

USE OF EVIDENCE-BASED TOOLS AND GUIDANCE IN SERVICE DESIGN AND COMMISSIONING

Research organisation	Institute of Public Care (IPC), Oxford Brookes University
Principal investigator	Clare Dodwell, Principal Consultant
Protocol author(s)	Clare Dodwell
Age or status of participants	Adult professionals who support vulnerable children and families e.g., in children’s social care, early help, education, health.
Number of participating local authorities	Between 8 and 12
Number of children and families	None
Number of stakeholders & commissioners	Estimated to be up to: 70 one-to-one interviewees, 16 one-to-one expert interviewees, 70 participants (across 10 focus groups) 50 survey respondents
Methodological components	We will start with a rapid research review, to identify and report on research findings about what can hinder or help the adoption of evidence-based approaches, and to identify



	<p>examples of what works Toolkits and Practice Guides and any evaluation of these in terms of effectiveness.</p> <p>We will use a mixed methods approach in our fieldwork that includes in depth, one-to-one semi structured online interviews, online focus groups and a short 10-minute online SmartSurvey.</p>
Primary outcome(s)	<p>To inform the development of the new Foundations Toolkit and the Practice Guides.</p> <p>Research findings will enable Foundations to have a better understanding of the service design and commissioning process of support targeted towards families within local areas.</p> <p>It will also provide insights on the barriers and enablers to commissioning or implementing evidence-based programmes and evidenced-informed services for different stakeholders including those designing and commissioning Children’s Services and Children’s Social Care.</p>

Summary

Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families is developing a new Evidence Toolkit that presents information on the strength and direction of evidence for different approaches, as well as specific programmes for children and families. They are also producing Practice Guides to support the implementation of a new National Children’s Social Care Framework.

This research is intended to aid the design and set-up of the revised Toolkit and of the new Practice Guides, by understanding current local practices in relation to designing and/or commissioning of services and how evidence-based tools and resources are used by key stakeholders.

Through interviews, focus groups and a survey with professionals including Directors of Children’s Services, Assistant Directors, Heads of Service, Practice Leaders and Commissioners, who are responsible for designing and commissioning evidence-based interventions and programmes, the research aims to provide insights into the individual, organisational and system factors that may facilitate or hinder the implementation of interventions which have been proven to work in improving outcomes for children and families. This knowledge will help to shape the content and format of the Toolkit and Guides as well as identify the best way to promote and disseminate them to encourage the adoption of evidence-based practice.

The research will take place over six months between September 2023 and February 2024. This will enable timeframes for the production of the first Practice Guides to be met.



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Background and context

What are Practice Guides and Toolkits?

Practice Guides have the aim to synthesise and present the most robust available evidence on a range of topics to commissioners, practitioners and stakeholders to inform commissioning decisions, implementation of evidence-based recommendations, and available practice. The guides will provide practical recommendations for those leading work to design and commission services at local level and will also have implications for national policy makers as they design policy and programmes. They will be based on reviews of research, evidence synthesis, assessment of specific programmes, the experience of practitioners and the opinions of experts. Practice Guides will be based on high quality robust impact evaluation summarised via comprehensive and rigorous systematic review. Practice Guides will also draw on other forms of evidence and expert insights to ensure recommendations are useful to the intended audience, recommend how effective interventions can be successfully implemented and will be sensitive to lived experience of vulnerable and diverse children and families.

The Toolkit serves as a database of evidence-based programmes to assist commissioners in choosing well-evidenced programmes, together with supporting programme providers in thinking about what good evidence looks like. They are designed to be user friendly and accessible, written in plain English and include examples of best practice, diagrams, hints and tips, checklists and digital content e.g., video clips. Examples include NICE guidelines, Education Endowment Foundation Evidence Store and in this context the legacy What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) Evidence Store Toolkits and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) Guidebook.

The importance of conducting user research

When developing new Practice Guides and Toolkits it is important to conduct user research to understand the environment in which professionals are working, how decisions are made and what might help or hinder the implementation of evidence-based practice. It is important to consider the views of a wide range of different users – in this case people who work with children and families in different teams and job roles including commissioners and practice leads who design and deliver services within local authorities, as well as other stakeholders, for example in Health and voluntary and community organisations. As well as considering what might be the different barriers and enablers for users in different organisations and job roles, it is important to hear the voice of users from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to ensure that the 'good practice' being recommended represents the diversity of lived experience of all children and families.

Aims

Families and children who receive rigorously tested interventions are shown to have improved outcomes and are more likely to benefit, and to a greater degree, than those who receive other services. However, the availability and use of evidence-based programmes for children and families can vary widely depending on factors such as local resources, leadership, and priorities.



Commissioning and designing evidence-based programmes for vulnerable children and families remains a challenge.

The purpose of this research is to explore how the intended audience for a new Foundations Evidence Toolkit and Practice Guides¹ (Directors of Children’s services, Assistant Directors, Heads of Service, Practice leaders and local commissioners) currently make decisions, who they listen to, how they use evidence, and what influences their approach. This work will provide an important foundation to inform the development of Practice Guides and the Toolkit and the ways in which they need to be promoted and disseminated. It will help to ensure that the dissemination strategy is targeted at increasing the capability, opportunities and motivations of the users.

Research questions

Key research questions are as follows:

1. What does service design and (de)commissioning process for services targeted to support families and children look like in different teams/directorates within local authorities and health partners?
2. What are the capability, opportunity, and motivation barriers and enablers to designing and commissioning evidence-based programmes for different stakeholders involved in making service design and commissioning decisions?
3. What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the legacy WWCS Evidence Store and the legacy EIF Guidebook?
4. How (if at all) do tools and guidance on evidenced-based programmes and evidence-based Practice Guides influence service design and commissioning and development of practice models?
5. What are the barriers to using and applying What Works Centre evidence guidance (e.g., from Toolkits and guidance) and what needs to happen to overcome them?

¹ The new Evidence Toolkit and Practice Guides are being developed to support the implementation of the Department of Education, National Children’s Social Care Framework, which is expected to be published towards the end of 2023 and was one of the recommendations of the 2022 Independent Review of Children’s Social Care: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1141532/Independent_review_of_children_s_social_care_-_Final_report.pdf



Design and methods

We will identify a stratified sample of between eight and twelve local authorities in England, including urban and rural areas, single and upper tier local authorities and different types (e.g., unitary, London borough etc), with a mix of levels of deprivation and those with a higher level of ethnic minorities within the local population. We will also include some of the local authorities that Foundations are already working with on other programmes. We won't be working with vulnerable adults or children, only professionals who work with them.

We will use our warm contacts to achieve the desired mix, usually at Director of Children's Services, Heads of Service and Lead Commissioner level. We will request participation from a range of teams and staff who work with children and families from universal to child protection level, including from partner organisations. We will be looking for an inclusive mix, including professionals who will be able to offer experiences of working with ethnic minority communities. There are no exclusion criteria. We have prepared a **participant information sheet** that includes topics such as the purpose of the research, the type of questions we are exploring, the methods we'll use, how we will protect confidentiality, how we will ensure data security, and what will happen to the findings. We will also prepare a **consent form** that will be completed with all professionals who agree to take part.

We will be conducting the research online to make it easier and more efficient for professionals to participate. We can offer different platforms including Teams and Zoom, according to preference but it is likely that Teams will be the platform of choice for local authorities. If someone does not have access to a computer, we could carry out the interview by telephone, but we expect this to be unlikely. There are no children or other special groups included in our research that might need adaptations. The main risk to obtaining the intended data or accessing the intended participant group is that they are too busy to take part. We will mitigate this, e.g., by keeping the interviews no more than an hour, making the survey short (10mins to fill in), emphasising the importance of contributing to the research. By using our warm contacts at senior level, we hope they will 'champion' the research and encourage participation by their staff. We will also use any warm contacts and networks that Foundations have, to identify 'expert' interviewees who are familiar with the WWCS evidence store and EIF guidebook.

The nature of this research is exploratory (see research questions) rather than evaluating performance against a set of measures. For example, in order to answer the first question: 'What does service design and (de)commissioning process for services targeted to support families and children look like in different teams/directorates within local authorities and health partners?', in addition to interviews and focus groups we will ask local authorities to provide a range of information and data about how and what they commission for children and families. This might include their local commissioning frameworks, Toolkits, strategies and secondary data – e.g., financial information, service activity data etc, to help us write up case studies for each area.

Information about our data collection methods is as follows.



Interviews

The interview schedule will be developed by the lead investigator, based on the questions outlined above. It will be shared with Foundations to check content. The interviews will be carried out online by the Lead Investigator and two other experienced researchers. They will be recorded using Teams software with the participant's consent and transcribed into Word documents. We aim to interview up to 70 professionals from the local authority sample and up to 16 'experts' from other organisations that specialise in developing Practice Guides and/or are familiar with the WWCS and EIF legacy resources.

Focus groups

We aim to run one online focus group in each local authority ($n = 10$) with up to 7 participants in each (an overall total of 70). As part of our preparation, we will talk to our local authority contacts to find out whether there are any sensitive organisational issues or group dynamics we need to be aware of (e.g., restructures, redundancy programmes, difficult relationships between teams etc) and we will stress that participants are only there on a voluntary basis, they only need to share what they feel comfortable with and they can leave at any time. There will be two IPC facilitators (same people as above) that are experienced in managing group dynamics and ensuring that all have a chance to speak and share their experiences. Should any participant become distressed during the course of the focus group (or interview) we will follow our Distress Protocol. The protocol is agreed with each local authority and would usually be the name and contact details of a designated person (for example in HR) that we could liaise with if any staff would like follow up support.

Survey

The link to the online survey and accompanying information will be distributed through a number of channels including Directors of Children's Services, IPC Academic Partnership members, IPC Commissioning Course Alumni Forum, IPC newsletter and website, Foundations newsletter and networks. The survey will be primarily focused on eliciting views on barriers and enablers of evidence-based practice and desired content and format of the Practice Guides. The survey will run for four-six weeks. We will monitor responses and send reminders to encourage uptake.

Admin data

We will collect the following personal details: name, job role, organisation, how long in the job and email addresses. Data to be collected at local authority level has been mentioned above.

Evidence synthesis

We will carry out a rapid research review to identify any existing evidence about what can help /hinder the adoption of evidence-based approaches and also any evaluation of how effective Toolkits and Practice Guides are in terms of applicability, and accessibility. This will help to inform our research questions.



Timescales

We will start to contact local authorities to invite them to participate ('in principle') and then schedule interviews once ethical approval has been granted. We expect ethical approval to be granted early October. We hope to start carrying out interviews and focus groups and to launch the survey from w/c 23rd October. We envisage that fieldwork will continue until w/c 18th December.

Analysis

Transcripts from interviews and focus groups will be analysed using a combination of deductive thematic analysis (drawn from the interview and focus group questions) and inductive thematic analysis, where salient themes emerge during analysis of the data. Analysis will be conducted by the Lead Investigator, using an offline coding system (e.g., post-it notes, pen & paper) and triangulated with survey findings.

In addition to the thematic analysis, there will also be a write up of each local authority's commissioning and service design 'system' as case studies to illustrate the variety and complexity of approaches, highlighting any examples of good practice that promotes the use of evidence-based programmes.

Ethics & participation

Ethics approval will be sought through Foundations Ethics Board. It is expected that the turnaround time will be approximately three weeks from date of submission.

The procedure for obtaining agreement to participate in the research will be a three-stage process. Stage one will be making contact with our sample local authorities to get an 'in principle' agreement for their staff to participate. In stage two, we will ask those local authorities that have agreed to participate, to circulate an information briefing to relevant staff with an invitation to either join a focus group or be interviewed. For those that agree to an interview or focus group, we will complete a consent form with them before the interview or focus group starts. For interviewees that are being recruited outside of local authorities, we will use the same approach – i.e., provide a briefing sheet and complete a consent form prior to interview. Survey respondents will also be provided with a link to an information sheet to enable them to make an informed decision about whether to participate.

Further risks and mitigations are described below:

Risk	Mitigation
Protecting participants and researchers from harm	We will inform participants about any potential risks involved in taking part in an interview to ensure they can give informed consent to participate. We will use experienced, DBS checked interviewers who have been trained in qualitative methods and are familiar with our Distress and Disclosure and Safeguarding Protocols. We will follow University guidelines regarding risk assessment.



Confidentiality	We will ensure participant confidentiality (except where they share something that makes us think someone is at risk of harm) and make this clear in the information sheet. We will ask for consent to audio record interviews (or take notes otherwise) and disaggregate transcripts or notes from participant identifiers. We will not ask for survey respondents' names or contact details.
Consent	Participants are adults competent to give consent. We will provide a plain English information sheet about the research and privacy notice(s) for interviews and surveys. We will be clear that that we are asking them to participate on a voluntary basis and they can choose to end their involvement at any time. Researchers will check participants' understanding and confirm consent prior to interviews. Survey respondents will be given information to enable them to make an informed decision.

Data protection

We are certified to the international standard for information security (ISO 27001) and the UK Government backed scheme Cyber Essential Plus. Our processes incorporate the requirements of these standards as well as the requirements of GDPR/Data Protection Act 2018 as illustrated by our achieving Standards Exceeded in the NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit. We work with clients to ensure we comply with their data protection policies and to complete Data Protection Impact Assessments and/or Data Sharing Agreements.

Please see **privacy notice** for project.

Personnel

The evaluation team is as follows:

- Fiona Richardson, Project Sponsor, IPC, will quality assure key research tools and products including interview and focus group questions, analysis and reports.
- Clare Dodwell: Principal Investigator, IPC, responsible for project set up activities, project management, liaison with Foundations, design of research tools (interview, focus group and survey questions), overseeing fieldwork and carrying out some interviews and focus groups, analysis, report writing.
- Viv Taylor: Researcher, IPC, will carry out interviews, facilitate focus groups.
- John Wilkinson: Researcher, IPC, will carry out interviews, facilitate focus groups.
- Ellie Macey: Assistant Researcher, IPC, will carry out rapid research review and design, administer and analyse survey (in conjunction with Lead Investigator)
- Elise Halford: Research Assistant, IPC, will coordinate recruitment of local authorities and schedule interviews and focus groups.



Timeline

Dates (completion)	Activity	Staff responsible or leading
Mid-October	Set up activities (includes research protocol, ethics approval, designing data collection tools, recruitment of sample local authorities, rapid research review)	Lead Investigator
Mid-December	Data collection activities (includes fieldwork coordination, interviews, focus groups, survey)	Lead Investigator, Researchers, Research Assistant
Mid- to end February	Analysis and write up activities (includes data cleaning and survey analysis, qualitative analysis including coding and data triangulation, write up of headlines/ early findings, draft report, final report)	Lead Investigator, Assistant Researcher