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INNOVATION METHODS IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

SPRING CONSORTIUM | Department for Education

Introducing disciplined innovation

Innovation in public services is too frequently seen as a purely inventive or creative process, and at worst a laissez faire, 'let a thousand flowers bloom', approach in lieu of robust systems and processes.

Disciplined innovation brings about step changes in outcomes and performance by applying low risk, inexpensive and manageable innovation methods. There is no limit to the use of these methods. They can support rapid re-design of children's services under pressure to cut costs and improve performance, or can support whole-system transformation towards dramatically better outcomes for children.

The right processes take the mystery out of innovation, turning new insights into great ideas and making great ideas real. Critically for children's social care, disciplined innovation has been used in the Innovation Programme to create safe spaces for development, using a 'split screen' approach to balance 'business as usual' with genuine leaps into the unknown. Applying a robust theory of change that connects new activity to transformed outcomes gives structure to the process and maintains focus on what really matters. Gathering new insights through research into the lives, experiences, needs and ambitions of children and families has stimulated ideas and created compelling evidence for the impact of new approaches.

Three methods have proven to be particularly powerful in children's social care. New ways of understanding data that help to match the experience of young people to the processes and practices that work best. Co-design with young people and families that creates new perspectives on problems and solutions, shifting the relationship between services and people. And iterative cycles of prototyping and piloting that support leaders and practitioners to better understand and embrace risk, safely.

Insights from the sector

Insight gathering and understanding data

FAMILY INSIGHTS: segmenting based on need

Newcastle's Family Insights programme is a new approach to social work with an ambition to reduce bureaucracy, increase opportunity for direct work and increase confidence and ability to effect lasting change with families. At the core of the model is a needs-based segmentation: a restructuring of social work units to focus on children and families with similar characteristics, based on data already collected by partner agencies. Data analysts are embedded in teams to enable effective use of research and information, generating insights that support practice and improve social workers' understanding of the circumstances in which particular interventions are most effective for different families.

Read more about Family Insights in the Programme Directory springconsortium.com/new/dir/

ACHIEVING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING: ethnographic research with children in care

In 2015 NSPCC undertook qualitative research to consolidate and apply the evidence base for achieving emotional wellbeing for looked after children. Working with four local areas in the UK, it conducted ethnographic research and interviews with 42 children in care and care leavers, in addition to 56 foster carers and 80 practitioners. Interviews with young people included visual materials to map their journeys through care and their networks of support.

This project was not part of the Innovation Programme. Find out more about NSPCC's work on the emotional wellbeing of children in care at www.nspcc.org.uk

Co-designing with young people and families

STOKE'S HOUSE PROJECT: a housing 'co-operative' for care leavers

The House Project is a collaborative business, in which young people and adults work co-operatively to manage their own housing in order to create stable homes for as long as they need them. In its pilot phase, ten young people aged 16 and over have refurbished homes leased from Stoke-on-Trent City Council and co-designed all aspects of the business, supported by facilitators, a clinical psychologist and social care practitioners. The project was co-designed from the beginning, with young people leading the governance group - creating a service around their needs while building ownership, responsibility and agency.

Read more about the House Project at www.thehouseproject.org, in the Programme Directory springconsortium.com/stoke/dir/ and evaluation summary springconsortium.com/stoke/eval/

ACHIEVING CHANGE TOGETHER: co-designing a CSE pathway

Achieving Change Together is part of Project Phoenix, a programme to tackle child sexual exploitation across Greater Manchester. It aims to avoid referrals to secure accommodation for those at risk, by focusing on a social care - rather than criminal - response. Its commitment to putting the design of services in the hands of young people has included ethnographic research and working with 30 young people who have experienced CSE to co-design a pathway for new cases.

Read more about Achieving Change Together in the Programme Directory springconsortium.com/phoenix/dir/ and evaluation summary springconsortium.com/wigan/eval/

Prototyping and piloting

FIRSTLINE: prototyping practice in social work training

Firstline is a tailored leadership programme designed to develop the leadership skills of social work managers so that they can be influential and impactful leaders. Led by Frontline, the programme is designed specifically for the social work context and encourages managers to lead in a way that enables social workers to shape and improve their local system. During the prototype cohort the Frontline team worked closely with eight LAs and 37 social work managers, testing and iterating the approach and programme model in real time, allowing learning to be embedded quickly.

Read more about Firstline at www.thefirstline.org.uk, in the Programme Directory springconsortium.com/first/dir/ and evaluation summary springconsortium.com/first/eval/

PAUSE: adapting to local contexts

Pause works with women who have experienced - or are at risk of - repeated pregnancies that result in children needing to be removed from their care. Pause is currently being delivered in seven areas and is rolling out to a further nine Pause Practices over the next six months. All Practices receive ongoing support from the national team, including regular training, supervision and practice tools. Each area has a local Pause Board, and a contractual 'Pledge' between each Pause Practice and the national Pause team exists to ensure fidelity and integrity to the model, while ensuring learning is shared and used to influence and have impact across the wider system.

Read more about Pause at www.pause.org.uk, in the project storyboard springconsortium.com/pause/story/ and Programme Directory springconsortium.com/pause/dir/

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL INNOVATION

Apply disciplined methods

Use as disciplined, planned and thorough an approach to innovation as you would to implementation.

Adopt project management and leadership processes that are flexible, responsive and collaborative, but with no less rigorous outcomes and milestones.

Ensure continuous learning processes are embedded at all levels, to evaluate and learn as a team in real time.

Take a 'split screen' approach

Balance innovation with 'business as usual', ensuring that current provision is improved at the same time as new approaches are tested.

Give dedicated time, resource and authority to the innovation process, so that it is not an extra activity on top of day jobs.

Ensure appropriate (and different!) governance, management, leadership, and accountability are in place for both improvement and innovation.
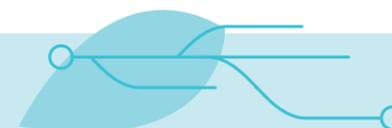
Use a robust theory of change

Develop and share a compelling theory of change so that new activities are always connected to the outcomes we want to see for children and families.

Identify interim indicators that let you know you are on track, and share these openly and honestly.

Be prepared to adapt to data and insights developed along the way - accepting criticism, letting go of what doesn't work and constantly creating new ideas.

Gather new insights

Use blended research methods, including quantitative data analysis, to build a rich picture of the system, and qualitative methods like ethnographic research to dig deeper into the experiences of children, families and practitioners.

Challenge and test assumptions and orthodoxies by comparing multiple perspectives and bringing varied voices into the conversation.