

Project Summary

Safeguarding Assessment and Analysis Framework (SAAF): A Randomised Control Trial and Implementation Evaluation

Commissioned by the Department for Education (2013-2015), with Queens University Belfast

Policy, practice and research background

This is the first study in social care in the UK to use experimental (RCT) methods to focus clearly on implementation as well as on impact. Child protection is an area of policy and practice which is fraught with uncertainty and where, as the Munro Review (Munro, 2011) of child protection emphasised, risk can be reduced and managed but not eliminated. Local authorities have a duty to make enquiries under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 where it is suspected that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, to determine whether action is required to safeguard the child and promote their welfare. The *Assessment Framework* which has been the basis of assessment practice since the early 2000s is structured around three domains: the child's development needs, parenting capacity, and family and environment factors. It has ten principles of good assessment practice. The quality of assessments and of the analysis underpinning them has been the subject of much criticism, and has remained stubbornly resistant to change. Analyses of Serious Case Reviews (Brandon et al, 2008) have identified recurrent weaknesses in assessments relating to insufficient information being collected or a failure to analyse it well. The Munro Review importantly highlighted the unintended consequences of seeking to improve assessment by over-reliance on guidance and detailed procedure which allows too little space for professional judgment and analysis.

Background to the project

There has been growing interest in Structured Decision-Making and in tools to support it, as a way of improving assessment, analysis and the quality of decisions flowing from them. The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned a systematic review of models for analysing significant harm (Barlow et al, 2012) which identified two tools as particularly promising: the *Graded Care Profile* and *Safeguarding Assessment and Analysis Framework (SAAF)*. The review emphasised that neither have been tested in terms of validity, reliability and impact. The DfE commissioned Queens University Belfast and the Colebrooke Centre to carry out an evaluation of the impact and the implementation of SAAF. SAAF was developed by *Child & Family Training* and is being used by a number of local authorities. It is based around seven stages in assessment, analysis and intervention planning and particularly emphasises analysis of the nature and level of harm, the risks of re-abuse or likelihood of future harm, and the prospects for successful intervention. *Child & Family Training* provide training, a

user guide including 'grids' which can be completed as part of the assessment and other support materials (Bentovim et al, 2009).

Project design

The project is particularly exciting as we believe it is the first rigorous experimental study in social care in the UK to focus clearly on implementation as well as on impact. This twin approach is crucial if it is to provide clear guidance not only on *whether* SAAF is effective and should be used more widely but also on *how* it should be implemented to secure positive impacts. The implementation evaluation, which the Colebrooke Centre is leading, involves working with the developers of SAAF to identify the 'core components' of the intervention: the principles, populations, practices and implementation supports that are the essential elements of SAAF's effectiveness. As with many complex social interventions, this is not a straightforward task. The evaluation will explore the strategies needed to secure high quality 'as intended' usage of SAAF, the support system for implementation, and how SAAF is embedded into the delivery system of child protection assessment and case planning (including recording systems, documentation for child protection conferences, the formulation of Child Protection Plans, court documentation and the use of expert assessments).

The project is set up as a multi-site cluster randomized trial. It involves 6 local authorities, with social work teams as the unit of randomisation. The primary outcome is reduced rates of re-referral for abuse or maltreatment. It will involve:

- analysis of local authority Children in Need data, augmented with the collection of additional case data
- analysis of assessments and Child Protection Plans
- pre- and post-training surveys
- qualitative and quantitative study of implementation approaches, practices and strategies, their effectiveness and their relationship to outcomes
- a follow-up stage more mature models of implementation

Publications and outputs

The study began in Autumn 2013. The main output will be the full study report, likely to be published by DfE around end 2015/early 2016. This will include guidance on strategies and approaches to support the implementation of SAAF. We will also produce summary outputs aimed at different audiences as well as scientific papers in peer-reviewed academic and practice-based journals.

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