what works centre for
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

Stakeholder engagement during 'gestation phase'
October 2017 – June 2018

Published July 2018

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1. Introduction

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care is a new project funded by the Department for Education to foster evidence-informed practice in the sector in England. The Centre's development team is helping to identify what the Centre should focus on, how it should identify and share evidence, and how it should be managed and led.

An important part of the early phase of developing the What Works Centre has been engaging with the sector, including people who use services, to understand their views and priorities for the Centre. This report provides an overview of key messages across the different strands of engagement.

> *"Always ask – would this be good for my own child?"*
> Young person, children and young people's panel

2. Engagement activities

The Development Team has undertaken the following engagement activities between the start of the project in October 2017 and end of June 2018.

Activity	Detail
Practitioner events	Four practitioner events attended by 160 practitioners and managers held between December 2017 and January 2018 in Coventry, Bristol, Leeds and London.
Site visits and practice insights design research	Site visits to 17 local authorities, including detailed practice insights design research conducted between October and December 2017 (9 sites) involving families, practitioners, practice experts, managers, senior leaders and strategic leaders.
Children and young people's panel	Panel comprising 20 young people aged 13 to 24. Read the report of the group's first meeting here.
Practitioner panel	Panel comprising 14 frontline practitioners and managers, including representatives from the voluntary sector.
Advisory group	An advisory group comprising 15 national stakeholders, senior leaders, academics and a young person's representative.
Meetings with national stakeholders	Range of meetings with key stakeholders including the Children's Improvement Board, the Principal Social Work

	Network, ADASS, BASW and LGA.
Voluntary and community sector leaders	A group of voluntary sector leaders, including representatives from NSPCC, Action for Children, The Children's Society and Family Rights Group have met twice to advise on the development and approach of the Centre.
Families	We are working with the Family Rights Group and their networks.
Online	850 people have subscribed for email updates about the What Works Centre.

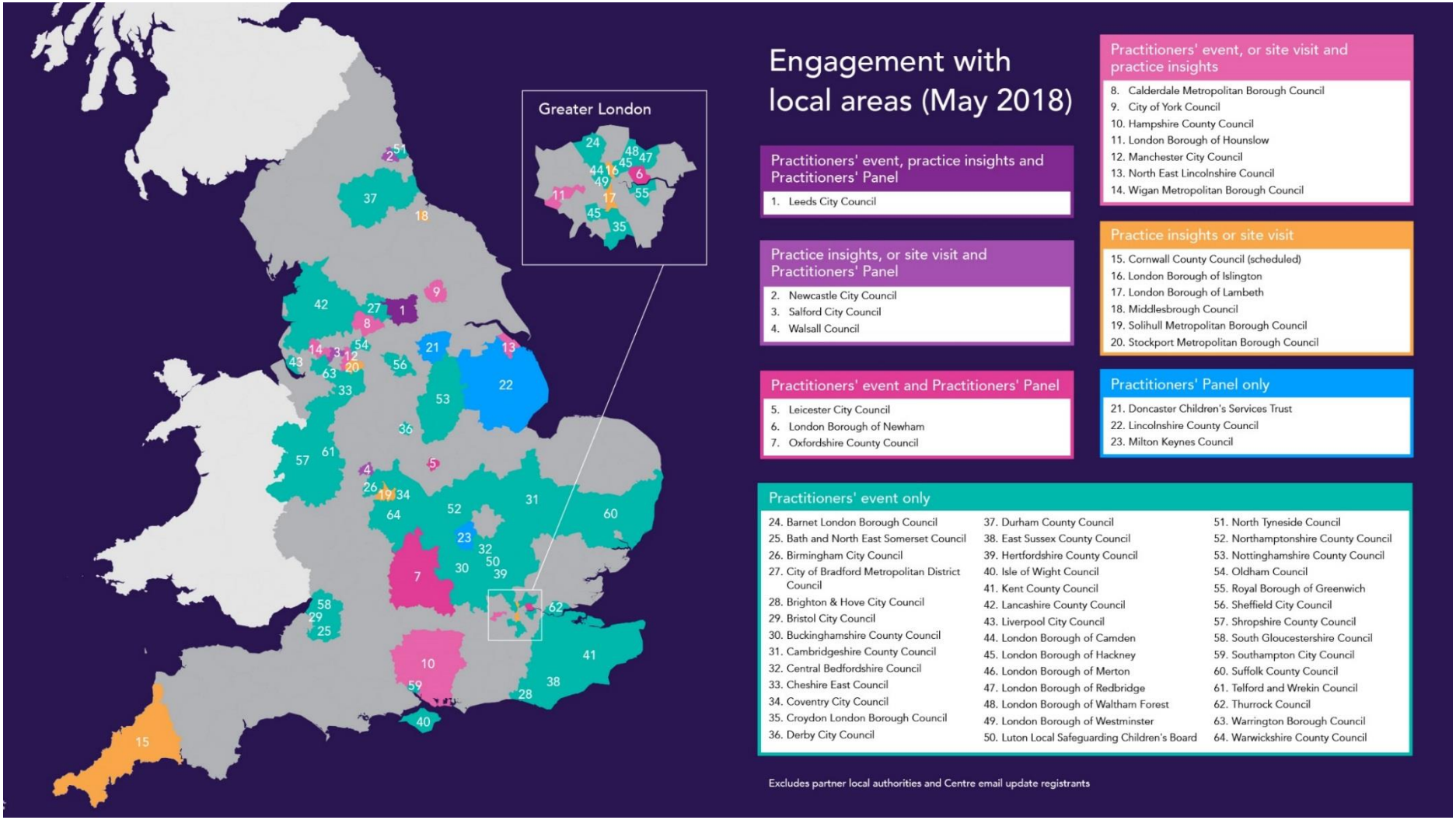
Across these various pieces of work we have engaged with nearly 300 stakeholders across the sector, including:

- 25 children, young people and family members
- 137 frontline practitioners and managers
- 54 senior managers and strategic leaders
- 33 representatives of partner organisations (e.g. health, education)
- 39 national organisations, including voluntary sector organisations.

In addition, 850 people registered to receive regular email updates about the development of the Centre.

In total, 64 local areas have actively engaged with the development of the Centre – including 62 local authorities, one local safeguarding children's board, and one children's trust. The level of engagement varies from attending an event, through to a combination of participation in events, practice insights studies and representation on the Practitioners' Panel. The map below summarises local areas engagement as at June 2018. (Note: It does not include Pioneer Partners. This information will be updated on the Centre's website.)

Map of engagement activities



3. What do stakeholders want from the What Works Centre?

Stakeholder views on the purpose and focus of the Centre have been grouped in to the following principal themes.

3.1 Work with the sector, rather than 'do to'

A number of stakeholders highlighted the importance of the What Works Centre taking a collaborative approach - working with the sector to ensure that the Centre's activities are relevant to practice. Stakeholders recognised that the team had taken this approach in the development phase.

> *"This approach - working with those at the frontline rather than doing to or for - will ensure that the Centre is relevant and that it supports the development of the high quality practice that children, young people and their families need and deserve."*
> Steve Walker, Director of Children's Services, Leeds City Council

Stakeholders also highlighted the importance of two-way learning: namely, the Centre should learn *from* the sector, as well as produce knowledge and evidence for it. Stakeholders highlighted that advances in practice are often ahead of the published research literature, meaning that it is important to have direct links with the sector, as well as via research. They suggested that the What Works Centre could undertake research in partnership with the sector, and co-produce the outputs, even if this meant issuing findings which are in draft or at an early stage.

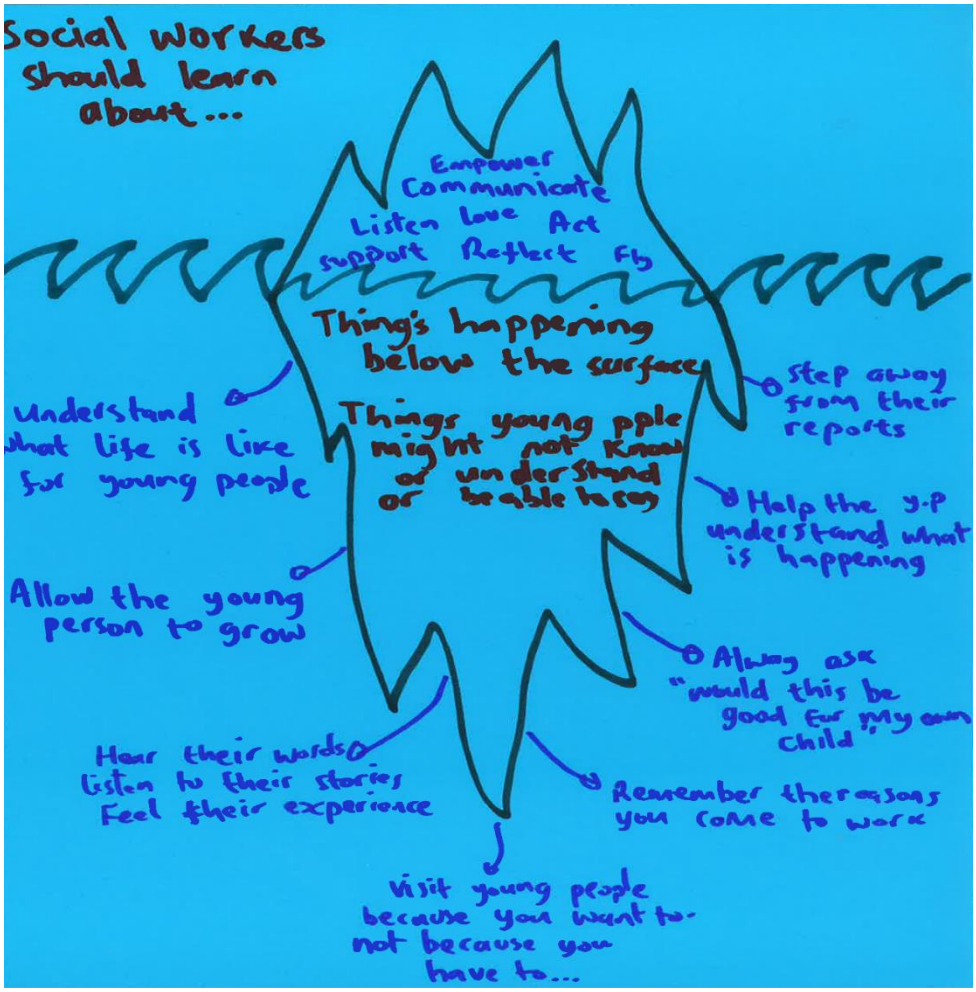
3.2 Keep children, young people and families at the heart

Stakeholders thought that the Centre must not 'lose sight' of children, young people and families, whose experience should be central to its work. This included encouraging research which has a focus on children, young people and families' views, and what they think works for them. A focus on outcomes was a key part of this, and ensuring that the Centre promotes longer term follow up of outcomes for children and families.

> *"Do we really know whether we improve children's lives five years after we have worked with them?"*
> Director of Children's Services

Keeping children and young people at the centre was an important theme from the children and young people's panel, as illustrated by the artwork below:

Artwork from the children and young people's panel – young person's view on what social workers should learn about…



Artwork from the children and young people's panel – young person's view on what social workers should learn about…

3.3 Have a strong, realistic focus on implementation and improving practice, allowing for local context and nuance

There was a strong view that the What Works Centre should lead to improved practice rather than being 'just another website' where information and research is stored.

Stakeholders thought that, to achieve this, the Centre would need to:

- Provide practical support to embed evidence in practice
- Take in to account the financial climate in which services are operating, both in terms of the impact of austerity on poverty in local communities, as well as the reality of cuts to local services.

Linked to the above, a number of stakeholders highlighted the importance of taking a nuanced approach to implementing evidence about 'what works', highlighting the importance of local context in whether interventions are transferable. Stakeholders particularly highlighted regional variation in terms of issues faced (for example, in urban versus rural authorities) and in how local services are configured.

> *"Good practice travels with nuance - you cannot simply 'cut and paste' from one place to another".*
> Sarah Caton, Chief Officer, Association of Directors of Children's Services

There was a call for the What Works Centre not to make 'hard and fast' recommendations, but to allow for local adaptation in implementation of particular

approaches. Stakeholders thought that providing cost-effectiveness information about particular approaches, as well as information about upfront costs of implementing interventions, was an important role of the Centre.

3.4 Explore what works to create the conditions for good social work

A number of stakeholders thought that the focus of the What Works Centre should not just be on 'what works' in direct practice with families, but also what works in supporting good social work practice.

> *"We ignore at our peril understanding what works to create the conditions in which quality social work can flourish. Leadership, supervision and partnerships are just three of the critical ingredients for helping to make children's lives better."*
> Annie Hudson, Strategic Director – Children's Services, London Borough of Lambeth

Stakeholders emphasised the strong influence that working context and practice systems have on the practice of individual social workers, and that getting these right can have a significant influence on individual practice. It was noted that a number of areas had experience of implementing new practice systems, which could be of value to others.

3.5 Help the sector create a culture of learning

A key theme in stakeholder feedback was the role the Centre could play in developing the sector's capacity to learn and generate its own data. For example, one of the key themes in the practice insights research was to 'Enable learning, not just access to information'.

Stakeholders suggested that the What Works Centre could play a role in supporting local areas to do more self-evaluation and analysis of existing data sets, and contribute to a culture of learning and sharing information across the sector.

Linked to this, stakeholders saw the Centre as having a role, along with other organisations, in continuing to improve the standing of the social work sector, including celebrating successes and effective ways of working.

3.6 Be aware of the 'joins' with other agencies

The initial focus of the What Works Centre will be on children's social care. Stakeholders cautiously accepted this focus, but urged the development team to be mindful of the multi-agency context within which social care operates. They also noted particular importance of the 'joins' with other parts of the system, such as early help services. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of involving non-statutory parts of system, including the voluntary and community sector.

"We need to not treat social work as a separate bubble but be mindful of the wider context: we are seeing people we didn't see five years ago."
Stuart Gallimore, Director of Children's Services, East Sussex County Council

3.7 Learn from others, and do not duplicate

Stakeholders noted other organisations and initiatives with a role in embedding evidence in practice, including past initiatives which failed to fully 'take root' within the sector. There was a request for the What Works Centre to learn from the experience of other, similar, organisations and to complement and co-ordinate with, not to duplicate, the work of others.

3.8 Offer challenge, including to Government

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of the What Works Centre being independent, and being able to challenge prevailing wisdom and norms when necessary, including challenging Government.

4. What topics do stakeholders want to know more about?

As part of engagement, we asked stakeholders what aspects of practice they thought it would be useful to have more evidence about. Clearly, not all topics can be covered in the first instance, but these responses should help to inform the Centre's programme of work over time.

Overarching points

Linked to some of the statements above, the following overarching points were highlighted in relation to what topics the Centre should focus on:

- Suggested areas of initial focus ranged from systemic to frontline – issues identified ranged from service design and configuration, practice models, and effective ways of undertaking direct practice.
- Focus on the 'how, not just the what' – request to focus on systemic conditions that enable good practice, and how to implement evidence-based ways of working.
- Distinction between 'interventions' and 'practice' – and request for a focus on the latter – a number of people drew distinctions between looking at the evidence on particular interventions compared to more broadly framed practice challenges. For example, one stakeholder said: 'Some of the interventions…like the MASH, describe simply an approach to information sharing, they exist in one form or another in all local authorities. The more interesting issue is how we share information effectively'. Stakeholders thought the Centre should not be too prescriptive in recommending specific models for intervention or practice.
- Importance of agreeing an outcomes framework based on a shared understanding of what good social work is.
- Empowering and enabling children, young people and families to be at the

centre of any work with them including by providing information and tools that they can use to get the most out of engagement with social work.

Topics of interest

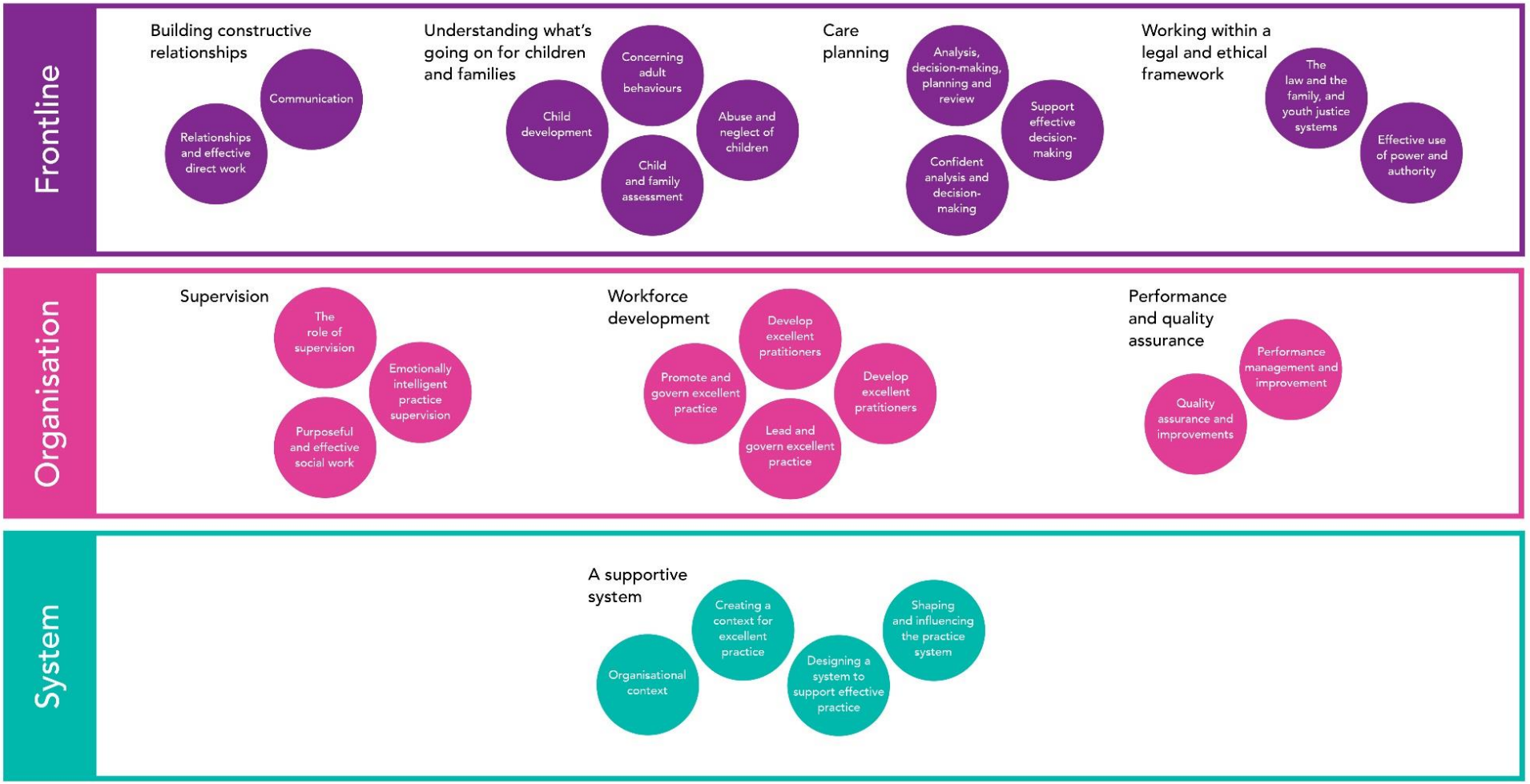
Consultation about potential topics for the Centre were guided by a framework based on the knowledge and skills statements for child and family social work[1]. The framework – which is summarised in the diagram below – groups themes according to whether they relate to:

- Frontline practice
- Organisational issues
- Systems issues.

The topics identified have been analysed across each of the stakeholder groups, and clustered in to themes according to the levels in the framework. (See Appendix 1 for detailed analysis across groups.)

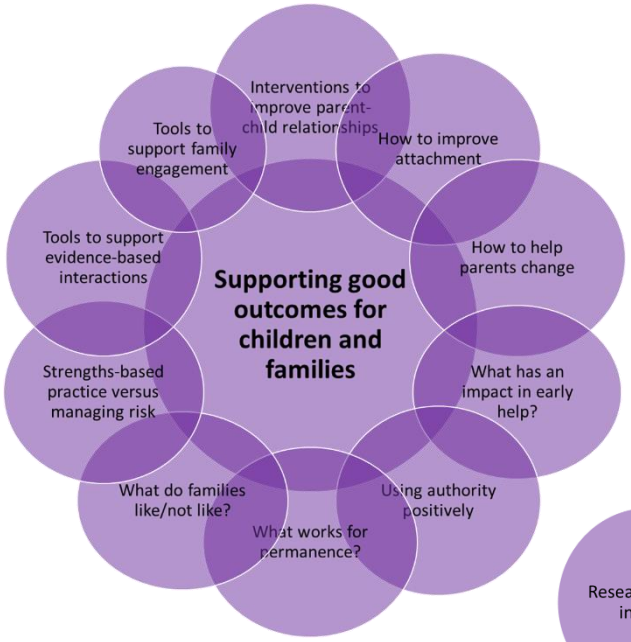
[1] Developed as part of practice insights work, and used to guide discussions at practitioners' events.

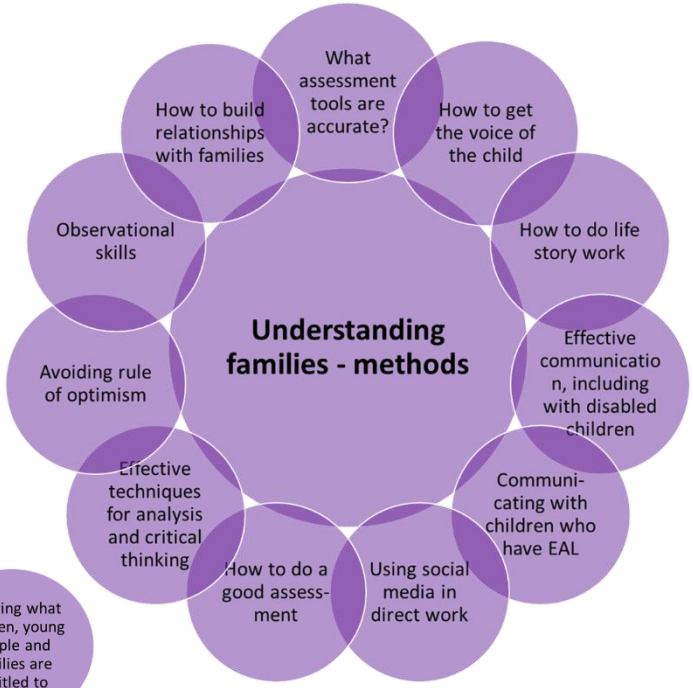
Knowledge and skills for social work

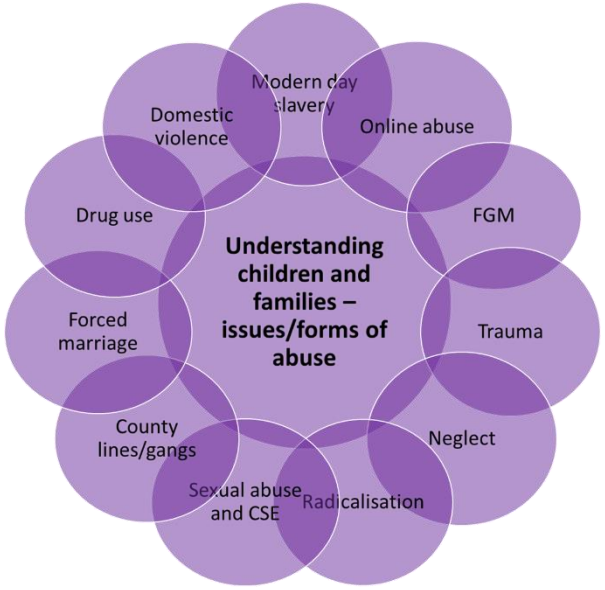


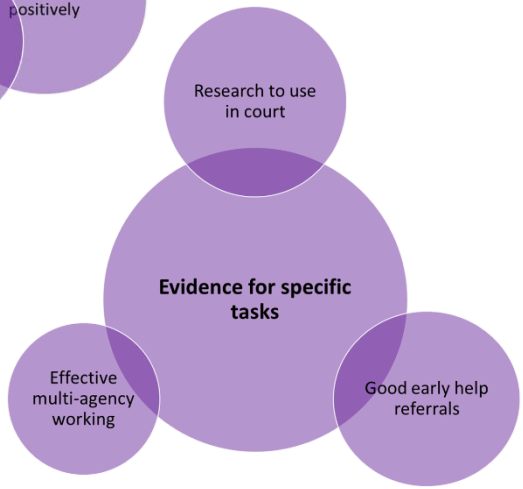
Topics of interest identified by all stakeholders – clustered by theme

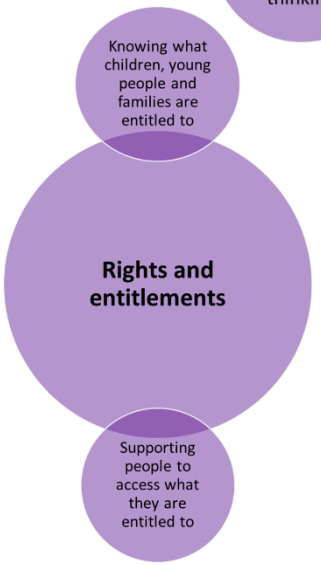
Frontline



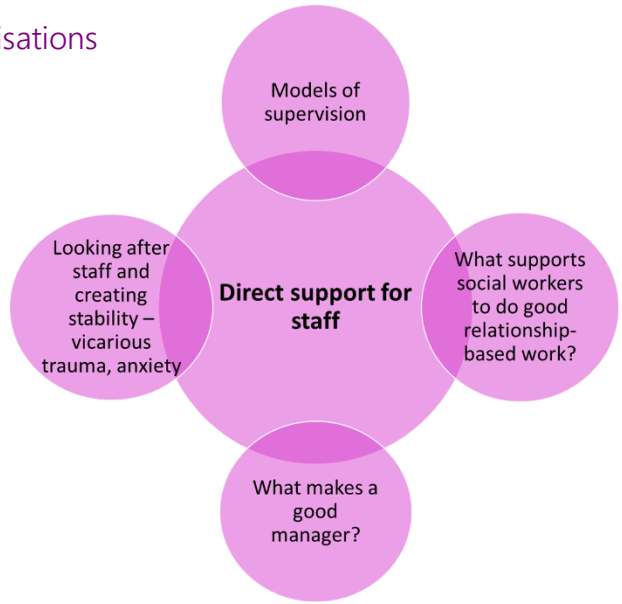




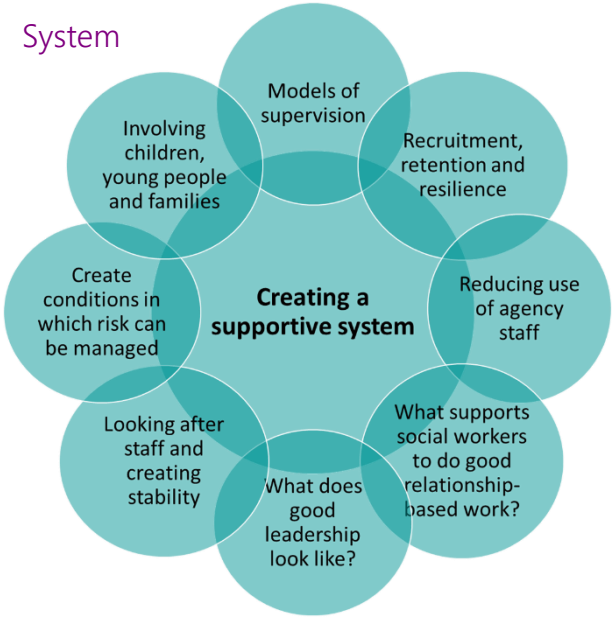


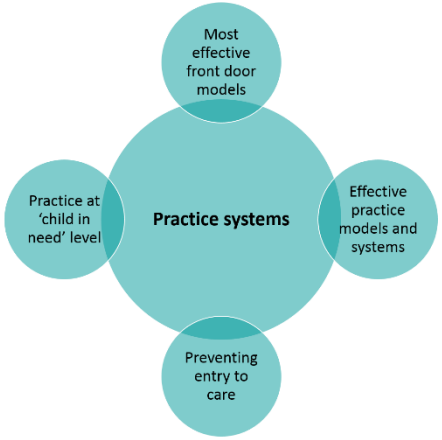


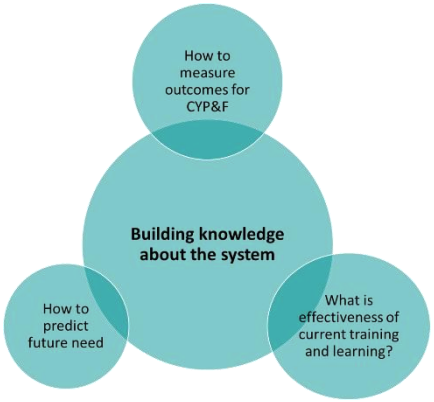
Organisations



System



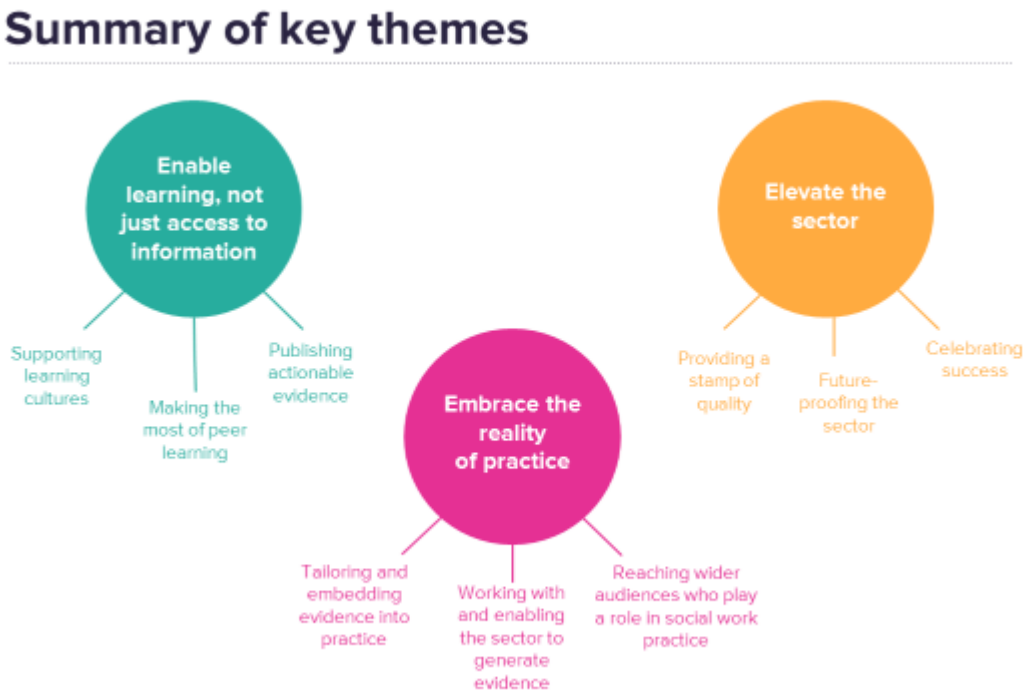




5. How should the Centre make evidence useful and usable

Across the various strands of engagement, we asked stakeholders how the Centre can make evidence usable and useful. Detailed observation and design research was also carried out as part of the practice insights work. The key themes arising from the practice insights work are shown below.

Key themes from practice insights research



These have been cross-referenced with comments from other strands of engagement to give the following key messages:

5.1 Develop a range of ways to make evidence useful and usable (and used) – including both digital and 'face to face'

There was a strong view that the Centre needs to offer a range of types of products, to cater for different learning styles, and offering different levels of engagement with the material, ranging from introductory or overview materials to more in-depth.

A number of stakeholders thought that the Centre should make use of multiple digital media, such as video and audio/podcasts a well as text-based products. This was thought to support different learning styles, and also reflect the mobile working undertaken by many frontline social workers. There was also suggestion that evidence could be embedded within case management systems.

As well as digital products, stakeholders highlighted the importance of interactive and

face to face methods of sharing information such as training, workshops, conferences and masterclasses.

5.2 Facilitate relationships and make use of knowledge within the sector

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of making use of the knowledge within the sector, and enabling people to learn from each other. Suggested ideas included the Centre facilitating access to experts in particular subjects ('library of experts') or offering 'virtual group supervision'. It was felt that this would help to make best use of the expertise and knowledge that exist, whilst also allowing for an element of discussion and debate of ideas, which was felt to be important.

Stakeholders further recognised that many local authorities have tackled difficult issues, such as improving practice following a poor inspection rating, it that it would be useful for other authorities to learn from these experiences.

Stakeholders again highlighted that the sector should be involved in the generation of the evidence base, for example through participation in formal research projects.

> *"The What Works Centre would enable us to network with other authorities who are doing things well… I think it would be the networking, actually getting together, that would be valuable"*
> Advanced Practitioner, Practice insights research

5.3 Make the voice of the child and family central, and develop products to support families

Stakeholders thought that the outputs of the Centre could play a useful role in bringing the voices of families and children to the fore, for example by ensuring that these are strongly represented in any research undertaken by the Centre and its research partner.

The practice insights research also identified that there was a potential role for the Centre in producing materials that would better equip families with tools and information that would allow them to have a better understanding of what social work involvement means, and to take more ownership within the process.

5.4 Support the development of capacity to learn and learning cultures

There was a strong view that, as well as providing knowledge and evidence, the Centre should play a role in building the sector's capacity to produce its own learning, including through the development of a learning culture.

Suggestions included support for local authorities to improve their 'feedback loops' by strengthening how they gather and make use of feedback from families, and embed these in quality assurance systems. The practice insights research also highlighted that frontline social workers often did not know the longer term outcomes of their work; this

knowledge could help them to adjust and refine their approaches.

It was also noted that local services could make greater use of their own routinely collected data. The practice insights research found that local authorities generate a significant amount of data themselves – but did not always have capacity to use the data to draw conclusions about what worked best, or what lessons might be useful to the rest of the sector.

Stakeholders also thought that the Centre could provide materials that would support local dissemination of learning, for example materials for use in team meetings or training.

5.5 Develop or recommend practical tools to support frontline practice

Some stakeholders suggested that the Centre could develop practical tools to support frontline work. For example, the practice insights research, which included front door teams, suggested that the Centre could help by producing or recommending decision-making tools for use at the front door. Other examples included assessment frameworks, or tools for use in direct work with children and young people. However, it was felt it was important to balance this with local discretion and adaptation.

5.6 Celebrate good practice

A number of stakeholders emphasised the importance of the Centre sharing and celebrating good practice. This was seen as important, not just in improving practice, but also in improving the standing and confidence of the social work profession. This was thought to potentially be a good fit with other developments in the profession, for example the establishment of the new regulator, Social Work England.

> *""I feel down sometimes about the doom and gloom in the sector… We need to get more out there on positive practice."*
> Principal Social Worker, Practice insights research

5.7 Be a conduit to other sources of information

Stakeholders highlighted that there are numerous existing sources of evidence and best practice available to the sector. It was suggested that the Centre should not duplicate these, but work in partnership to disseminate evidence that meets the Centre's standards.

5.8 Be aware of financial barriers to accessing products

There was some concern that the Centre's products would not be free of charge. Having to pay for access was strongly viewed as a potential barrier to use of the Centre's products and services.

6. Our approach – how we propose to work

The stakeholder views that have been gathered through this process will shape the emerging What Works Centre and its activities. Here, we highlight four key ways that we hope the Centre will work as it continues to develop. The Centre will:

- Work in partnership with the sector in all aspects of the Centre's activity, from identifying evidence gaps, to establishing the right outcomes framework and supporting the implementation of new evidence-informed practice systems or interventions.
- Develop and test new approaches to making evidence useful, usable and used. We must recognise that even where best-evidenced practice is identified, local systems and conditions may not support the implementation of evidence-informed change
- Co-ordinate with other key stakeholders in the wider national learning system for children's social care – a large number of organisations have a role to play in the development of evidence-informed practice.

6.1 Working with the sector at all stages

The experience of past 'what works' initiatives and our engagement with the sector to date has highlighted that ongoing dialogue and close partnership working will be essential be to the success of the future Centre.

We have heard from the sector the importance of the Centre 'working with' and not 'doing to'. We have also heard that it will be important for the Centre to remain independent, and not become too closely aligned to policy, academia, or indeed the sector itself. In each of these regards the Centre will need to find a balance of support and challenge.

Meeting the needs of the sector will necessitate working closely to identify and address evidence gaps, whilst also challenging professionals to adopt new practice where existing practice has been shown to be less effective. The Centre will provide support in conducting research to fill the gaps in evidence, and facilitating the implementation of change; challenge to acknowledge where practice isn't being effective, and to commit to change.

Balancing support and challenge

An ongoing task for the Centre will be to explore the best ways to achieve this balance, working with its stakeholders.

The Centre's engagement model

Our initial scoping work and engagement with the sector suggests that the sector faces a range of barriers to evidence-informed change:

1. Existence – there is a lack of evidence to support many areas of practice
2. Relevance – where good evidence does exist it does not satisfy the needs of practitioners, managers and system leaders as it fails to explain 'why' or 'how' evidence might better be applied in a given context, or to provide insights as to the costs of change
3. Access – structural issues, including resource constraints and training and skills, limit practitioners' opportunity and capability to find and access good evidence
4. Interest – demand for good evidence in the sector is limited by a range of factors including a tendency to default to professional judgement and the advice of peers
5. Conditions – cultural and organisational contexts can make even the best-evidenced approaches difficult to adopt in practice, and change hard to achieve.

The Centre therefore proposes to operate across the cycle of evidence production and use to: identify evidence needs; generate knowledge by synthesising existing data or by conducting new research; share evidence insights by making it accessible to the right people, and scale our findings – supporting the implementation of evidence-informed change in new domains and localities.

We aim to avoid a 'dissemination' model in which the research agenda, activities and products are determined by the Centre and then handed over to the sector for implementation. Instead, the Centre hopes to develop an effective 'engagement' model of working, in which the sector is closely involved at each stage of the process. This model of partnership working at all stages is illustrated in the figure below.

Centre activity, co-producing with the sector at all stages

6.2 The Centre will test a range of ways to make evidence useful and usable, and to support the sector to generate its own learning

From the outset, the Centre has been committed to developing and testing new ways of supporting evidence-informed practice. Consultation with stakeholders has reinforced the importance of testing new ways of ensuring evidence is made useable, useful and relevant to social work – and does not simply 'sit' on a website.

We will work in partnership with a selection of Pioneer Partner sites in two stages (or 'waves') to develop and test a range of promising approaches to generating and sharing evidence, aiming to address the barriers to use of evidence described in Section 6.2. The approaches developed will inform the future activities of the Centre.

Wave 1 (summer/autumn 2018)

We will test a range of ways to generate, share and scale evidence across a range of key topics, including:

- Safely preventing children from entering care
- Supervision and decision making
- Workforce wellbeing
- 'Front door' arrangements.

Wave 2 (autumn 2018 to spring 2019)

At this stage, generating and sharing activity will build on findings from Wave 1 Prototyping by:

- Continuing to test promising tools and services in new local contexts
- Developing and testing new tools and services.

There will be two complementary approaches to scaling at this stage:

- Prototyping of tools and services, and applying prototypes developed in Wave 1 to new areas of practice/new local authorities
- Action research projects based on:
    - Ideas arising from review of evidence
    - 'Lifting and shifting' - and evaluating - promising things that work well in some localities to new localities
    - Implementing and evaluating new proposals arising from engagement work
    - Evaluating things that work well or are already underway in local areas.

6.3 Knowledge and learning infrastructure

Stakeholders made clear that the Centre needs to co-ordinate and align with other aspects of the national knowledge and learning infrastructure for children's social care, including other Government initiatives to test new ways of working, and the regulatory landscape, as illustrated in the figure below.

National knowledge and learning infrastructure

An ongoing part of the development of the Centre will be to continue to refine its understanding of how the Centre needs to link with other key organisations and initiatives, the mechanisms by which this will take place.

7. Next steps

The developing Centre will continue to engage with the sector in the next phase of development (July 2018 to March 2019), through:

- Work with the selected partner sites
- Further meetings of the advisory groups established in this phase
- An ongoing programme of visits and meetings.

We hope to continue to work closely with the sector to design and develop the Centre as an organisation, and how it will operate during the development phase and beyond.

If you would like further information please contact Ewan King, Engagement Lead at ewan.king@scie.org.uk.

Appendix 1. Topics identified by stakeholders

Frontline issues

Main theme	Category	CYP panel	Practice insights	Event Bristol	Event Coventry	Event Leeds	Event London	Advisory group	Practitioner panel	Key stakeholders (inc site visits)
Supporting good outcomes for children, young people and families	Interventions to improve parent-child relationships		✔		✔					
	How to improve attachment				✔					
	How to help parents change			✔					✔	
	What has an impact in early help?			✔						
	Using authority positively						✔			
	What works for permanence?			✔		✔	✔			
	What do families like/not like?					✔	✔			
	Strengths-based practice versus managing risk				✔					
	Tools to support evidence-based interaction				✔					
	Information and tools to help children, young people and families take ownership	✔	✔ (Families)							✔
Understanding children, young people and families (methods)	What assessment tools are accurate? E.g. Graded Care Profile			✔		✔				
	How to put children and young people at the centre, getting the 'voice of the child'	✔		✔			✔			
	How to do life story work			✔						
	Communicating with disabled children			✔		✔				

Main theme	Category	CYP panel	Practice insights	Event Bristol	Event Coventry	Event Leeds	Event London	Advisory group	Practitioner panel	Key stakeholders (inc site visits)
	Communicating with children whose first language is not English			✔						
	Effective communication with children, young people and families	✔	✔ (Families, SWs)	✔						
	Using technology and social media in direct work	✔		✔						
	How to do a good assessment			✔						
	Effective techniques for analysis and critical thinking			✔			✔			
	How to avoid 'rule of optimism' – ask better questions, better observation						✔			
	Observational skills								✔	
	How to build relationships with families		✔ (Families)					✔		✔
	Assessing risk and need at the front door		✔							
Supporting specific tasks	Research to use in court					✔			✔	
	Good early help referrals						✔			
	Effective multi-agency working								✔	
Understanding families (types of abuse)	Modern slavery				✔				✔	
	Online abuse		✔							
	FGM		✔	✔					✔	
	Trauma				✔					
	Neglect				✔					
	Radicalisation				✔					
	Sexual abuse and CSE				✔					
	County lines/gangs		✔		✔					

Main theme	Category	CYP panel	Practice insights	Event Bristol	Event Coventry	Event Leeds	Event London	Advisory group	Practitioner panel	Key stakeholders (inc site visits)
	Drug use				✔					
	Domestic violence				✔					
	Forced marriage								✔	
Understanding families (types of families)	Inter-generational patterns						✔			
	Teenagers and 18+						✔			
	Adolescents and risk of exploitation						✔			
	Repeat care proceedings				✔					
	Understanding of culture and class			✔	✔		✔			
	Gender identity and transgender young people			✔					✔	
	Parents with mental health problems					✔				
	Children and young people's mental health	✔								
	Child development		✔						✔	
	Offending behaviour								✔	
	Practice at 'child in need' level *(this might also be organisational/systemic)*								✔	✔
	Poverty								✔	✔
	Adults with disabilities								✔	
	Early years									✔
	Fathers		✔							
Rights and entitlements	Knowing what children, young people and families are entitled to, and advising on how to get it	✔	✔ (Families)							

Organisation-level issues

Cluster	Category	CYP panel	Practice insights	Bristol	Coventry	Leeds	London	Advisory group	Practitioner panel	Key stakeholders
Direct support for staff	Models of supervision, including 'live supervision', group supervision, what makes a good supervisor?		✔	✔			✔	Not priority	✔	
	What makes a good manager? Supporting development of theories of learning.		✔	✔						
	What supports social workers to do good relationship-based work?						✔			
	Looking after staff and creating stability – vicarious trauma, anxiety etc				✔	✔	✔			
Equipping people to use evidence	Standards of evidence									
	Professional confidence to use evidence				✔					
	How to promote a learning culture						✔		✔	
	Supporting local feedback loops						✔			

System-level issues

Cluster	Category	CYP panel	Practice insights	Bristol	Coventry	Leeds	London	Advisory group	Practitioner panel	Key stakeholders
Creating a supportive system ("suffocated by the stem)	Models of supervision, including 'live supervision', what makes a good supervisor?		✔	✔			✔			✔
	Recruitment, retention and resilience	✔ (reduce turnover)	✔	✔	✔		✔			✔
	Reducing use of agency staff			✔						
	What supports social workers to do good relationship-based work?						✔			
	What does good leadership look like?				✔	✔				
	Looking after staff and creating stability				✔	✔	✔			
	Create conditions in which risk can be managed			✔						
	Involving children, young people and families in influencing processes and systems				✔					
Practice systems	Most effective front door models			✔				✔		✔
	Effective practice models and systems		✔						✔	
	Preventing entry to care									
	Practice at 'child in need' level *(this might also be organisational/systemic)*								✔	✔
Building knowledge about the system	How to measure/understand outcomes for CYP&F – not just KPIs, including		✔ (strategic leaders)	✔	✔	✔		✔		✔

Cluster	Category	CYP panel	Practice insights	Bristol	Coventry	Leeds	London	Advisory group	Practitioner panel	Key stakeholders
	longer term outcomes									
	What is effectiveness of current training and learning? (Step Up, Frontline, teaching partnerships). How can training be more effective, e.g. involvement of CYP?		✔		✔					
	How to predict future need		✔ (service leaders)							
Delivering change	How to undertake organisational change (e.g. 'turning round' a struggling organisation)		✔ (service leaders)						✔	✔
	How to implement best practice		✔ (service leaders)						✔	
	How to learn from experiences of others		✔ (service leaders)						✔	