families.

Positive endorsements and acceptability among education staff

There was evidence that the pilot was positively received by a range of stakeholders, including education staff, children and families. The discussion noted above on the balance of existing work and school-based work shows how keen education staff are for the social workers to be based as much as



possible within their school, with caseloads comprised of children attending only their school or cluster. This shows that although there are aspects of the delivery that need work, education staff are keen on ensuring social workers take up a full role in the schools. This seems a positive endorsement of the programme, and a strong sign that the concept of social workers in schools is one that schools themselves are committed to.

The following quotation from a school pastoral team member illustrates why school staff were so appreciative of the input of SWIS to date;

“This is probably the best link we’ve ever had in that 5-year period (her time in school), because we’ve had link social workers before, and it had just been paperwork exercise... nothing that’s been improved or challenged or supportive to a family. Whereas I feel in the last term [social worker] and [senior practitioner] have really got into the school, listened to what we were saying, asking for...this is what these families need” (Pastoral staff, interview)

This was echoed by a head teacher in a different school, who elaborated on the consequences of more meaningful involvement with schools, suggesting “everything happens smarter...everything is joined up in a continuum and is flowing from one thing to another”.

Fit with existing provision

Head Teachers and DSLs noted that the addition of the social worker to the school enhanced the existing Team Around the School (TAS) provision. Previously, the TAS provision varied on a school by school basis but the inclusion of social workers has assisted with the structure of these meetings. One Head Teacher commented on the “impressive changes” in the TAS meetings where there is a much freer exchange of information and more effective chairing. We observed a TAS meeting during our evaluation where social workers along with SAP workers, the school nurse, and the school DLS shared information effectively and expediently. This resulted in clear action points and decisions. The SAP worker commented “this wasn’t even happening two months ago, it really is different now, I feel like we are getting things done and making a difference in these families’ lives”. Another Head teacher stated that their investment in the SWIS project meant they were “already far better off than those without this system, despite the project only being in its infancy”.

Discussion

The pilot is generating significant insights into the complexities of bringing social care staff into schools, and early qualitative evidence that this approach has potential as a way of addressing safeguarding issues in schools. Feedback on how the pilot builds on the existing TAS model is positive, and many of the challenges are being addressed through the proactive approach taken by project leads. A key challenge, over the next period, is to clarify and consolidate the role of the social workers in schools.

One aspect of the pilot which makes this particularly challenging is the varied nature of the schools involved, the differences between schools in how the project has been implemented, and how readily the school has accepted the intervention. There is evidence that relationships are developing across all the schools, so we will observe how successfully the pilot has overcome these early challenges later in the evaluation. As the project develops it is hoped that the qualitative accounts of promising outcomes will be supported by quantifiable differences between the schools involved and comparator schools.

Conclusions and next steps

The pilot fits well with the ethos of Stockport Family and the current drive to enable social workers to deliver relationship-based social work. By extending the TAS model with social work input, they are providing valued and timely support to education staff in dealing with safeguarding issues. Recruiting a



new team of social workers and embedding them within schools is a real achievement, particularly given the relatively short period of time in which this has been done. It is evident that meaningful work is being undertaken with children, families and with school staff which is encouraging and impressive.

We recommend a renewed emphasis on establishing the pilot in all schools and increase the presence of social workers in schools that have been less involved to date. We also recommend a continued focus on workload and efforts to ensure workers can have a physical presence across the schools and work intensively with children and families within them.

In phase 2 of the evaluation we will explore in more detail the mechanics of embedding the pilot into each of the schools involved, 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. Our final report will be published in March 2020.



Table of contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction	1
Methodology	1
Key findings to date	1
Variations in implementation	1
Mobile working challenges	1
Roles and relationships	2
Workload challenges	2
Positive endorsements and acceptability among education staff.....	2
Fit with existing provision	3
Discussion.....	3
Conclusions and next steps	3
Table of contents	5
Introduction.....	7
Rationale for social workers in schools project.....	7
Background to the project in Stockport	7
The pilot evaluation.....	7
Methods.....	8
Summary of pilot evaluation design	8
Data used in this report.....	8
Research questions addressed in this report.....	8
Analysis underpinning in this report	8
Interim findings	10
Project launch and initial implementation.....	10
Recruitment, training and set-up	10
Themes identified to date.....	10
1. Variations in implementation between schools	10
2. Mobile working challenges	11
3. Roles and relationships.....	11
4. Workload challenges.....	12
5. Positive endorsements and acceptability among education staff.....	13
6. Fit with existing provision	14
Discussion	14
Conclusions and next steps.....	15



Recommendations	15
References	17



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 focused on early intervention and protection, rather than statutory social work practice.

In Stockport, social workers have been placed into ten of the highest need mainstream schools. This includes two secondary schools and eight primary schools, and Stockport hope a ninth primary being included soon. 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 Stockport

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

In Stockport schools are organised into 11 geographical clusters. The intervention is taking place within the Werneth cluster, which covers a geographical area in Romiley in the east of the borough. The Werneth cluster has been using a Team Around the School (TAS) model since September 2016, which places early help practitioners alongside school nurses, teachers, and other school professionals. The aim of TAS is to improve information sharing and responses to safeguarding issues. Central to this is the role of School Age Plus (SAP) workers, who are responsible for early help referrals and family engagement, and often lead TAS meetings. Stockport are situating the social workers in schools' pilot within the TAS model in order to enhance its provision. The team includes six social workers, three senior practitioners, one project manager, a business support officer and a team manager (full time equivalent).

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, Wallace, and Forrester, 2019). The pilot evaluation focusses 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 evidence of the impact of the pilot. The schools involved in the pilot are listed in Table 1.



Table 1: List of schools involved

School	Primary/ Secondary	Size (pupils)	Type
Werneth	Secondary	1018	Maintained Community School
Harrytown	Secondary	736	Maintained Catholic faith School
St Mark's	Primary	280	Maintained Church of England faith school
St Christopher's	Primary	212	Maintained Catholic faith school
Arden	Primary	429	Maintained Community School
St Bernadette's	Primary	239	Maintained Catholic faith school
St Paul's	Primary	331	Maintained Church of England faith school
Greave	Primary	229	Maintained Community School
Woodley	Primary	475	Maintained Community School
Westmorland	Primary	483	Maintained Community School

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, Wallace 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 initial implementation shortly after the pilot got underway (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. And, 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 March and June 2019. It includes administrative data from the local authority, formal and informal interviews and observations with social care and education professionals, and focus groups involving school personnel involved in the intervention. Five researchers from Cardiff University completed the fieldwork in Stockport in June 2019. The details of data collected can be found in Table 2.



Table 2: Data collection March 2019 – June 2019

Data collection type	Number
Interviews with head teachers and school pastoral teams (1-4 participants per interview)	10
Interview with Director of Children's Services	1
Interview with principal social worker	1
Interview with project leads	2
Interview with social workers	3
Interview with senior practitioners	2
Interview with business support assistant	1
Interview with team leader	1
Observation of steering group meeting	1
Observation of discussion between team manager and business support assistant	1
Observation of Team Around the School (TAS) meetings	2
Observation of drop-in session with social worker and senior practitioner	1

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

Research questions addressed in this report

At this stage in the project our focus is on early evidence of feasibility and promise, as set out in the evaluation protocol (p. 3-5). 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?

Some of these questions are addressed more comprehensively than others at this stage. For example, while we have some early evidence about implementation, we will seek to develop how this fits into the logic model as part of our development of a programme theory.

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 lead author 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 research findings.

Interim findings

Project launch and initial implementation

This project was launched in April 2019, but minor delays due to the schools' Easter holidays and the number of schools involved, meant that not all workers were embedded until June 2019. At the time of our fieldwork they had begun to engage in direct work with school staff, young people, children and families. At the time of writing Stockport are working with leaders in the remaining primary school with a view to including this school fully in the pilot in due course.

The social work team are based in an office at one of the secondary schools – a large modern school. They work across this school and the other nine schools, spending time in each for an agreed period per week, although – as we discuss below - there is some variation in how successful this has been. For full time staff, social workers typically cover two schools each, and senior practitioners work across 4 schools. Having one of the secondary schools as a central base has proved advantageous in that the social workers are less isolated than they expected.

Recruitment, training and set-up

Stockport opted to recruit internally, because they were confident in the capabilities of their existing staff and wanted to avoid delay. This has enabled them to set-up the team quickly, though knock-on delays in recruiting to back fill their previous roles has meant that some workers are still working with families from their existing caseload. The limitations this has placed on their ability to take on new cases from the schools immediately has caused some frustration among some head teachers and pastoral staff at the schools.

Training and orientation of varying levels has been offered by the schools and this has allowed the social workers to become familiar with each school and its policies and procedures. They have also met DSLs and other safeguarding staff, as well as obtaining access in some cases to school email and calendars.

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.

1. Variations in implementation between schools

For a variety of reasons, the pilot has been implemented differently across the schools. Variations in the physical space available, the culture of the schools, and the lines of communication between



education and social care staff have all impacted on how the team has engaged with each school. In addition to the main office base at the secondary school, several of the primary schools have made space available, but it has not yet been possible to accommodate the social worker at the other secondary school.

One of the social workers explained that this was due not only to limited office space, but also due to the pastoral philosophies of the two neighbouring schools;

“There are no reasons why [the two secondary schools] should be different ... they both take from the same catchment and there are the same problems in both schools. [I think that one of them] would rather deal with things themselves and not involve social services” (Social worker, interview)

Nonetheless, ongoing discussion with one school led the team to hope that they would be able to integrate more into the school as the project develops. Whether a school was a primary or secondary provision was a key feature influencing the implementation of the pilot. Primary school staff felt that it was important for the workers to be known to parents and carers, and be visible and available on the playground. Work in both secondary schools involved less day-to-day contact with families, but more direct work with children and young people. At one secondary school, young people were able to approach any of the team based in the office directly as they move around the school independently. In a primary school, a child would be escorted to the social workers in a more formal manner.

Parents were also involved with the social workers in the secondary school, but they were likely to be involved with them at their home than in the school. Social workers within primary schools also had more of an opportunity to provide services such as parental drop-ins to offer advice or to signpost families who might need another service.

2. Mobile working challenges

In common with the other two SWIS Change projects, Stockport had early issues with technology (internet access, Wi-Fi and internet security), which impeded their everyday work and made mobile working difficult. The need for this IT support is important because social care staff needed remote access to their own systems and databases, and ensuring technical support is adequate is a key implementation lesson from the pilot. These issues were resolved in the week prior to data collection and the social workers were noting the improvements made here in the days before our visit.

Beyond the practicalities of aligning systems used by the two agencies, challenges around the rules associated with data sharing were also raised. For example, both the schools and the social workers wanted to adhere to their own data protection rules, but also share information that would be helpful. After experimenting with post-it notes over names and blanked screens, they eventually settled on sitting around a table each with their own laptop and discussing cases without physically showing the information to others. This was seen to work well in the TAS meeting observed. One head teacher noted that effectively sharing information was fundamental to multi-agency working, and that barriers to doing this must be overcome;

“We need to find safe ways to circumvent the prohibition. [In school we have] this phrase that safeguarding trumps everything [and in the SWIS project we need to stop] confidentiality rules and practices being so limiting and think of safeguarding as the first priority”. (Head teacher, Interview)

3. Roles and relationships

Many of the social workers and school staff interviewed discussed difficulties they had faced in negotiating what the role of the school and the social worker would be. In general, schools want to use the social worker as a pastoral and safeguarding resource in the school to assist their existing staff.



However, social workers have noted the need to maintain boundaries of the work they should be doing and not take on too many pastoral duties, such as playground duty.

The leadership team were aware of this challenge and actively finding ways in which to resolve these issues and develop a shared understanding of the role. One senior staff member explained ‘...it’s about getting the balance between ‘is it a statutory social work role or not?’” and added “I think we’re really sort of honing our delivery in that very very tight space”. This is being done in close collaboration with education staff. For example, the steering group have regular meetings and school staff were invited to sit on the interview panels when social workers were being recruited.

These efforts seem to be proving successful in building positive relationships between the two agencies. Most schools were positive about the input of their link social worker and complimentary about their dedication to their work and the extent to which they were overcoming challenges. One head teacher noted “it’s a more positive face of social work than we’ve seen previously” while another described the pilot as evidence of social care “...interacting in a wholly different way with the school staff and also importantly with children and families” The social workers in turn were noticing rapidly improving relationships with each school as their understanding of each other’s work increased.

The quality of the resulting relationships between social care and school staff seems crucial in the success of the pilot. There is some evidence that relationship building is progressing, as the level of support offered to both schools and social workers appears to be high. Despite concerns about workloads, many of the social workers reported high levels of job satisfaction and a desire to continue with the project and the relationship-based work to which it lends itself. Once social workers became more embedded in the schools and have good relationships with staff, they feel less isolated from the wider social care team. This suggests the schools represent a supportive environment. This was also echoed in many of the accounts given by school professionals, where decreasing professional anxiety regarding social care issues and good relationships with school social workers were reported. One noted that they can now;

“...use the social workers as a sounding board ... you know ... like check you’re doing the right thing ... [I appreciate] the instant access to social work, we want early intervention that’s what we want” (DSL, interview).

Others agreed that things were changing, with one pastoral lead noting that previously they had “to spend a long time gathering evidence” before approaching social care, whereas the pilot means they “can ask for advice when we need it”.

4. Workload challenges

The burden of workloads was an issue that was raised by social care and school staff. We only interviewed a small number of social workers involved, and their experiences may not represent the team. However, there was a strong sense among those we did interview that the workload was difficult to manage. One worker described being “run off [their] feet” and another talked about being “run ragged”. They also noted the challenges of balancing the time they spend in the schools with other social work tasks that take place in other places (such as court work or home visits). School staff lent support to the notion that social workers had a heavy burden of work and head teachers noted that ensuring social workers are not “overloaded” by keeping workloads manageable would be a crucial factor in the success of the pilot.

A related issue was the existing cases that some workers retained at the start of the pilot. One senior member of staff said this could mean “their presence in school would not be that powerful”. Although project leads clarified that this was only the case for 3 of the workers, who brought 6, 15, and 22 children respectively, this does seem to have exacerbated workload issues for some workers. One worker described their case load as “inhibiting” and explained;



“I came up from half term on Friday, and I spent all day just on case recording, PLO stuff for existing cases that aren’t even on our cluster ... still working on locality case work” (Social worker, interview)

To some degree a period of transition is to be expected, and our fieldwork took place at a relatively early stage in the pilot. Over the course of the early months, work with some of these families has been completed or passed on to other workers, but at the time of writing seven families remain allocated to workers in the team. Senior management were aware of this and stressed that they were making efforts to reduce existing caseloads. At the steering group meeting we observed this reassurance was well-received by many of the schools, who are keen to see social worker presence in the schools increased. Some workers are understandably keen to continue working with families with whom they had developed relationships, and Stockport gave a strong sense that their priority was what was best for families.

5. Positive endorsements and acceptability among education staff

There was evidence that the pilot was positively received by a range of stakeholders, including education staff, children and families. The discussion noted above on the balance of existing work and school work shows how keen education staff are for the social workers to be based as much as possible within their school, with caseloads comprised of children attending only their school or cluster. This shows that although there are aspects of the delivery that need work, education staff are keen on ensuring social workers take up a full role in the schools. This seems a positive endorsement of the programme, and a strong sign that the concept of social workers in schools is one that schools themselves are committed to. School staff were particularly positive about the extra knowledge social workers brought, and one noted “I think we are quite good at knowing what services are out there, but they know lots more than we know”.

A school pastoral lead noted that “the kids are very responsive, interested in the social workers [being] there, want to be introduced to [the social workers and to] understand the role”. This reflects a broader belief that the project could help to demystify the negative stereotypes children and families may have of social workers. Moreover, a senior practitioner described how the workers used their time at assemblies, in the playground, and at dropping off times, to familiarise parents with them. They acknowledged that the stereotype of “social workers as child snatchers” is deeply ingrained and they expressed hope that this strategy will help change this perception. One of the senior managers reinforced this view, suggesting that as part of the pilot workers were;

“...interacting in a wholly different way with the school staff and also importantly with children and families [I attribute this] efficiency to their increased presence, connection and legitimate role within the school setting.” (Senior Team Interview)

The following quotation from a school pastoral team member illustrates why school staff were so appreciative of the input of SWIS to date;

“This is probably the best link we’ve ever had in that 5-year period (her time in school), because we’ve had link social workers before, and it had just been paperwork exercise ... nothing that’s been improved or challenged or supportive to a family. Whereas I feel in the last term [social worker] and [senior practitioner] have really got into the school, listened to what we were saying, asking for ... this is what these families need” (Pastoral staff, interview)

This was echoed by a head teacher in a different school, who elaborated on the consequences of more meaningful involvement with schools, suggesting “everything happens smarter...everything is joined up in a continuum and is flowing from one thing to another”.



6. Fit with existing provision

One way in which this process of 'joining up' seems to be working is through enhancing the existing Team Around the School (TAS) provision, which head teachers and DSLs noted as a benefit of the SWIS. Previously, the TAS provision varied on a school by school basis but the inclusion of social workers has assisted with the structure of these meetings. Whilst their role varies in each TAS context, the addition of SWIS social workers to the TAS has been noted. Some schools felt it increased the commitment of professionals and provided a level of accountability that was previously absent;

“Before now when we had differing levels of commitment from the school nurse, the school age plus (SAP) workers and social services it was a frustrating waste of time on occasion. [SWIS] is so different, it brings people together and brings about accountability.” (DSL, focus group)

Another head teacher commented on the “impressive changes” in the TAS meetings where there is a much freer exchange of information and more effective chairing. We observed a TAS meeting during our evaluation where social workers along with SAP workers, the school nurse, and the school DLS shared information effectively and expediently. This resulted in clear action points and decisions. The SAP worker commented “this wasn’t even happening two months ago, it really is different now, I feel like we are getting things done and making a difference in these families’ lives”. Reflecting on the meeting in an interview, a head teacher noted “We didn’t need to discuss any children because every child we had on our list the social workers were already dealing with, which is just a real, real, massive progress than we’ve never had before”.

Summarising the difference the pilot has made to the existing TAS model, a senior manager said;

“we were linked to one or two schools [with only] a limited presence within that school, really very limited...what’s different now is that we’ve embedded those that work for that team within the school” (Senior staff, interview)

In addition to the effectiveness of the TAS meetings, many school staff commented on the speed at which they can get advice and feedback. One school safeguarding worker contrasted the pilot with their previous experiences of referring through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding and Support Hub (MASSH);

“...it could be three days before we’ve got an answer back, but with [social worker name] within ten minutes we know where we’re going with it’ (Pastoral team, interview).

Another head teacher stated that their investment in the SWIS project meant they were “already far better off than those without this system, despite the project only being in its infancy”.

Discussion

The pilot is generating a great deal of insight into the complexities of bringing social care staff into schools, and early evidence suggests that this approach has potential as a way of addressing safeguarding issues in schools. Still being in its infancy, it is unsurprising that social care and education staff are still working out how best to implement the pilot. Indeed, the learning that emerges from this process is an expectation of the Change Projects. At this early stage there is clear evidence that they are working collaboratively to make it a success, and their efforts are undoubtedly aided by the broad-based enthusiasm for the project.

The pilot builds on the existing TAS model, so it is particularly encouraging that the feedback is so positive – with a consensus that the social worker enhances this way of working and fits into the model seamlessly. Many of the challenges are being actively addressed through the proactive approach taken by project leads. A key challenge, over the next period, is 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 seem to vary. As the pilot moves away from the initial implementation, Stockport will need to develop a consistent understanding of what the SWIS role encapsulates.

One aspect of the pilot which makes this particularly challenging is the varied nature of the schools involved, and the differences between schools in how the project has been implemented and how readily the school has accepted the intervention. The differences between implementation in the two secondary schools is a good illustration of this, and a point which highlights the role of context. There is evidence that relationships are developing across all the schools, so we will observe how successfully the pilot has overcome these early challenges later in the evaluation. Some school staff were particularly effusive about progress to date, while others were more reserved with their responses. However, the universal willingness of head teachers and DSL pastoral staff to meet with the researchers and share their experiences is a positive sign.

We will continue to explore the nature of the intervention, and how it varies across settings within the Werneth cluster in the remainder of the pilot. As the project develops it is hoped that the qualitative accounts of promising outcomes will be supported by quantifiable differences between the schools involved and comparator schools.

Conclusions and next steps

The pilot fits well with the ethos of Stockport Family and Stockport Children's Services and the current drive to enable social workers to deliver relationship-based social work. Rather than bringing a completely new idea into play, Stockport have used the pilot to strengthen an existing approach that is already proving effective. By extending the TAS model with social work input, they are providing valued and timely support to education staff in dealing with safeguarding issues. Recruiting a new team of social workers and embedding them within schools is a real achievement, particularly given the relatively short period of time in which this has been achieved. It is evident that meaningful work is being undertaken with children, families and school staff, which is encouraging and impressive.

During data collection it was apparent that the project has some impetus across the board involving all levels of children's social care, as well as from many of the schools involved in the project. It will be interesting to re-visit Stockport later in the year when the project has become more established. The relationships that Stockport has built between children's social care and the school system are striking. Those participating in the research have expressed their desire for this to continue to develop and improve over the next academic term.

At this early stage it is important not only to reflect on what has been done well in implementing this programme, but also to consider whether any changes can be made at this stage prior to the Autumn term during which further evaluations will be made. Stockport have been highly reflexive in the implementation process and have already highlighted where they feel changes need to be made. These are reiterated in the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- Further work to establish the pilot in all schools and increase the presence of social workers in schools that have been less involved to date.
 - The success of this will be down to continuing collaboration between social care and school staff. We suggest the project leads work closely with schools where social workers have not been as fully embedded in order to explore the feasibility of this.
- Continued attention on workloads



- Some social workers expressed difficulties managing their workload, and some workers continue to hold previous cases. It appears that these have largely been passed on, freeing the SWIS workers up to focus on school-based work. Senior managers will want to ensure the overall workload is manageable, and a continued focus on workload is recommended.

In phase 2 of the evaluation we will explore in more detail the mechanics of embedding the pilot into each of the schools involved, 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. This will provide a robust counterfactual, in order to estimate the short-term impact the pilot is having. Our final report will be published in March 2020.



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