

Institution: The University of Edinburgh
Unit of Assessment: 22 Social Work and Social Policy
Title of case study: 2: Improving engagement with involuntary service users in social work
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This collaboration between the UoE and six local authorities developed social work interventions to improve engagement with ‘involuntary’ services users. The impact of the research is seen in the sharing and implementation of knowledge about ‘what worked’ within and across the participating local authorities and in gradually shifting practice cultures within these authorities. The impact is evident at several levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practitioners changing how they work with service users, including greater ability to challenge risk averse practice in, for example, working with young adults with learning difficulties; • three participating local authorities incorporating project findings into policy and staff induction and training; • knowledge exchange activity via a thriving practice panel with representation from one local authority and UoE. This has led directly to six events each attracting around 60 practitioners; • use of findings in wider academic, policy and practice communities through distribution and uptake of 500 ‘Good Practice’ booklets; • practitioners pursuing further study, one enrolling for a PhD, another writing a book and others going on to participate in a subsequent KE project following on from this one.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>This work was funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the ESRC and the Local Authorities and Research Councils’ Initiative under the Engaging with Scottish Local Authorities Scheme. The grant awarded was £100k (of which £20k was contributed by six participating local authorities). Grant holders were Wilkinson (at Edinburgh since 2001) and M Smith (2005). Cree (1991), Whyte (1984), McGhee, and Hunter (1979) now Hon. Fellow [retired 2011]) were involved in supporting practitioner research activity throughout the REF period. The project ran from November 2009 until February 2011.</p> <p>The theme, ‘Engaging with Involuntary Service Users’, was co-produced with local authority partners. Its policy relevance is apparent in major policy documents, such as ‘Changing Lives, the 21st Century Review of Social Work’ (Scottish Executive, 2006) and the ‘Munro Review of Child Protection’ (2011). Munro recommends a shift away from managerially-based practices towards more direct work with families, which our own findings support. This practice and policy relevance has proved important in creating a climate conducive to the project’s activity and its reception within wider practice, policy and academic communities. The aims of the project were: to explore the complexities of involving involuntary clients as partners in the social work process, and to identify pointers as to how this might best be done. A subsidiary aim on the part of funders was to learn about the processes of effective knowledge exchange in such collaborative ventures.</p> <p>In the research element of the project, knowledge exchange activities were used to generate data that was grounded in practitioners’ knowledge of what was effective in working with involuntary clients. This involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three knowledge sharing seminars, bringing together academics and social work staff from six local authorities. These events attracted over 70 practitioners, who had opportunities to feed into the findings • Practitioner research projects on topics relating to the project theme, with mentoring and training from UoE academics. Six projects were completed in 2010. <p>The research demonstrated that processes in social work practice with involuntary clients were</p>

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'messy', non-linear and often serendipitous. One of the key project findings was that similar processes were apparent in relation to knowledge exchange. In both cases, the development of relationships was central. Key elements within this included the establishment of trust, a sense of credibility and a sense of timeliness and meaningfulness to participants. This focus on relationships and emotions links to the debate around the centrality of relationship-based practice in social work now re-emerging in the academic literature, which identifies prevailing managerial cultures as impeding the establishment and continuity of the type of relationships from which effective social work practice might emerge.

What becomes important from this project is the finding that similar forces are evident in respect of KE, where qualities of credibility, reflexivity and emotion are central to its effectiveness; policy and academic assumptions about knowledge exchange and mobilisation are likely to be ineffective if they fail to understand the complexity of the relationships that underpin them.

The research element of the project was supported by a scoping review of existing research. This was presented as a short, accessible briefing and two literature reviews. See <http://bit.ly/jbfXtj> or <http://tinyurl.com/pokp54t>.

A Good Practice Guide summarised the project findings in an accessible booklet format for practitioners (<http://bit.ly/iDqilW> or <http://tinyurl.com/p9fotm8>). Several hundred copies were distributed. The project has an online presence: <http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla> or <http://tinyurl.com/pxkw3c8>. The wider ESLA project has a web presence: <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/engage/> or <http://tinyurl.com/ppfk8sb>. Two further ESRC KE awards (2013, PI M. Smith, £49k; and 2013-15, Co-I V E Cree, PI: S Holland, Cardiff University, Edinburgh £163k) have been made that relate directly to the project.

3. References to the research

Gallagher M, Smith M, Wosu H, Stewart J, Hunter S, Cree V E, Wilkinson H (2011) Engaging with families in child protection: lessons from practitioner research in Scotland. *Child Welfare* **90(4)**: 117-34, available from HEI.

Gallagher M, Smith M, Hardy M, Wilkinson H (2012) Children and families' involvement in social work decision making. *Children & Society* **26(1)**: 74-85, DOI: [10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00409.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00409.x).

Smith, M, Gallagher, M, Wosu, H, Stewart, J, Cree, V E, Hunter, S, Evans, S, Montgomery, Holiday, C. and Wilkinson, H (2011) Engaging with involuntary service users in social work: findings from a knowledge exchange project. *British Journal of Social Work* **42(8)**: 1460-77, DOI: [10.1093/bjsw/bcr162](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr162). Listed in REF2

Gallagher M, Wilkinson H, Smith M (2012) A collaborative approach to defining the usefulness of impact: lessons from a knowledge exchange project involving academics and social work practitioners. *Evidence and Policy* **8(3)**: 311-27, DOI: [10.1332/174426412X654040](https://doi.org/10.1332/174426412X654040). Listed in REF2

Smith M, Wilkinson H, Gallagher M (2013) "It's what gets through people's radars isn't it?" Relationships in social work practice and knowledge exchange. *Contemporary Social Science*. DOI:10.1080/21582041.2012.751499, DOI: [10.1080/21582041.2012.751499](https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2012.751499).

4. Details of the impact

Impact on individual practice

Much of the immediate impact from the work came from the **active dissemination and brokerage roles** undertaken by the practitioner researchers who formed the focus of the project activities. In formal feedback, all participants reported changes in their own practice, e.g. supporting service users to approach risk more positively; being more pro-active in encouraging service users to participate in meetings; increasing the amount of time spent with service users; being more pro-active in informing service users about decisions affecting them; and changing style of report writing to be more accessible for service users. Impacts have included positive developments in relationships with service users and decisions by practitioner researchers to, in one case, undertake a PhD and in another to write a book. (5.1)

Influencing social work education

Working with involuntary service users is a challenging element of social work practice and thus of social work education across the UK. Impact from this project focuses on improving direct practice at a number of levels within and across social work departments in Scotland and increasingly more internationally. This often occurs by influencing those who educate social work practitioners. This project has achieved this goal, as the following extract from an email illustrates:

“Just a quick note to say how much I have enjoyed and learned from your/and colleagues recent paper in the BJSW. I am doing quite a bit of work in the area of user engagement in Northern Ireland. I could really identify with so many of the points and arguments which are asserted in your paper. This really adds to the literature and broadens understanding in an important area of social policy and social work. I have asked our Masters students to read this paper ahead of our teaching tomorrow on our Personal and Public Involvement Module. Many thanks again” (Joe Duffy, Queen's University, Belfast). (5.2)

Impact on local authority practice

Contribution analysis, an approach to assessing the performance of policies and programmes, was used to capture activities and the outcome of these at local authority level. Scottish Borders has incorporated a Practitioner Research Project report into a service review. Their leaflets have been re-designed and methods of gathering service user feedback routinely have been explored. In Midlothian a training course for employees on participation in child protection is being developed. In Edinburgh a Practitioner Research Project (PRP) report has been included in the induction pack for new social workers, and in post-induction training. (5.3) The PRP has also helped one of the practitioner-researchers to design a course for staff on working with ‘resistant and involuntary’ service users. This ran in 2010 and was well evaluated by practitioners who attended.

Usefulness of project outputs

Outputs from the project have proved to be particularly useful and relevant to practitioners, as the following exchanges indicate:

“Last week I came across the wee leaflet [Good Practice Guide] you put together from your work around engaging with involuntary clients.... I think the content is really excellent. ...” (Stuart Allardyce, Practice Development Worker, Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, (Practice and KE remit, University of Strathclyde). (5.2)

“I was at the workshop you delivered at the youth justice conference where you gave out the good practice guides. I have found these a really useful basic guide for staff and would like to distribute them among our workforce. Is it possible to purchase copies of this guide?” (Iain Macaulay, North Lanarkshire Council). (5.5)

Ongoing impact on practice cultures

M. Smith accepted the invitation to become involved in a Practice Panel for the City of Edinburgh Council where he advises on practice development and practice models with a view to shifting the culture of the local authority children’s services from a compliance based to a learning culture (see <http://edinburghbrightfutures.com/2013/07/31/creating-a-learning-culture-in-childrens-social-work-2/> or <http://tinyurl.com/q5rq8og>) The Panel arranged six events between November 2011 and May 2013 for practitioners and managers. These events have been over-subscribed and delivered to over 180 practitioners. M. Smith led the input on four of the sessions and Whyte and Cree on another. These events were very well received (evaluations are available). The work of the Practice Panel was ‘Highly Commended’ in the City of Edinburgh Children and Families Achievement Awards and was entered for a Care Accolade with the Scottish Social Services Council (5.3)

The Council’s lead officer for children and families practice teams presented on the Practice Model at the Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) conference, where the model was highlighted by delegates as an exemplar of how local authorities and universities should be working together on topical issues. He and M. Smith subsequently presented at a further ADSW conference (2013). (5.4)

The ongoing involvement between the UoE and City of Edinburgh Council (and also involving East Lothian Council) resulted in a further successful bid to the ESRC under the KE Opportunities fund

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(£49k, started Jan 2013). The aim of this project is to help the two participating local authorities to shift their cultures away from primarily procedural to more relational ways of working, in line with the recent Munro Review of Child Protection. M. Smith is PI on this project and Wilkinson and Cree are Co-Is. The project involves three strands: reflective learning groups for practitioners, seven supported pieces of practitioner research around strengths-based practices, and three training days for managers to support the work of practitioners to achieve change. This project is a direct follow-on from the ESLA project. (5.5)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Practitioner researcher can attest to the confidence the project gave her to co-author a book. Also included the report in the induction pack and training and devised the course on resistant and involuntary users, can attest to the impact of the Edinburgh project.

5.2 Lecturer in Social Work can confirm relevance of work to the important area of engaging and involving users of social work services in service delivery/provision.

5.3 Head of Children and Families Service, City of Edinburgh Council can attest to the role of the Practice Panel in taking forward social work practice in Edinburgh.

5.4 Director WithScotland, University of Stirling, can attest to the project's relevance to the child protection agenda across Scotland and the attention it has attracted.

5.5 Service Manager Children's Services, East Lothian could speak to the role of the ESLA project and its follow up in helping shift practice cultures in their local authorities.