

NSPCC

KNOWING HOW TO PROTECT

USING RESEARCH EVIDENCE TO PREVENT HARM TO CHILDREN

Jonathan Breckon and Joanne Hay

February 2015

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

We are very grateful to **Jane Aston** who wrote the first draft and assiduously captured the discussion of the seminar that informed this paper. We would also like to thank the following for their help and insights on the report:

Jonathan Bacon, Mary Baginsky, Susannah Bowyer, Leon Feinstein, Dez Holmes, Elspeth Kirkman, Geoff Mulgan, Miles Ockwell, Chris Roberts, Helen Roberts, Andrew Webb, Stian Westlake and Teresa Williams.

The views and any errors in the report remain the authors own. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of the Alliance for Useful Evidence, NSPCC or its constituent partners.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jonathan Breckon is Head of the Alliance for Useful Evidence. The Alliance for Useful Evidence champions the use of evidence in social policy and practice. It is an open-access network of more than 2,000 individuals from across government, universities, charities, business and local authorities. He joined Nesta from the Arts and Humanities Research Council where he was Director of Policy and Public Affairs. He has also worked in policy and research at the Royal Geographical Society, the British Academy, and Universities UK. He is a member of The Society of Evidence Based Policing executive committee and Board member of Campaign for Social Science.

Joanne Hay is Head of Strategy at the National Society for the Protection of Children (NSPCC). The NSPCC are the leading children's charity fighting to end child abuse in the UK and Channel Islands. They help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives, protect those at risk, and find the best ways of preventing abuse from ever happening. She joined the NSPCC from Tri-borough Childrens' Services. Previous roles include Strategy and Commissioning Director for Kensington and Chelsea local authority and Advisor for the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit.

Nesta...



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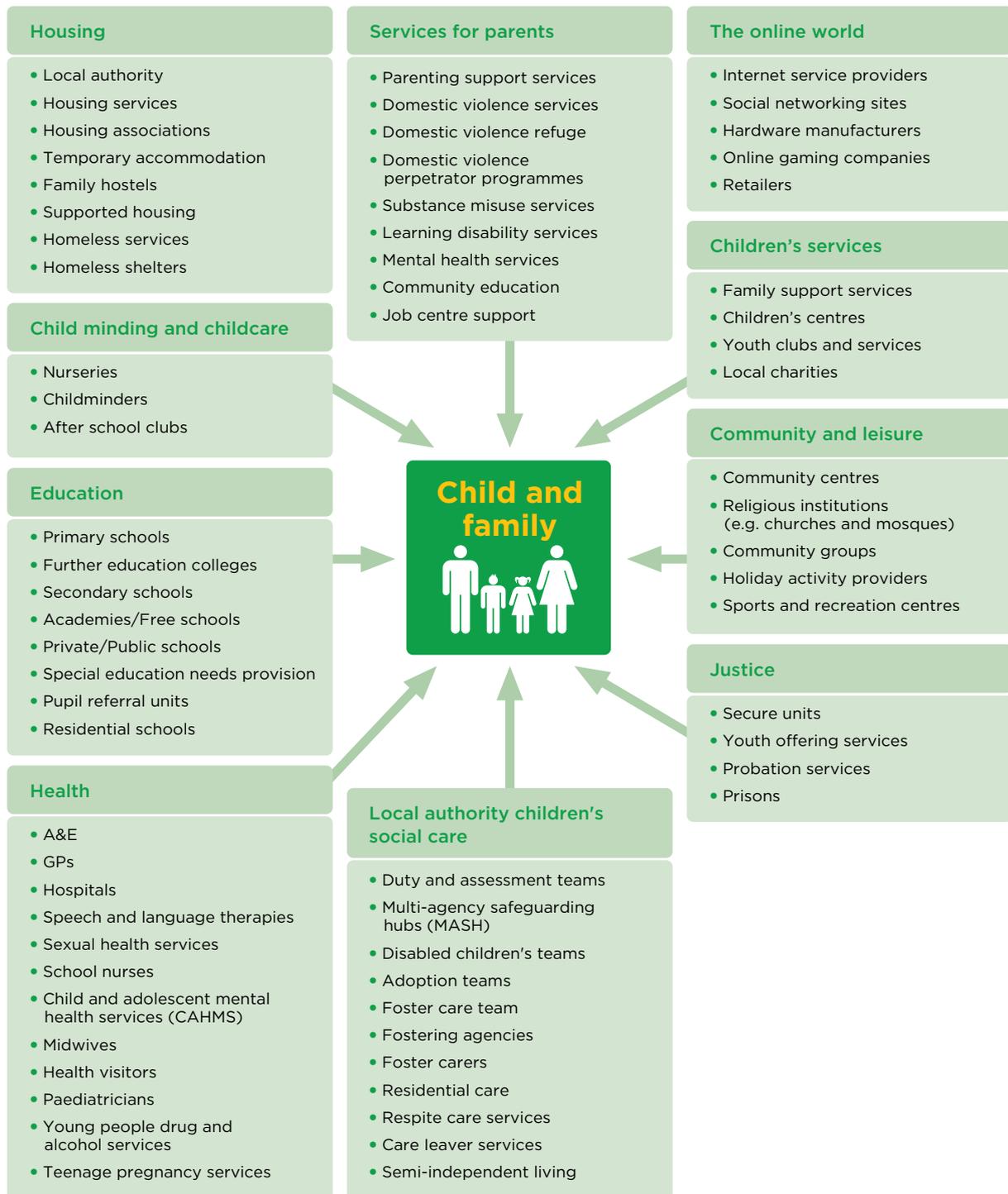
INTRODUCTION

The sad reality is that abuse and neglect of children is not in decline. Around 520,000 children are abused or neglected at home each year.¹ Much has been written about the need to rethink services. To ensure that limited resources achieve the best possible outcomes for our most vulnerable children and families. Or to intervene early to prevent them from entering the care system in the first place. But could we utilise more evidence to improve the situation? In contrast to other sectors, the evidence base for what works in social care is underdeveloped.

There has been at least four decades of evidence-based medicine. The reality of evidence-informed practice can be challenging. Research may be biased because of dominance of big pharma, or an overreliance on ‘mechanical rule following’ at the expense of human care.² But there is still a strong commitment in health to improve professional judgement by the appropriate use of research. The guiding medical principle of *primum non nocere*, ‘first, do no harm’, is relevant to other professions such as those involved in protecting children. Evidence may support such a principle, by pointing to whether, despite our best intentions, we may be doing more harm than good. And, more positively, opens us up to new innovations that could make us even better at child protection.

This paper outlines some ways forward in improving evidence use in child protection. It is based on a roundtable chaired by Geoff Mulgan, chief executive of Nesta, run by the Alliance for Useful Evidence and NPSCC, on 10 March 2014 (a list of delegates can be found in Annex A), email correspondence with delegates, and a plenary debate at the ‘How safe are our children?’ NSPCC national conference, 2 April 2014 at the Royal College of Physicians, London. Unless otherwise stated, any quotations used in the report come from the roundtable on 10 March 2014. The views and any errors are, however, the authors’ own.

Our seminar gave particular focus to the role of social workers. But we know that safeguarding and protecting children extends far beyond social workers and children’s social care, into a wide range of services that are provided by public, private and third sector organisations. The police, for instance, play an important role. Our remit was UK-wide, but we are conscious that the discussion and contributors were not equally spread around the UK and we welcome your views on running roundtables focused on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NSPCC has provided this infographic of the child protection system to show the diversity of actors in this field:



1. EVIDENCE, INTUITION AND GOOD PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT

“Social workers and managers should always reflect the latest research on the impact of neglect and abuse when analysing the level of need and risk faced by the child.

Working Together to Safeguard Children, Department for Education, 2013³

There may, in the past, have been a perceived tension in the sector between using evidence to inform practice and professional judgement. The fear was of ‘de-skilling’ staff; professional decision making becoming over-reliant on ‘tick box’, static, standardised models. Models that were based on other people’s research, eroding hard-won personal expertise.

But this tension is misplaced and outdated. According to research commissioned for the Department of Education, professional judgement and evidence can – and should – be mutually supportive. Experience and intuitive thinking are essential components of decision making in ‘human services’. But they must be informed by theory, research and the use of evidence-based tools and standardised measures in practice.⁴ There is an increasing consensus about the need to move towards what’s called ‘Structured Professional Judgement’, in which professional decision making is supported by research-based standardised tools.⁵ These sorts of instruments support objective measurement of the issues facing individuals and families. They can help provide evidence of the extent to which the services/support provided impacts on those issues to produce positive change, based on the best available research of what does – and doesn’t work – in particular contexts.*

But, according to a systematic review of all the available research, these standardised tools work best when blended with professional competence and confidence.⁶ Instruments and checklists are not a substitute for professional expertise. It was stressed to us by Teresa Williams, Director of Social Research & Policy at the Nuffield Foundation, that these tools are dominated ‘on average’ predictions; they don’t always help you to make decisions about particular cases. But the general assertion is valid: research evidence can be a device for good professional judgement by being part of the mix. Evidence is not a threat to judgement. Both are needed.

‘Professional intuition is sometimes marvellous and sometimes flawed’

Research evidence can also provide insights into how we go about making decisions in child protection practice. When can you trust your guts? Or when will our intuitions deceive us – with potentially dire consequences for those protecting children from harm?

*Use of standardised measures is one aspect of evidence-informed practice. But we are aware that there are other approaches to applying best available research on what does and doesn’t work in particular contexts.

Substantial work in social psychology and behavioural economics has been devoted to exploring, challenging, and uncovering the scope of cognitive biases. Some of this research shows the positive side of quick-thinking professional judgement. For instance, Gary Klein* observed how senior American firefighters could accurately predict the sources of fires just by the 'look and feel' of the smoke and flames on the outside of the buildings.⁷

But some of research on how we make decisions can be quite challenging for any professional. The potential for harm and our ability to make the right choices in child protection cannot be overestimated. One study for the Department for Education on the accuracy of clinical judgement in the assessment of risk of child maltreatment found the accuracy to be 'only slightly better than guessing'.⁸

There is a whole range of cognitive biases distorting social workers' decisions at the 'front door' in the child protection system, according to the Behavioural Insights Team.⁹ For instance, they found 'confirmation bias' where you only look for evidence that confirms pre-existing views. The complexity of social workers' decision making is increased further by the fact that many sequential decisions have to be made through the course of a single day, which engenders 'decision fatigue'.¹⁰

How to bolster professional intuition at the 'front door'

Professional intuition can be highly valuable. But we must be aware of its downsides. As the Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman asserted in a joint article with Gary Klein in *American Psychologist*, their influential research has flagged that 'professional intuition is sometimes marvellous, and sometimes flawed'.¹¹

So how to get the best from intuition? The BIT team has offered ways to help social workers at the 'front door'. For example, a problem with some of the tools mentioned above - such as actuarial tools for risk assessment - is that they are too complex for fast-paced professional decision-making settings. They proposed that it may be more effective to use what they call 'Fast and Frugal Trees': simpler, more intuitive versions of actuarial tools. Or even checklists, which can be used to ensure, for example, that specific questions have been asked of a case relating to a child before it is closed. BIT recommended that the Department for Education trial some of these methods.

The Behavioural Insights Team, also recommend giving more time for reflection and gathering accurate feedback on past decisions. Or being informed by gathering 'case banks' to build up knowledge of the cues relating to various types of outcomes so that these can be recognised in new cases.¹²

*Gary Klein has closely observed how fire-fighters, nurses or soldiers make high-pressure decisions 'on the job', not in the idealised world of the laboratory. Klein's work has influenced how the US Army has trained their recruits and remains highly relevant today, 16 years after his influential book 'Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions' was published.

2. CAN INSTITUTIONS SUPPORT EVIDENCE-INFORMED CHILD PROTECTION?

In other areas of social policy, we have seen the creation of new institutions to foster evidence-use by professionals – as part of improving practice.¹³ Could we do the same in child protection?

In policing, we have new bodies such as the Society for Evidence-Based Policing and a College of Policing to assist frontline staff grappling with research. In schools, there is the Education Endowment Foundation, networks such as Teacher Development Trust and a new member-led College of Teaching to make sure ‘professional practice is grounded in the best up-to-date evidence’.¹⁴ But there are no dedicated forums for discussing innovation and evidence for what works in child protection.

A highly promising new set of ‘what works’ institutions will make it easier access to research for those engaged in child protection. Not just for frontline staff, but also commissioners, policymakers and others with the power and resources to make things change. This current ‘what works’ movement involves the Cabinet Office in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council, the Big Lottery Fund and others. Together they have set up eight ‘what works’ centres. Some are new, such as the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction, based at the College of Policing, and others are well established – such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence – but have been brought into the fold of a network of centres.¹⁵

The new what works institutions are of course not the only players that can help with evidence. We can ‘recycle’ some of the material from What Works for Children, supported by Barnado’s, City and York universities, and the Economic and Social Research Council. Although it formally closed around a decade ago, it still has useful ‘evidence nuggets’, a rich website and training materials.¹⁶ The Centre also provides insights into how to positively support staff. One of the leading lights in the What Works for Children initiative, Professor Helen Roberts from UCL’s Institute of Child Health, described how the centre dealt with mentoring that was popular but had some serious questions marks against it from research:

“Mentoring (had)...a particularly popular intervention at the time (cheap, strong face validity and some heart-warming stories). We were able to share with service planners research evidence which showed that not all mentoring had the desired effect, and what was great about working with people who ran services was that they didn't then say 'so we won't do it' but worked to adapt their service to counter some of the difficulties which had caused harm to vulnerable children and young people where mentors had been given insufficient training, or had lost interest or become disillusioned, leaving young people with one more failed relationship.”¹⁷

The What Works for Children was partly a response to a common criticism from practitioners: ‘We don't know where to find research evidence/never get to hear about research’. That centre – and the new tranche that started in 2012 – will help answer that challenge. There are many other players with long experience supporting the sector to access and apply evidence. The list could be very long, but to name-check a few, there are charities and consultancies like Research in Practice, the Social Research Unit at Dartington, the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating (EPPI) Centre – and of course children's charities such as NSPCC.

All these institutions can help us apply research evidence to child protection. The ‘what works’ centres will make research more accessible. Although there are no centres for discussing innovation and evidence focused on child protection, creating another institution is probably not the answer. Practitioners seeking digestible evidence should access the current bodies. What we do need is help with ‘intelligent demand’ for the evidence produced by these organisations. Helping staff apply material from What Works centres in the real-life ‘blue light’ settings of protecting children. We return to this point in the recommendations in the final section.

3. CAN WE EXPERIMENT TO FIND OUT WHAT WORKS?

How do you innovate when the perceived costs of failure are so high? If we experiment with a new therapy, say, or approach to preventing child abuse, it can feel frightening if it doesn't work. It's hard to argue for experimentation in this highly emotionally charged area.

The former head of Westminster and Chelsea Council Derek Myers is an advocate of a more scientific approach to running local authorities in all areas, including experimental approaches. But he warns:

“We cannot easily do blind trials. We cannot ignore some dangerous parents whilst we seek to help others in order to measure the different effects. Try saying that to the Serious Case Review.”¹⁸

We also heard from our roundtable about the challenges of experimental research from Leon Feinstein, Head of Evidence, Early Intervention Foundation:

“Randomised control trials are really useful; if they are done well they can shed tremendous light on certain questions. But it is very difficult to do them well, and even then, they are not going to answer all of the questions that we have in relation to social policy, or indeed, child protection.”

An example, according to Leon, would be a recent review looking at the long-term consequences of domestic violence and abuse.¹⁹ Conceptually, as an impact question, it is the terrain in which randomised control trials might be thought to be useful.

“But the experience of domestic violence cannot be randomised, so while in some domains, randomised control trials are very rich and useful, they cannot provide all the answers needed.”

Leon Feinstein, Head of Evidence, Early Intervention Foundation

But we must try and learn, to find out even better ways of protecting children, and learning what is not currently working – and what works. Dr Susannah Bowyer from Research in Practice has argued that experimentation doesn't have to be risky:

“If experimentation includes learning more about what we already do and its effect, it doesn't involve taking additional risks, just understanding better the inherent risks in 'business as usual'. Innovation, equally, needs some evidence underpinning it to justify the risk of implementation.”²⁰

There are relatively few randomised controlled studies around child protection.²¹ But trials do take place. A trial is currently underway evaluating the effectiveness of a therapeutic service designed to help children and young people who have been affected by sexual abuse.²² The research includes one of the largest randomised trials of this type of therapy called 'Letting the Future In', which helps children and young people express themselves including talking, playing and creative activities such as painting, drawing or storytelling.²³

Of course experimental research is not enough. It is vital we have a diversity of types of evidence (see section below on using appropriate research methods). As Dr Susannah Bowyer from Research in Practice said to us:

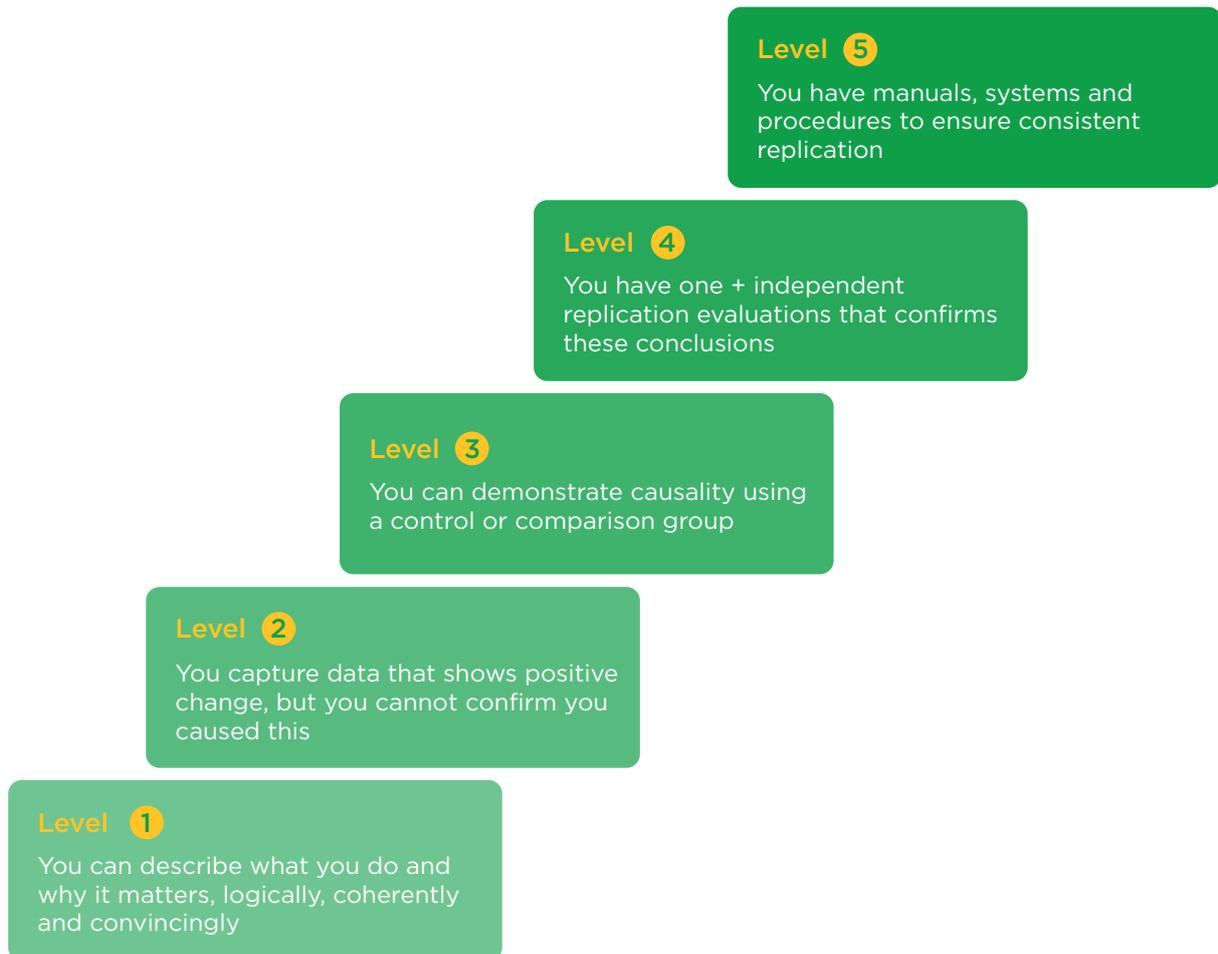
“If we ignore the value of qualitative research in building understanding of the experiences of children and young people, and of practitioners in the child protection system, we stand to remain ignorant of a great deal of knowledge vital to the project of building practice. We know that relationships are at the core of successful social work. Understanding relationship-based practice and building transferable evidence to support practice improvement will have to take account of qualitative research evidence.”²⁴

Experimenting with new approaches – and robustly evaluating them – is an important way of finding out if things work, and not blindly going on as before. One way of dealing with different approaches to evidence is to formalise them in a framework or hierarchy of evidence types. This is discussed in the next section.

4. WHAT IS 'GOOD ENOUGH' EVIDENCE?

What sorts of evidence should we include – or drop – when making decisions on protecting children from harm. To answer this, some organisations use formal tiers of evidence. The idea is to make explicit and transparent criteria for deciding what's in or out.

Nesta levels of evidence



One model is the Nesta Standards of Evidence. They use a simple 1 to 5 scale. The starting point for all those Nesta will fund is Level 1, this involves a clear articulation of why something, such as a new service, could have a positive impact. As the levels progress, it will be expected that data is collected to isolate the impact, the findings are validated externally, and by Level 5, demonstrable evidence that the product or service can be delivered at multiple locations and still deliver a strong, positive benefit.

These standards are not new. The US has many similar hierarchies, such as the Maryland Scale and GRADE. In the UK, there are Project Oracle's Standards of Evidence²⁵ for youth services, Nesta's levels of evidence for impact investment,²⁶ and the Social Research Unit at Dartington's 'what works' standards of evidence.²⁷

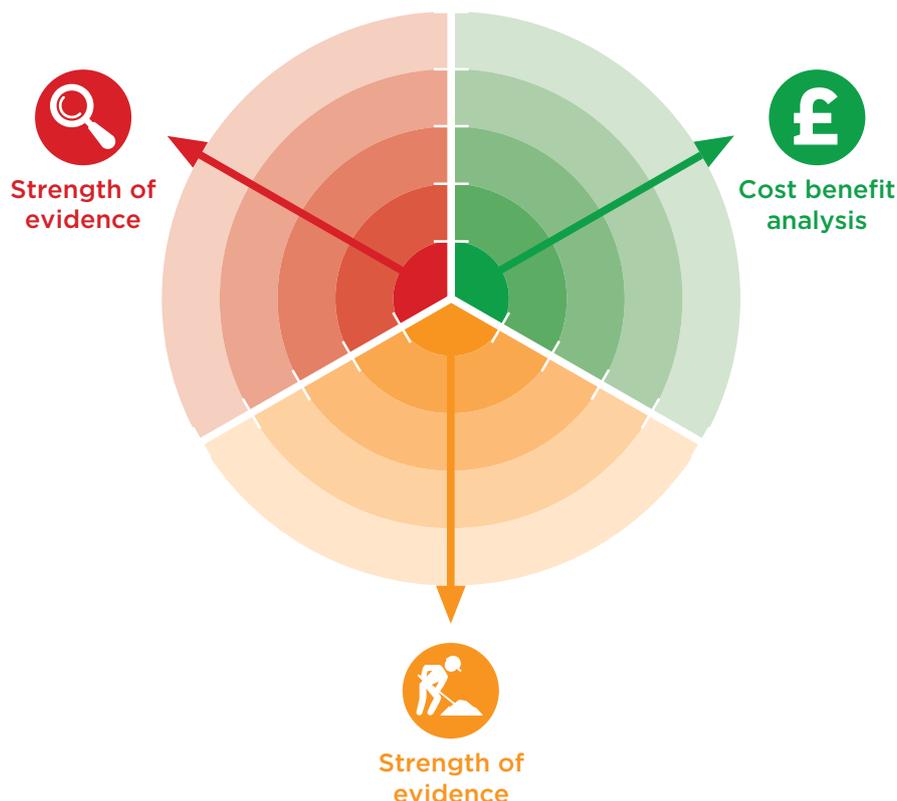
A model based on this same approach and that of the UK Treasury's guide to evaluation, *The Magenta Book*,²⁸ comes from Early Intervention Foundation, one of the 'What Works Centres'.²⁹ Although their focus is not on child protection per se, their approach to different types of evidence, launched in a guidebook³⁰ published in July 2014, provides insights into how we might formally answer the question of what types of evidence we need. The Foundation's framework is focused on advising commissioners of services.

The Early Intervention Foundation standards are trying to use a balanced approach that recognises the need for formative assessment to support innovation as well as summative assessment to inform commissioning. As their lead on evidence told us at the roundtable:

“This approach seeks to support innovation and improvement to the evidence base. Small steps forward are more achievable than trying to translate everything into a randomised control trial. But equally, if we can do randomised control trials well, where they are relevant to particular questions, then we can add a huge amount to our understanding of the challenges of intervention.”

Leon Feinstein, Head of Evidence, Early Intervention Foundation

When advising commissioners of local services, the Foundation stressed that strength of evidence is only one of the criteria they use. They also have two other elements: local 'implementability' and local appraisal of costs and benefits, set out in the diagram below. All three need to be included in the mix.



As well as the hierarchies of evidence, there are other useful guides and toolkits to help judge what's 'sound evidence'. In a very different sector from child protection, international development, the BOND network has an Evidence Principles checklist, used by many NGOs to help commission, design or review evidence. It is particularly relevant to qualitative research. The BOND principles include 'appropriateness' – does your method match your research question? Another guide to quality comes from the now-defunct Cabinet Office strategy: *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence*.³¹ It's still as relevant today as it was back when it was produced in 2003. Another helpful framework sits beside HM Treasury's *Magenta Book*,³² a vast tome offering guidance on evaluation; it has a special supplement to check the quality of qualitative evaluation.³³

Whatever the downsides of these hierarchies, frameworks or principles – and there are certainly critics³⁴ – they do at least give you a structure to think about what evidence is going to be useful. Quantity of evidence does not equate to quality. Some evidence will be much more appropriate to your needs than others. Judgements do need to be made, and these frameworks help to make those decisions.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING EVIDENCE USE

As an employer in the past, Derek Myers, former chief executive of two London boroughs and a qualified social worker suggested that we need a stronger culture of ‘learning from the past, and the present’ for child protection staff. When Derek employed staff, he generally sought people who were reliable, “*who would do as they were told, but who would be good cogs in the bureaucratic machine*”. In some public services that would be a successful strategy because those things demonstrate likely reliable delivery of regularised tasks.

“But the task of professionals dealing with risk also requires good judgement and therefore we need people who have the confidence to make those judgements, people who are semi-independent from their organisations. We also want people who can learn from the past, but also, from the present, and that is very difficult in a busy working environment. The people who have these qualities and capabilities will be ambitious; they will have career choices, and will be able to walk away to pursue a better working environment if you do not give it to them. These qualities are, at present, culturally at odds with people who see themselves deeply involved in the welfare of others.”

Derek Myers, Chair of the London and Trustee Board of Shelter

Therefore, we may need to encourage people to be ambitious in public service, to think carefully about what messages we send, how we reward people, and how we reinforce the expectation of a ‘high capability judging’ individual.

Can child protection staff be ‘social scientists’?

A recent review of social work training for the Department of Health by Professor David Croisdale–Appleby³⁵ outlines three domains of social work knowledge or capabilities; that social workers should be practitioners, professionals, and social scientists. The third domain, that social workers should continually demonstrate that they have a capability as social scientists, would be a profound change from the current position. It would require two particular characteristics – to be able to use research, but also to be able to gather evidence. So how can we encourage those working in child protection and care to be better social scientists?

Getting more involved in creating new research and using data

To be closer to social science, we could encourage social workers and others to do research. As part of their Continuing Professional Development, we should encourage direct involvement of staff in applied research, including doing PhDs.

The Chief Social Worker for children and families, Isabelle Trowler, suggested that social workers should be more involved in the ‘building up of local knowledge about what works’.

Staff can also use data to research and learn. Senior managers have a responsibility to create a peer research environment, and encourage people to take data seriously, after having retreated from it, post-audit commission, in local government. Rather than being a burden, ‘data is a rich treasury of insights’.

Top-down policy performance frameworks need to encourage this performance measurement information to be for practitioners to enable judgment, not just a tool a measurements control systems imposed from above.

“...part of the barrier to people using the (performance measurement) information, it’s that it is something done to them, rather than something available for them.

Leon Feinstein, Head of Evidence, Early Intervention Foundation

Others have recommended that ownership of research needs to be with frontline staff, not something imposed on them by external academics.³⁶ Encouraging child protection teams to be involved in generating research questions, designing research projects that meet their needs, and helping to gather data and evidence, could help engender a greater sense of ownership. Practitioners in public services – not academics – are often innovators and initiators of new programmes that need evaluating before being rolled out.³⁷ We need to have these innovators at the heart of this evidence system. But for people to be involved in this way and become like ‘social scientists’, will require considerable growth of workforce capacity to free them up to engage.

Better education and training on evidence use

The two recent government reviews of social work training have recommended more training and professional development on evidence use.³⁸ These reviews provide an opportunity to be much clearer, from an employer perspective, about the expectations of social workers, and what the knowledge and skillset should be.

Having been tasked with clarifying what social workers should know, and should be able to do post-qualification, the Chief Social Worker for children and families Isabelle Trowler, told us that:

“For the first time ever, the Knowledge and Skills Statement will set out in one place what child and family social workers need to know and be able to do. I am clear that social workers need to be able to create responsive support packages and provide effective social work approaches based on best evidence which are tailored to meet individual child and family needs.

Learning from our peers – and ourselves

For staff in child protection we could encourage a culture of sharing learning. This might not be appropriate for all staff, but could be beneficial for others:

“I think if once a year social workers were required to identify one piece of work, and to give an account of what they did, and why they did it, and be peer reviewed by colleagues they worked with, maybe from a nearby authority, that would be quite salutary.

Derek Myers, Chair of the London and Trustee Board of Shelter

In his *Visible Learning* series of books, the highly influential academic Professor John Hattie has argued that we need tools and research to make visible how the best teachers teach.³⁹ Teachers get transcripts of their lessons, and videos of their lessons. And simply making very visible exactly what they are doing turns out to be a very powerful tool for improving professional practice. We should do more of this for staff involved in protecting children. It should be more common practice for supervisors to go on visits with social workers.

“It goes back to what several of you said, actually, that weighting down, formalising how you do what you do, and then reflecting on it is quite powerful. I have been repeatedly struck in the last few months how tools for visibility seem to have a powerful effect on performance at every level.

Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive, Nesta

More back-up from the bosses

There is an important role for local authority chief executives in creating a working environment that encourages evidence. Much of the discussion around child protection focuses on other leaders such as Directors of Children and Family Services. But we heard at the roundtable how the role of chief executive is really pivotal, because they control the culture of the organisation.

Chief executives, and other leaders, can create an environment that protects staff from unreasonable expectations, carving out time for social research activities, and ensuring that staff are not only measured on the process outcomes. Some speakers at the roundtable suggested that those in leadership positions should also expose themselves to peer-review, to ensure they are capable of leading this new high standard environment. Leaders and decision makers must also apply to themselves the standards expected of their workforce.

Too many managers do not support or allow research by social workers. Time is not always made available for this, though some middle managers in local authorities are striving to create the necessary culture, time and systems to allow practitioners to use evidence. We realise that this would require a very significant amount of time and would require growing team capacity, but the benefits could outweigh the costs.

We also heard at the roundtable that there was some reluctance by local authorities to replicate what works in different settings. We need to go beyond a resistance to ‘not created here’ and encourage a culture of learning from other geographies across the UK and abroad.⁴⁰ We cannot improve without learning from others, and adopting and adapting other successful innovations.

Creating a culture and ecosystem to foster research use

The right ecosystem for the use of research and evidence was crucial, both within local authorities and in the training of social work professionals.

We need to create a culture that values and encourages research in the same way that has happened in health, largely driven by doctors who come from a scientific training, where there are now inbuilt incentives to publish and be research active.

Suggestions for creating a culture which encouraged research and evidence use in social work and child protection included having a Research Excellence Framework – the UK-wide system for measuring research performance – that gives even greater rewards for academics who produce research that is relevant to those working in child protection.

We can also learn from some of the principles built into teaching hospitals – joint ownership by academics and practitioners from initial undergraduate training right the way to post-doctoral research, located in a single spine for excellence around the country.

One way to incentivise more evidence is to discuss with Ofsted more requirements for research literacy. ‘Research-informed practice’ is already an explicit attribute of outstanding practice identified by Ofsted,⁴¹ but more could be done to make it mainstream. While this may create resistance amongst staff as another externally imposed pressure, it would make it more of a visible priority.

“If Ofsted decided that it was good to be demonstrating your use and literacy around research, authorities will very naturally become more excited, or exercised about doing so. It’s the biggest driver we have in children’s services.”

Dez Holmes, Director, Research in Practice

More time to think

In the face of day-to-day pressures, at present those working in child protection have little time to consider evidence that may help them.

“As a practical issue, social workers can’t do that (consider evidence) comfortably if they’re always working on the sharp end where they can make little difference, and are therefore feeling negative and hopeless. So we need to have a ‘balanced diet’ for social workers so that they’re working with a range of family problems, and then they can see a range of possibilities making their access to thinking about where’s the evidence for an intervention, where can we use that in this case. Rather than, what do I do about whether to leave this child in the family or remove them?”

Marian Brandon, Professor of Social Work, University of East Anglia

Reducing caseloads and giving more time to reflective activities would foster more of an evidence-based culture. At NSPCC there is some work being done on this:

“One of the interventions that we’ve been looking at... is about trying to help social workers use and look at evidence for making decisions about neglect. And one of the biggest messages that came out of that was that caseloads are so high they didn’t have time to think, and reflect about the evidence. So, I would say that’s quite a quick way – to improve their ability to reflect on an instance and to give them more time to do it.”

Matt Barnard, Head of Evaluation, NSPCC

As we saw in the Behavioural Insights Team research, ‘decision-fatigue’ may crowd out good judgement and even encourage serious errors.

CONCLUSION

Derek Myers is probably best known as the former Chief Executive of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and neighbouring Hammersmith and Fulham. But he was also a social worker working with children. He speaks about good judgement – what it is, why it is important and how it might be encouraged in the social work profession.

Derek stressed the importance of human capabilities in the system, which he became aware of when he was a social worker charged with looking after children:

“I remember at the time trying to learn from those around me, and what I worked out was that the people I found it easiest to admire, and wanted to learn from were the people who displayed good judgment.And, I take that to mean that it is about personal capabilities, the ability to synthesise that information, but it is also experience and knowledge – knowledge coming from hard research. And, all of that has to be processed to enable individuals to make good choices. And then to execute those plans that come from good choices. And let us not blind ourselves with that, but actually a perfect plan which is poorly executed will still put a child in danger.”

Derek Myers, Chair of the London and Trustee Board of Shelter

The point was made in our roundtable that the discussion may need to be widened out beyond the parameters of social work, given that more resources would be needed to create and sustain a suitable culture with enough time to usefully reflect:

“You can’t balance this question of theory and evidence under good judgement unless you can see more than the crisis intervention that lasts a moment in time. We have got to decide whether we drastically expand our social work workforce to be able to do that, or look to other sectors, and other professionals to play that role. And so, our very narrow focus around social work, I think, is holding us back.”

Lisa Harker, Head of Strategy, NSPCC

The fast-paced 'blue light' nature of child protection does make it even more challenging to use research than in other areas of practice. But there is a cultural shift towards more evidence use.

“There is a growing culture of evidence in social work – in part prompted by the Social Work degree, and also the Munro report, Family Justice Reforms – but it is often not well supported by organisations. There is a lack of time, lack of support and sometimes a lack of expectation from some managers – BUT there is plenty of willingness and drive amongst the frontline.”

Dez Holmes, Director, Research in Practice

The point to stress is that this is not 'research for research sake'. In many ways we know a good deal about 'what works', such as the sustained relationships of trust and therapeutic relationships of various kinds. The key thing is mobilisation of this knowledge in the real world of practice.

We are at an exciting moment, at which the professional development of individual social workers and of the profession as a whole are shared aspirations with real impetus and leadership from the Chief Social Workers, The College of Social Work and experienced brokers in this field. Engaged practitioners welcome this cultural shift, and are carving out the time to reflect and understand how theory and research already informs excellent practice.

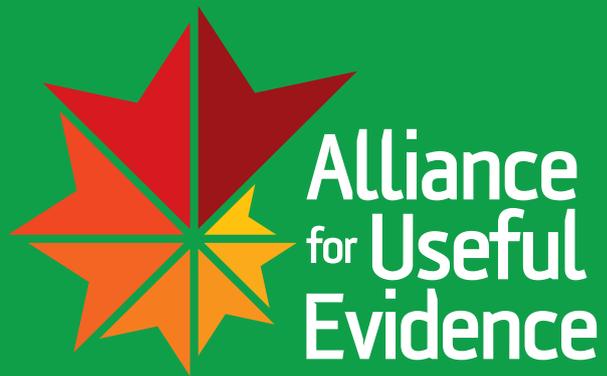
ANNEX

Delegate List: Roundtable: 'Using research and evidence to prevent children from harm', 10 March 2014 at Nesta

Name	Job Title	Organisation
Amanda Edwards	Deputy Chief Executive	Social Care Institute for Excellence
Anna Engebretson	Policy & Learning Manager	The Big Lottery Fund
Ash Chand	Protecting Minority Ethnic Children Expert	NSPCC
Chris Roberts	Research Lead, Health, Social Services and Children Analytical Team	Welsh Government
David Gough	Professor of Evidence Informed Policy and Practice	Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre
Derek Myers	Chair the Centre for London and the Trustee Board of Shelter, former Chief Executive of Kensington and Hammersmith Council	Shelter
Dez Holmes	Research Director	Research in Practice
Geoff Mulgan	Chief Executive	Nesta
Gillian Leng	Deputy Chief Executive	NICE
Hannah Smith	Children' Services Innovation Programme Team	Department for Education
Helen Roberts	Professor in the General Adolescent and Paediatrics Unit at UCL Institute of Child Health	UCL, General Adolescent and Paediatrics Unit
Isabelle Trowler	Chief Social Worker	Department for Education
Jeremy Hardie	Research Associate at the Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science	London School of Economics and Political Science
Jo Casebourne	Director	Public and Social Innovation Team, Nesta
Joanne Hay	Associate Head of Strategy Unit	NSPCC
John Harris	Management Consultant, Children's Services Services and Director	Colebrook Centre
Jonathan Breckon	Head	Alliance for Useful Evidence
Josh MacAlister	Chief Executive Officer	Frontline
Kathleen Stokes	Senior Researcher	Nesta
Leon Feinstein	Director of Evidence	Early Intervention Foundation
Lisa Harker	Head of Strategy and Evaluation	NSPCC
Marion Brandon	Professor of Social Work	University of East Anglia
Matt Barnard	Head of Evaluation	NSPCC
Miles Ockwell	Detective Chief Inspector	Sussex Police
Rachel Hitchinson	Press and Policy Officer	The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd
Rachel James	Life Programme Lead	Participle
Teresa Williams	Director of Social Research and Policy	Nuffield Foundation
Tom Rahilly	Head of Strategy and Development for Looked After Children	NSPCC
Andrew Webb	President	Association of Directors of Children's Services

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Alliance for Useful Evidence

1 Plough Place
London EC4A 1DE

www.alliance4usefulevidence.org

February 2015

