



**SOUTH WEST IMPROVEMENT  
& EFFICIENCY PARTNERSHIP**

**MindfulPractice**   
Promoting Inclusion Transforming Services

**Promoting and Improving High Quality Assessment,  
Planning, Intervention and Review (APIR) Practice**

**Report of an Action Learning Project for South West  
Improvement and Efficiency Partnership**

**April 2011**

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Mindful Practice Ltd.**

# Promoting and Improving High Quality Assessment, Planning, Intervention and Review (APIR) Practice

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Improvement and Efficiency Partnership

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Olive Stevenson CBE, who acted as a Consultant to the project during the early stages; to Professor Eileen Munro and Professor Harry Ferguson for allowing Government Office for the South West to include some of their work in the launch event packs; to Avriel Reader of A&A Associates for permission to use the 'presenter, enabler, observer' handout in the action learning sets; to Dr Cathy Sharp of Research for Real, for sharing her initial template for evaluating action learning with me; and to the three Project Managers for their support over the past 14 months. I would also like to pay tribute to the late Tony Morrison and the influence of his work in planning for the April 2010 launch event. Finally and not least, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the action learning set members and their mentors for their enthusiasm and commitment to the project. It has been a great privilege to share this learning journey, and I hope the report does justice to the outcomes achieved.

Dr Jocelyn Jones  
Ledbury, Herefordshire  
April 2011

## **Executive Summary**

### **Context of the APIR project**

The impetus for this improvement project came from a regional Safeguarding Leadership workshop held in June 2009. Participants at the workshop identified a need to promote high quality assessment/ planning/ intervention and review (APIR) practice amongst staff across the front-line safeguarding agencies in the region.

Action learning was chosen as preferred method to deliver the project, with two sub-regional action learning sets (one ALS in the west and one in the east). In addition to participating in an ALS, each team manager was to receive mentoring provided locally. The project was commissioned by Government Office for the South West in early 2010 with the launch of the project in April, followed by six ALSs in each sub region from May 2010 to January 2011. The following local authorities were represented at the start of the project: B&NES (2), Bournemouth (1), Bristol (2), Cornwall (3), Devon (2), Gloucestershire (4), North Somerset (2), Poole (2), South Gloucestershire (1), Swindon (2) & Wiltshire (2).

### **Overview of the approach taken**

#### ***The evidence base***

Brandon et al (2008, 2009, 2010) in their biennial analyses of serious case reviews advocate a responsive and interpretive stance in making sense of family circumstances, especially where there might be safeguarding concerns. They argue the case for practitioners and managers to be curious, sceptical, think systematically and critically, and act compassionately. In this conception of good practice, the competent social worker dialogues with the child's environment, back and forth, to make sense of the information they have collected, and form a cognitive, sensory and intuitive analysis of that information.

The project design was founded on a broad conception of knowledge (Jones 2003a; Humphreys et al 2003; Heron and Reason, 2001); the work of Hawkins and Shohet (2006) and Morrison (2005) on supervision, Ferguson (2009) on mobilities, emotions, atmospheres in the context of home visits and Munro (1999, 2008) on intuitive and analytic reasoning and hypothesis formulation. Together these different approaches, and the findings from the biennial analyses of serious case reviews, provided an 'evidence based' foundation to address uncertainty, risk and complexity within the action learning sets.

Another focus of the project was on leadership (Fisher et al 2003; Torbert 2004) and helping managers encourage their staff to go that extra mile to improve outcomes for children and families. This motivational approach to project delivery was based on a methodologically robust and frequently cited large scale US study (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998), which found an unequivocal link between the caseworker's rating of their work environment and positive outcomes for the children with whom they were working.

High quality supervision and building reflective capacity are central to generating non-routinised, relationship-based responses to children and families and working with uncertainty, risk and complexity (Taylor et al 2008; Gibbs 2009); and to developing service quality standards which seek to introduce intellectual rigour, manage uncertainty (and on occasion unfounded certainty), reduce dysfunctional anxiety and promote child-centred functional anxiety and attunement.

This project's key objective was to motivate front line managers and practitioners to do this challenging work well, and share both pre-existing or developing pockets of excellent practice within the ALSs.

### **Learning method**

Action learning (Revens, 1998; Kember 2000; Jones and Gallop 2003; McGill & Brockbank 2004) enables participants to acquire fresh insights into a real-time issue they have raised in the ALS. The emphasis is on reflecting, deciding to experiment with new action, taking action and, having moved on to a different place, starting the cycle again with reflection on the action taken, where to and so on. At its best action learning offers an enjoyable and non-stigmatising way of improving performance, and can lead to significant cultural change in organisations.

The Munro Review (Munro 2010; Munro 2011) highlights the need for a practice and policy framework which gives due acknowledgement to the complexity of the social work task, the intellectual and emotional demands on individuals and the central role of critical reflection. It also raises the question of how children's services in England can become more reflective and adaptive learning organisations, for example, by applying more double loop rather than single loop learning which asks 'Whether we are doing the right thing?' rather than focussing on compliance, by only asking 'Did we do it?' Action learning is an excellent way of encouraging more double-loop learning within organisations.

### **Evaluation**

The outcomes, and emerging benefits and challenges were tracked throughout the life of the project using a formative approach to evaluation (Clarke with Dawson, 1999). This promoted ownership and enabled any feedback to be rapidly responded to.

The evaluation findings draw on a range of ongoing and post project feedback: evaluation of the April launch event; group feedback at the September and December ALSs and with mentors at their two sessions in September and November; two 45 minute focus group discussions at the final ALSs in January 2011, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim; and two online evaluative questionnaires available for completion after the project had ended in February/March 2011– one for ALS members and the other for mentors.

Overall the following local authorities contributed to one or more forms of evaluative feedback in the period May 2010 to January 2011: B&NES, Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, Poole, Swindon, Wiltshire, and one of the two councils where a candidate had withdrawn. A total of 16 ALS participants (out of a maximum of 23 who started the programme in April) and seven mentors (out of a maximum of 11 who started in 2010) provided feed back in one form or another to the evaluation, giving an overall contribution rate of 70% for ALS members and 64% for mentors.

### **Outcomes and impact**

#### ***Front line managers will be more analytical, reflective and enquiring.***

Evaluation responses indicated that team managers had systematically enhanced their reflective capacities; increased awareness of their own intuitive and analytic skills became evident in the way they now approached the supervision task (Munro 1999, 2008).

#### ***Front line managers will have more creative and improved supervision skills.***

Towards the end of the project there was emerging evidence that some Team Managers were trying out new approaches involving both individual and group supervision with their team members to improve the quality of practice. Mentors also reported that their mentees had demonstrated this outcome, and one mentor went on to use some of course materials to develop multi-agency reflective practice workshops, which quickly became very popular and were over-subscribed (Annex C).

***Front line managers will develop, through application & ongoing evaluation, a robust model of practice standards.***

The innovative evidence-based participatory model encouraged exploration and promoted ownership such that over time team managers began identifying more subtle quality standards in their own practice. Children and young people started to come into focus more in assessments with a renewed sense of the importance of finding out what the reality of the child's day to day life was like and looking for evidence of that in assessments.

***Front line managers will report increased knowledge, understanding, skill and consistency of practice in relation to recording, sound analysis, and consistency of thresholds.***

***Front line managers and Heads of Social Care will report improved decision -making and practice standards.***

This evaluation collected feedback from ALS participants and mentors; feedback on the second outcome is being gathered independently by the Project Manager from Heads of Social Care. Throughout the duration of the project there was growing evidence, from a number of sources, that these two outcomes had been met, particularly by those who had an attendance score of five or more and had received at least three mentoring sessions.

***Front line managers will report benefits in sharing learning with colleagues across the South West region.***

This outcome was clearly demonstrated with positive feedback gathered across all the sources of data.

## **Challenges and recommendations**

### ***Challenges***

The biggest challenge to councils relates to the sheer day to day pressures and how, with best intentions, these can thwart nominees' plans to take part in a development initiative like this. Seniors managers are influenced just as much by cultural busy-ness as everyone else so that the clear advantages of signing up to a project like this are either not appreciated in the first place, not supported or not followed through.

Local models need to sit alongside higher level regional initiatives for employees, identified as 'the next generation' or 'bosses' of the future. For those fortunate enough to be selected for regional projects especially, there needs to be a clear remit to maximise their learning from other participating councils and return to their own departments with examples of best practice from elsewhere. This is the essence of 'double loop learning', which seeks to ask whether we are doing the right thing, and is a key step on the way to becoming 'an adaptive learning organisation'(Munro 2011), characterised by a culture which values its employees, is responsive and in a continuous drive for improved performance.

A project like this has the potential to support leadership development at all levels and would certainly equip senior managers to 'walk the talk' (Lord Laming 2003), taking a genuine interest in the quality of practice on the front line.

## **Recommendations**

1. More consideration needs to be given to the lead in time for projects of this nature so that the context and expectations are clear at the outset. Cover arrangements need to be agreed and regularly reviewed throughout the duration of a project like this or where local group supervision arrangements are set up by team managers: duty work is the social care equivalent of an accident and emergency unit. Any time out for professional development by individuals or teams needs to be planned well in advance.
2. The selection process should be transparent and service development focused. This would maximise the impact and help steer the legacy of the project in each local authority.
3. Nominees need to feel valued by being asked to participate, rather than being directed to attend, with back up to call on in the event of an emergency. Ideally two or more people should participate to help share and embed the learning in the authority; they could also travel together. Further consideration needs to be given to venues with good transport links and to car sharing. This would help reduce costs and carbon emissions, and support peer mentoring on the journey.
4. Initiatives like this need to take place at both regional and local level, and should be properly evaluated against outcomes and disseminated, building an evidence-based bank of what works in the region.
5. Where a content element is requested in the design of an action learning project, it is recommended that ALSs run on for slightly longer to allow more time in each session for experiential learning. If not already in place, there would also be some merit in offering ALS membership to NQSWs, perhaps facilitated by a trained internal facilitator.
6. Given the success of this project, it is recommended that further work on identifying practice standards be taken forward within a small voluntary sub group from the ALSs. This would identify standards in relation to:
  - How often team managers accompany social workers on visits, and if they do how well they use it as a learning opportunity afterwards.
  - The frequency and quality of group supervision sessions, assessed through a team resource file and discussions with team members;
  - The quality of the analytical framework used to record the reflective component of supervision and how that links to improved outcomes for children and families and a social worker's professional development.The standards could supplement the organisations and workloads 'health check' proposed by the Social Work Task Force (Social Work Task Force 2009) to help measure the all-important organisational or workplace climate in teams - one which creates the optimal environment for staff to generate positive outcomes with and for children and young people (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998; Gibbs 2009).
7. This project has identified two areas for further leadership development: one at front line manager level; and the other at a more senior level to help Service Directors and others understand and appreciate the evidence-based importance of reflective practice in improving outcomes for children and families. This needs to take place within organisational cultures and climates that actively go about noticing, commenting upon, and celebrating good practice as well as identifying and responding to underperformance.

It is recommended that Senior Managers be offered the opportunity to participate in regional or sub regional 'Master classes', based on the content element of the ALSs, to keep abreast of new applied research findings to support front line staff and to assist with local service developments. With the publication of the final Munro Review report due later this month, it is vital that the tomorrow's leaders are able to inspire their staff and generate opportunities for double-loop learning, as they strive to become adaptive learning organisations.

## 1. Introduction

### Context of the APIR project

The impetus for this improvement project came from a regional Safeguarding Leadership workshop held in June 2009. Participants at the workshop identified a need to promote high quality assessment/ planning/ intervention and review (APIR) practice amongst staff across the front-line safeguarding agencies in the region; it was considered that this needed to be underpinned by good recording, sound analysis, consistency of thresholds, and a robust model of practice standards. Action learning was chosen as preferred method to deliver the project, with two sub-regional action learning sets (one ALS in the west and one in the east); front-line managers in Referral and Assessment Teams were identified as potential beneficiaries of the project. In addition to participating in an ALS, each team manager was to receive mentoring provided locally.

The project was commissioned by Government Office for the South West in early 2010 with the launch of the project in April, followed by six ALSs in each sub region from May 2010 to January 2011. At the April launch event it was agreed that team managers would also receive six sessions with their mentor, either individually or as a group, depending on local preferences; a study time allocation of a day a month was also recommended for team managers. Mentors were invited to two follow up sessions in September and November.

### Key outcomes and anticipated benefits of the project

In April 2010 the following outcomes were agreed with the Government Office Project Manager to reflect the innovative and emergent approach being taken by the Consultant (see Section 2):

- Front line managers will report increased knowledge, understanding, skill and consistency of practice in relation to recording, sound analysis, and consistency of thresholds.
- Front line managers will develop, through application & ongoing evaluation, a robust model of practice standards.
- Front line managers will have more creative and improved supervision skills.
- Front line managers will be more analytical, reflective and enquiring.
- Front line managers and Heads of Social Care will report improved decision -making and practice standards.
- Front line managers will report benefits in sharing learning with colleagues across the South West region.

## 2. Overview of approach

### Findings from Biennial Analyses of Serious Case Reviews and the Munro Review

In real world social work practice, problems do not present themselves as givens. They must be constructed from the elements of problematic situations which are uncertain, confusing, sometimes troubling and upon occasion professionally dangerous. Brandon et al (2008, 2009, 2010) in their biennial analyses of serious case reviews advocate a responsive and interpretive stance in making sense of family circumstances, especially where there might be safeguarding concerns. They argue the case for practitioners and managers to be curious, sceptical, think systematically and critically, and act compassionately. However, these qualities place a high demand on practitioners and raise issues relating to the types of organisational culture and climate and quality of supervision which promote this level of engagement and thinking skills on a day-to-day basis.

The Munro Review (Munro 2010; Munro 2011) highlights the need for a practice and policy framework which gives due acknowledgement to the complexity of the social work task, the intellectual and emotional demands on individuals and the central role of critical reflection. It also raises the question of how children's services in England can become more reflective and adaptive learning organisations, for example, by applying more double loop rather than single loop learning which asks 'Whether we are doing the right thing?' rather than focussing on compliance, by only asking 'Did we do it?' Action learning is an excellent way of encouraging more double-loop learning within organisations. This project, which was itself submitted to the Munro Review last summer, incorporated many elements of the approach now being suggested in the Interim Report.

### **Relationship-based practice and analytic & intuitive reasoning**

This project sought to address the key outcomes through advocating a relationship-based approach to practice and supervision underpinned by 'respectful uncertainty' (Lord Laming, 2003). In this conception of good practice, the competent social worker dialogues with the child's environment, back and forth, to make sense of the information they have collected, and form a cognitive, sensory and intuitive analysis of that information. The first line manager plays a key role in this process by asking the right questions, and by developing the necessary practical skills, knowledge, analytical & intuitive reasoning capabilities of their team members.

The project design was founded on a broad conception of knowledge (Jones 2003a; Humphreys et al 2003; Heron and Reason, 2001); the work of Hawkins and Shohet (2006) and Morrison (2005) on supervision, Ferguson (2009) on mobilities, emotions, atmospheres in the context of home visits and Munro (1999, 2008) on intuitive and analytic reasoning and hypothesis formulation. Together these different approaches provided an 'evidence based' foundation to address uncertainty, risk and complexity within the action learning sets.

### **Leadership and staff motivation to improve outcomes for children and families**

Another focus of the project was on leadership (Fisher et al 2003; Torbert 2004) and helping managers encourage their staff to go that extra mile to improve outcomes for children and families. This motivational approach to project delivery was based on a methodologically robust and frequently cited large scale US study (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998), which found an unequivocal link between the caseworker's rating of their work environment and positive outcomes for the children with whom they were working: improvements in the children's psychosocial functioning were significantly greater for children and young people served by offices with the most highly rated organisational climates. Key characteristics of the offices with positive organisational climates were the ability to be flexible and use discretion, both of which are essential in the complex terrain of children and families work: '*effective children's services require nonroutinized, individualized, service decisions that are tailored to each child*' (p. 416).

The findings of Glisson and Hemmelgarn on the importance of workplace climate are supported by a more recently published UK qualitative study (Taylor et al, 2008), which investigated the anxieties and defences of children and families' social workers involved in care proceedings and the role of an organisational culture which encourages the expression of anxiety and where uncertainty can be acknowledged and held without causing undue delay. The argument here is not about reducing anxiety across the board, but enhancing functional anxiety "If I feel like this, what it is like to be a child living in this home"? and reducing dysfunctional anxiety which may take up managers' and social workers' energies and can often be projected inappropriately elsewhere or lead to disengagement.

This conclusion is confirmed by one of the most comprehensive studies on child protection supervision (Gibbs, 2009): organisational cultures need to normalise and legitimise feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and ambivalence to help managers and practitioners develop and

maintain a child-centred focus. Critical thinking and reflective practice tools, such as applied in action learning (Revans, 1998; Kember 2000; Jones and Gallop 2003; McGill & Brockbank 2004) and case discussion groups (Ruch 2007), offer an effective and empowering way to build and share practice wisdom, promote intellectual rigour and functional anxiety, and to regulate dysfunctional anxiety.

High quality supervision and building reflective capacity are central to generating non-routinised, relationship-based responses to children and families and working with uncertainty, risk and complexity; and to developing service quality standards which seek to introduce intellectual rigour, manage uncertainty (and on occasion unfounded certainty), reduce dysfunctional anxiety and promote child-centred functional anxiety and attunement. This project's key objective was to motivate front line managers and practitioners to do this challenging work well, and share both pre-existing or developing pockets of excellent practice within the ALSs.

### **Action learning, experimentation and positive outcomes**

Action learning (Revans, 1998; Kember 2000; Jones and Gallop 2003; McGill & Brockbank 2004) enables participants to acquire fresh insights into a real-time issue they have raised in the ALS. Other set members have a period of uninterrupted time to simply listen; and are asked to resist coming in quickly to solve the issue for the presenter as so often happens in snatched periods of time in the office. Rather ALSs encourage the issue holder to explore the problem through posing good questions. This typically kick starts a positive learning cycle where a presenter will initially express anxiety and uncertainty about the issue, perhaps even a sense of 'stuckness'. Through the ALS they will be encouraged to take a risk by trying out a new way of dealing with the issue. This may involve a challenge or struggle of some sort, but eventually new learning occurs which helps to either solve the problem quite quickly with a renewed sense of confidence or points the presenter in a different direction for the solution (Randall et al, 2000).

The method reduces dysfunctional anxiety "It's not just me then" or the negative energy generated by covering up a substantial knowledge gap on a particular issue, and promotes a search for shared solutions and growth from the collected experiences and strengths of set members. The emphasis is on reflecting, deciding to experiment with new action, taking action and, having moved on to a different place, starting the cycle again with reflection on the action taken, where to and so on. At its best action learning offers an enjoyable and non-stigmatising way of improving performance, and can lead to significant cultural change in organisations. This last point is particularly important in the context of the Munro Review's (Munro 2011) emphasis on learning quality and children's services' departments seeking to reduce bureaucracy and becoming learning organisations:

*This is an opportunity not to set the 'right' system in stone, but to build an adaptive, learning system which can evolve as needs and conditions change. It is only by seeking well-balanced flexibility that the system can hope to retain its focus on helping children and families, rather than simply coming to serve its own bureaucratic ends (p.20).*

## **3. A curriculum for change - April 2010 to January 2011**

### **Launch Event – April 2010**

An introduction to action learning, learning styles and different ways of knowing; consideration of recent research and government guidance in the field of safeguarding (Lord Laming 2003 & 2009; Brandon et al 2008 & 2009 on serious case review findings; C4EO 2010 briefings and safeguarding knowledge review; DCSF 2010); hypothesis formulation (Prof. Eileen Munro's work on analytic and intuitive reasoning and the application of devil's advocate to protect against groupthink; Prof. Harry Ferguson's work on mobilities, emotions and atmospheres)

and organisational climate (Glisson & Hemmelgarn 1998; Hemmelgarn & Glisson 2006; Gibbs, 2009); introduction to tools and techniques to improve supervision practice and to use in the mentoring relationship (Tony Morrison's work; recently published CWDC materials on the supervision of NQSWs and Early Professional Development) and the identification of key strengths, potential contributions to the project and specific actions (group feedback).

### **ALS 1 of 6 – May 2010**

Revision of some of the most important content from the launch event for those who were absent; getting started in action learning experiential exercises; making the most of your mentor and study time (Clutterbuck 2004; Hay 2007); dialogue re content element of ALS and what needs to be covered in the syllabus to meet potential knowledge gaps of referral and assessment team managers in the region.

### **ALS 2 of 6 – June/July 2010**

Social work ethics and values – an overview. Revision of the underpinning philosophy of good practice was seen as essential: a social worker's or manager's value base underpins day to day practice decisions; what they see as important; how they seek to help children and families; and how complex decisions are articulated.

Attention was also paid to understanding power differentials between professionals and family members and amongst family members to promote engagement of carers and in particular the most vulnerable and often unseen children & young people (Collins 1990; Fox Clark with Asquith 1995; Harding 1997; Banks & Gallagher 2009; Barnard et al 2008), and improve information collection and assessment; what service users tell us about the qualities of those who help them (Jones 2007; Sharp and Jones 2010); and action learning experiential exercises.

Although domestic abuse was not formally presented on in the content element of the ALSs as a discrete topic, throughout the project the Consultant drew on her own ongoing research and emerging findings from 26 in-depth interviews with mothers who had lived with domestic abuse, and in many instances extensive abuse in their own childhoods; and 27 interviews with children and young people recovering from domestic abuse (Jones and Sharp 2010a and 2010b; Sharp and Jones 2010; Sharp and Jones forthcoming 2011). This helped apply related research findings, for example from the biennial analyses of serious case reviews or on child neglect, to the complexity of day to day practice & what might confront social workers when they walk through someone's front door; and consider the questions a manager might need to pose to find out more about the influence of 'atmospheres' on assessment.

### **ALS 3 of 6 – September 2010**

The content element was a presentation on co-operation and disguised compliance. This was based on material from the 2008 & 2009 analyses of serious case reviews and research texts on working with involuntary clients/ resistant families (Cooper 2005; Rustin 2005; Trotter 2006). As mentioned above, practice examples from the Consultant's ongoing research on domestic abuse were used to illustrate or emphasise particular points. Flip chart feedback was gathered in each ALS on areas to probe during supervision. The collated feedback was shared across both ALSs in October. After the 'taught' element of the ALS participants worked on particular issues and agreed action they would take forward.

### **ALS 4 of 6 – October 2010**

This ALS meeting addressed some key issues and dilemmas identifying and working with families where child neglect is or may be a concern. The session began by looking at definitions of neglect and its corrosive effects on children's wellbeing (Jones and Gupta 2003; Stevenson 2007). Three categories of neglect, were presented - 'disorganised', 'emotionally neglecting' and 'depressed' (Crittenden 1999). These were then discussed in the context of initial assessment using attachment theory (Howe 2005). Recurring findings on child neglect from the last three biennial analyses of serious case reviews were presented to raise awareness of risk factors and early identification of concerns. The presentation was supported by printed notes pages and other selected material from Reder and Duncan (1999) and

Salford Primary Care Trust on risk and protective factors (shared with the Consultant when she spent a day with one of Gloucestershire's Referral and Assessment Teams in October as part of this project)<sup>1</sup>.

The session was very participative with an opportunity for set members to raise their own particular issues or case examples.

### **ALS 5 of 6 – December 2010**

This session explored some approaches and tools to improve analysis: the influence of values, communication, relationships and critical thinking on assessment; undertaking a cultural review of a case; the importance of information collection; and keeping each child in mind and involving them in the assessment. A particular focus was a consideration of the ecological transactional approach to child maltreatment (Cicchetti & Valentino 2006), which has been referred to in the last three biennial analyses of serious case reviews. This was discussed alongside work on family-professional dynamics (Reder et al 1993) and communication on hypothesis formulation and chronologies (Reder & Duncan 1999, 2003); and analysis in assessment (Dalzell & Sawyerr 2007).

The low numbers at the December ALSs, due to the adverse weather and hazardous driving conditions, allowed those present to experience a very interactive set meeting, which was highly valued. Issues discussed included:

- Giving staff members permission to say 'I don't know'.
- Losing the child – reasons may be not jeopardising child, personal effects of child abuse on practitioners, children using 'coded' language/ symbols – need reflection to de-code
- Barriers to accessing child – influence of 'chaos'

### **ALS 6 of 6 – January 2011**

Although appreciated by set members, the content element inevitably reduced the time for more experiential learning. This final session therefore aimed to consolidate learning for those who had been present at the December ALS by allowing them time to work on their own inquiries in action learning trios. The topics discussed included identifying the most appropriate response(s) to a challenging practice scenario, and preparing for inspection. The latter discussion focused on duty systems and the processes in place across LAs in order to effect the same outcome. In each ALS there was one person who had not received the content element directly in early December due to absence. These two people received an individual mentoring session with the consultant based on the December presentation on **Improving analysis in assessments** (handout).

The final element of the ALSs captured participants' learning from the project and the impact on their practice and outcomes for children and families – the stories of change – in the form of a focus group. This had been requested by the previous Project Manager to strengthen project evaluation for the final report.

### **Mentors' session 1 of 2 – September 2010**

The learning objectives and programme for the session are attached as Appendix A. This session was primarily experiential, providing an opportunity for mentors to: share best practice e.g. tools and techniques to promote critical reflection; obtain help with any specific issues; and contribute to the ongoing evaluation of the project.

Mentors shared ideas for a best practice toolkit:

- NQSW supervision history helps managers generate a real dialogue
- NCB 'Putting analysis into assessment' toolkit is useful to challenge hypotheses (Dalzell & Sawyerr 2007). This was subsequently used with ALS members in ALS 5 of 6.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.salford.gov.uk/supportingtools.htm>

- Being braver about looking at ‘near misses’
- On repeated referrals get professionals together.

### Mentors’ session 2 of 2 – November 2010

The learning objectives and programme for the session are attached as Appendix B.

This session was mainly experiential, providing an opportunity for mentors to:

- Share best practice e.g. tools and techniques to promote critical reflection;
- Obtain help with any specific issues;
- Contribute to the ongoing evaluation of the project.

### Absence and dissemination

Those who were absent and mentors were emailed the handout and any other handouts as electronic files e.g. group exercises with the session notes.

Notes were written up and circulated following the sessions to help take forward their agreed actions; share learning across the ALS and amongst mentors; and support ‘buddying’ arrangements to update those who were absent. Key learning points from an ALS or mentor were shared across the whole community of learning.

## 4. Profile of participating councils: starters and finishers

### ALS members

The April 2010 launch event was well attended with ten out of the 16 South West Councils represented: Bournemouth’s nominee and mentor were not able to attend. Twenty seven people benefitted from the event, which included nine mentors; a total of 34 people had been invited. Figure 1 indicates the level of involvement of each LA and the number of people put forward at the outset.

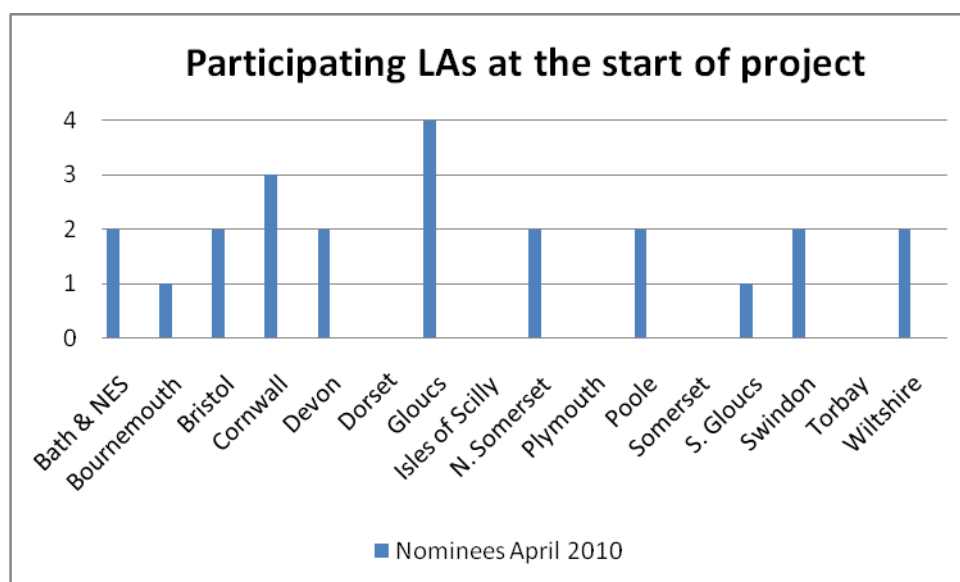


Figure 1

Over the course of the project six participants withdrew or retired (1 x B&NES, 1 x Bournemouth, 2 x Cornwall, 1 x South Gloucestershire, 1 x Swindon). South Gloucestershire and Bournemouth were no longer represented on the project by the summer due to withdrawal of their only nominees; one of Swindon’s nominees had also withdrawn due to

long term sickness of staff which was unlikely to resolve in the short/ medium term. By the autumn Cornwall's representation had also reduced significantly from three to one. This was due to the long term ill health and resignation of one original nominee and the serious illness and death of another.

By December one of B&NES's nominees had left service & taken early retirement. At the mid point of the project in September 2010, North Somerset's nominees were not represented and did not attend any further sessions. With no apologies tendered after October and no contact from their mentor, it is not clear why North Somerset's nominees, in effect, withdrew.

In December 2010 attendance was affected by the weather, as mentioned previously, but improved for the final ALSs in January 2011. During the last two ALSs Gloucestershire only had one of its four original nominees represented, Wiltshire had one of its two original nominees, and Devon had no representation. This meant that these participants (and by inference their local authorities) missed out significant integrative learning on analysis in assessment in the closing stages of the project. The cumulative attendance, with withdrawals counted as absences, of participating local authorities is shown below (Figure 2).

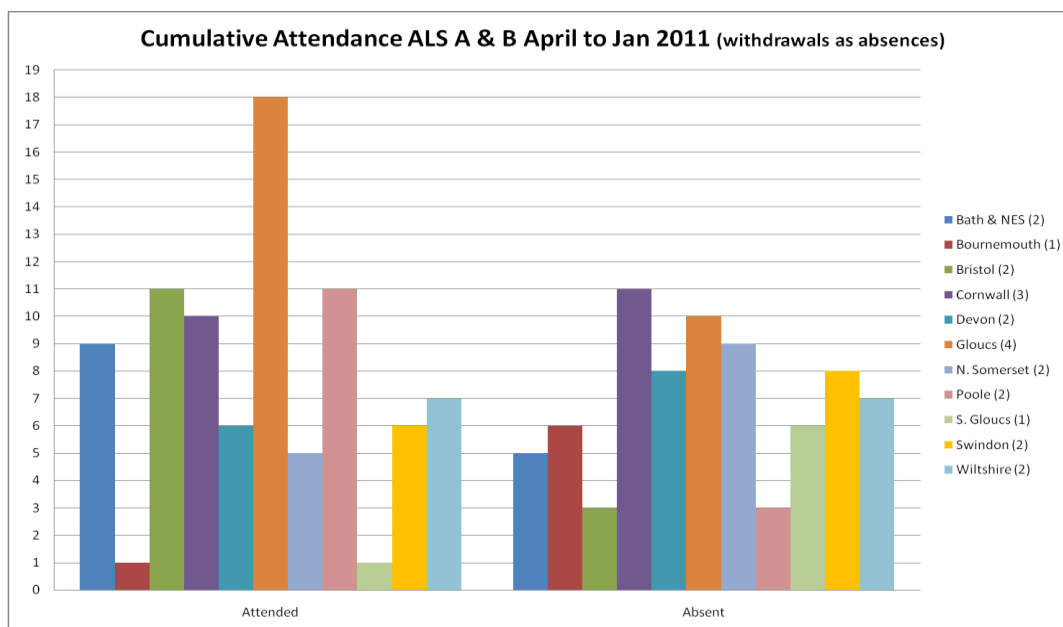


Figure 2

The maximum attendance was seven sessions including the April 2010 launch event. When considering attendance data only, the councils who benefitted the most from the project were Poole and Bristol with an average attendance of 5.5 sessions each, followed by Gloucestershire at 4.5. At the end of the project B&NES, Swindon and Wiltshire had one of their two original nominees participating - each with a score of 5.0 sessions; and Cornwall's lone 'finisher', from the three nominated, also had a score of 5.0 (Figure 3).

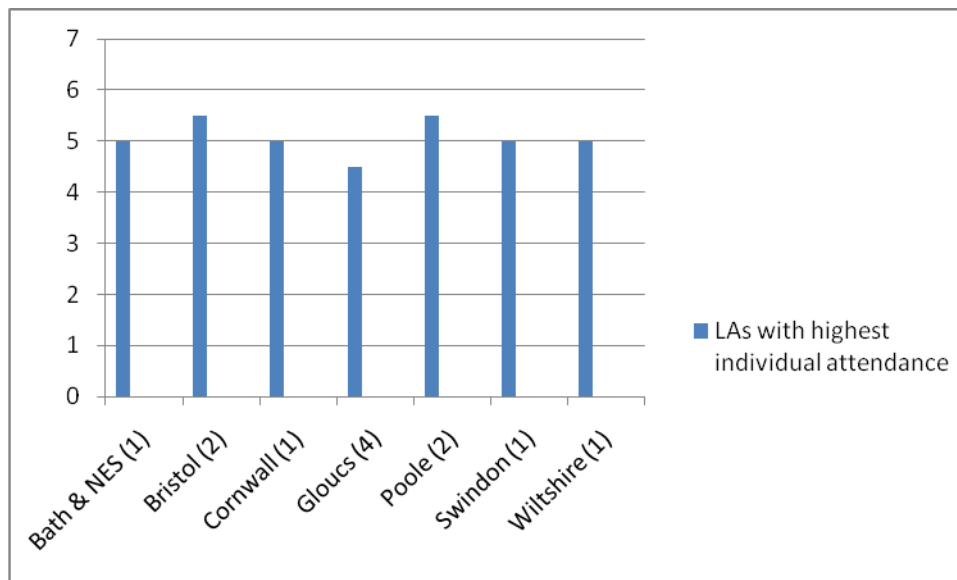


Figure 3

When looking at local authority representation in the final all-important integrative sessions in December 2010 and January 2011, Bristol and Poole gained significantly with their four nominees benefitting from the last two sessions. One participant from each of the following councils also profited - Cornwall, Wiltshire, B&NES, Gloucestershire and Swindon.

### Mentors

As mentioned above, nine mentors, participated in the April launch event; Bournemouth's and Bristol's mentors sent apologies. By the summer/ early autumn, Bournemouth and South Gloucestershire's only nominees had formally withdrawn; this reduced the number of participating mentors to nine by the mid point of the project. Swindon's mentor had lost one of her mentee's by the summer/ early autumn due to operational demands, and B&NES' mentor's second mentee took early retirement at the end of November.

Taking the September and November mentor sessions together five of the nine then participating councils were represented: Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, and Wiltshire. B&NES, North Somerset, Poole, and Swindon were not represented at either session, although all had been represented at the April 2010 launch event. Gloucestershire's independent mentor was the only mentor to attend the launch event and both sessions.

Apologies received for the September and November sessions included: operational demands, including a possible serious case review, and an inspection taking precedence; needing to receive important hospital treatment for serious ill-health; and hazardous travel in the region due to the snow at the end of November.

### Reading the data: a summary of key issues

However it is necessary to exercise a degree of caution here re simply equating attendance of ALS participants and their mentors with the best outcomes. For example, the attendance data does not reveal the degree of travel in any individual participants' journey of learning; how they benefitted from the sessions with their mentors; and most importantly, how they applied the learning from the project, as a whole, to improve outcomes for children and families; and perhaps most importantly how each council's nomination(s) fitted into any wider plan at strategic level i.e. the expectations placed on each nominee and scope given to them to maximise and cascade the learning to others in the local authority and within multi-agency partnerships.

Clearly where attendance was more sporadic or tailed off toward the end, those participants benefitted less from the fruits of building relationships and sharing learning with the other set members across the region; from the 'high level' reflective discussions around the presentations; and from fully engaging with the action learning cycle of issue/ experiencing, reflection, analysis/ conceptualisation and active experimentation. Receiving the handouts electronically and perhaps having the occasional catch up phone call with the facilitator or another set member cannot replace the quality derived from being a fully engaged member of an ALS. These issues are discussed in more detail below.

## **5. Project evaluation: what went well and areas for improvement**

### **Evaluation approach and methods**

The outcomes, and emerging benefits and challenges were tracked throughout the life of the project using a formative approach to evaluation (Clarke with Dawson, 1999). In a formative evaluation the researcher works closely with project staff to ascertain 'why certain things are happening, how the parts of the program fit together, and how people perceive the program' (Patton 1986). This promoted ownership and enabled any feedback to be rapidly responded to.

This evaluation therefore draws on a range of ongoing and post project feedback: evaluation of the April launch event; group feedback at the September and December ALSs and with mentors at their two sessions in September and November; two 45 minute focus group discussions at the final ALSs in January 2011, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim; and two online evaluative questionnaires available for completion after the project had ended in February/March 2011– one for ALS members and the other for mentors.

### **Contributions to the evaluation**

Overall the following local authorities contributed to one or more forms of evaluative feedback in the period May 2010 to January 2011: B&NES, Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, Poole, Swindon, Wiltshire, and one of the two councils where a candidate had withdrawn. A total of 16 ALS participants (out of a maximum of 23 who started the programme in April) and seven mentors (out of a maximum of 11 who started in 2010) provided feed back in one form or another to the evaluation, giving an overall contribution rate of 70% for ALS members and 64% for mentors. The councils who had the higher rates of participation are well but not overly represented in the feedback, for example, one of these local authorities did not contribute to the online evaluation. With respect to some of the councils 'in the middle' regarding attendance, in the absence of individual feedback it is not possible to say more. The Project Manager may be in a better position to report on this after discussion with Heads of Social Care in each LA – another important source of feedback.

The response rate from the online questionnaire was 11 out of the total of 23 for ALS participants and five out of 11 for mentors, giving response rates of 48% and 45% respectively although some respondents skipped some questions. Two reminders, over a three week period, were sent out to those who still had to submit their responses. The third and final reminder was personalised to each individual who had not responded by 11<sup>th</sup> March; this gave them a further three working days to complete the questionnaire by 16<sup>th</sup> March.

Although it would have been useful to gather more comprehensive information through the online surveys, it must be said that these are *very* busy people whose day-to-day priorities are very much driven by urgency and operational demands, so it was quite an achievement to get this level of return.

## **Selection and initial motivations to become involved in the project**

A majority of ALS participants reported that it was either their manager's decision that they came on the programme or they had been directed to attend by senior management. However this was not a significant issue with respondents reporting being 'fortunate', 'happy' or 'positive about being selected for the programme, although one had a word of caution about not being aware of the project until advised s/he was going. Ongoing evaluative feedback and some questionnaire responses indicated that a clearer context for the project in these early stages, including the expectations of mentor's role, would have been helpful.

All ALS respondents broadly agreed that the project had been relevant to their needs at the time. In terms of the design of future ALS programmes, it is worth noting that there was a marginal preference for a more locally delivered programme, and one of six months duration rather than nine. However this has to be balanced against the merit of working with people from other local authorities, which was highly valued but clearly necessitates some degree of travel (see Launch Event and Action Learning Sets below). The ability to release staff within a tighter time frame depends on cover arrangements and local children's workforce recruitment and retention issues in each area.

## **Mentoring arrangements**

Across both ALSs mentoring arrangements varied greatly. Mentoring generally worked best when the mentor did not line manage the mentee(s). Gloucestershire's four nominees were the only participants to have an independent mentor; this arrangement was valued by her mentees. In two instances set members from the same authority regularly travelled together and used the time for peer mentoring and additional reflection on the journeys to and from their ALSs. This added value to the project, but also saved on travel costs and reduced carbon emissions.

The recommended number of sessions with a mentor was agreed as six, starting between the first and second ALSs in late May/ June and ending in February 2011 after the final ALSs in January. Of the five mentors who responded to the questionnaire, two indicated they had met with the mentee(s) five or six times, and three said they'd met two to three times. A marginally less frequency of face to face contact with their mentor was reported by the 11 mentees. From the data reported the average number of sessions with a mentor appeared to be between two and three for those who did not withdraw.

Mentors reported the duration of mentoring sessions to be slightly more compromised by their mentees' work commitments than their own. Mentees' responses confirmed this to be the case. There was some anecdotal feedback in both ALSs from a minority of participants that they were not receiving the level of session frequency originally agreed. One mentor reported having little or no previous experience of mentoring.

The sessions with mentors were generally reported as helpful, although when asked to indicate a preference re attending an ALS or receiving mentoring, mentees showed a slight preference for an ALS. When mentoring worked well, it was highly valued by mentees. It helped them with a wide range of issues; being listened to and not feeling judged by their mentor was very important as was the knowledge of the person. Four of the five mentors, in their questionnaire responses, indicated that their mentees had found the sessions with them very useful.

## April 2010 Launch Event and Action Learning Sets - May 2010 to January 2011

The majority of respondents reported that the learning outcomes for the launch day had been either fully or mostly met on their evaluation forms. Qualitative feedback on the day was excellent with participants energised to apply the learning in their workplaces. The very few negative comments received mainly related to the packed nature of the day and being a bit 'rushed' or 'hurried' at times. Typical comments included:

- 'Enjoyable and useful day'
- 'Useful and great to be out of the 'spinning' office – time to think'
- 'I really enjoyed it!'
- 'Really enjoyed meeting other managers and having time out to 'get back to basics'
- 'Very enjoyable, glad to have this opportunity'
- 'Excellent day, thank you'

Eighty percent of ALS members and mentors, on the recent online survey, rated the launch event, as getting the project off to a very good start.

Other feedback about ALS delivery was equally positive: all ALS respondents felt that: their ALS had been competently facilitated; the ground rules had worked well; and the research presentations and handouts were very relevant to their current jobs. Any initial teething problems in the first ALS were quickly responded to. From the second session onwards no suggested improvements to the ongoing delivery of the ALSs were requested; mentors reported a similar high level of satisfaction with their two sessions.

All set members valued the shared learning with others across the region, and fed back positively on the reflective space the set offered, although 60% said they did not have enough time to get the most out of the ALS. From those who completed the programme, there was some excellent feedback:

*This course has been so useful and enjoyable. As a new manager I have been able to develop a positive supervision style, which challenges and encourages reflective practice, and also gained confidence in decision making.*

*The sessions were invaluable and gave me the opportunity to link with other Team Managers who understood the pressure and challenges faced on a day to day basis. The calming presence of our knowledgeable facilitator was like a breath of fresh air, and for the short period away from the 'coal face' allowed time to put some issues and dilemmas into perspective.*

Another set member commented that "the set got better and better" as the project proceeded and the group became smaller and more relaxed. This made discussions about difficult issues members were facing easier. In this regard it is worth noting that the ALSs were on the high side to start with: the Exeter ALS started out with 12 members and the Bristol/Gloucester ALS with 11 members. Clearly people do 'fall by the wayside' but this project would have benefitted from three ALSs, distributed across the region by need and/or demand, with approximately eight members in each and well positioned so that members did not have to travel longer than a hour ideally or one and a half hours maximum each way either by car or bus/train/taxi. Travelling time/ distance was underlined as an issue by even more regular attenders, and by someone who had withdrawn quite early on: 'I was disappointed that I could not continue with the programme . . . the long travelling distance was a contributory factor for not being able to attend'.

## 6. Outcomes and impact

The benefits and impact of the project are reported under each of the outcomes.

### **Front line managers will be more analytical, reflective and enquiring.**

Through their involvement in the project team managers systematically enhanced their reflective capacities; increased awareness of their own intuitive and analytic skills became evident in the way they now approached the supervision task (Munro 1999, 2008). Seven of the eleven questionnaire respondents<sup>2</sup> agreed that their intuitive and analytic reasoning abilities had improved: they were now not only questioning their own assumptions or hypotheses more regularly but also those of the social workers they supervised. They also reported doing this at other meetings where cases were discussed in order to overcome 'groupthink' (Munro, 2008).

Two mentors ranked the degree to which this outcome had been met by their mentee(s) as high and three scored it as medium. Qualitative feedback from the final ALSs adds some detail to the questionnaire responses, and also shows that differences in learning styles were able to be accommodated within the ALSs. Some preferred the content element whilst others were drawn to more experiential approaches:

*Within supervision encouraging more reflection. There's always that push to use your leave and your TOIL and "Have you been sick recently and you've got these training courses coming up haven't you? Right now let's get on with the cases." . . . And actually stepping back and encouraging them to reflect not only how they feel themselves but on specific cases, any dilemmas or anything they want to think more about.*

*I've slightly changed the supervision style and I'm asking social workers now a lot more of the story . . . tell me the story of the family rather than just keeping it so focused on tasks that need to be done. So that's definitely as a result of this . . . it's enabling the social worker to think a lot more and it's enabling me then to direct*

*I think the whole supervision theme that's run throughout these action learning sets has been useful for me . . . to be more reflective and not so task centred in supervision.*

*I think the real life experiences . . . in our groups, and we've had a situation where we've listened [to each other], because then you can help resolve it . . . I think that's been really useful. While the reading material and the research is useful and interesting, you don't always have the time to actually incorporate that into your day job whereas the practical experiences of others you can.*

### **Front line managers will have more creative and improved supervision skills.**

Towards the end of the project there was emerging evidence that some Team Managers were trying out new approaches involving both individual and group supervision with their team members to improve the quality of practice. This feedback came from the final ALSs:

*I've made it now a feature . . . with every supervisee, you know, maybe every couple of months or to have that break from case management, just being able to think, talk. It's a two way and it will be "I want you to bring something to supervision next time, whatever you want," so I've found it really, really beneficial.*

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<sup>2</sup> Three skipped these questions and one respondent ticked not applicable due to their withdrawal.

*On Tuesday and Thursday mornings I do a team briefing – a mini group supervision to promote reflection – twice a week so that part timers can participate. It's brought the team together and has been a good vehicle to overcome negative feelings which may arise in practice e.g. inadequacy etc*

But one Team Manager, who was managing a big team, described some of the not inconsiderable cultural and organisational challenges to doing things differently, as well as the real benefits of group supervision for her/his team:

*We did do a session in the team, we took three hours out to look at assessments and analysis . . . what was interesting was it met with - I think resistance is a bit of a heavy word - but there was level of resistance to doing this because it was taking time out . . . everybody's time is valuable and they've got to account for every minute, and people were feeling quite frustrated that I was asking this of them. . . . By the end of the session everybody agreed it had been well worthwhile and we'd all got something from it, including challenging each other and how we approach pieces of work and what we bring to those pieces of work . . . We did say we would try and do it every three to four months. I think anything more than that it's not just going to happen. And from that I felt I was able to develop more of a culture in the team that it's okay to do this, it's okay to value yourself [with] learning and reflection time and challenge time. But what I've also done is I've raised it with our service manager that this needs to be built in throughout the year, that proper cover arrangements are made for this type of team development work*

Survey responses from Team Managers confirmed the impetus the programme had given them to ask better questions in supervision, which in turn had made their staff more reflective and questioning of their practice:

*I have enabled SWs to be far more reflective following joint visits with them, and to 'talk to themselves' about what they have just seen, heard, felt, smelled etc.*

*In supervision I have more focused on the child, more questioning/challenging of the Social workers and other professionals.*

*I have used suggestions re supervision to help members of the team improve their practice by being more questioning in their approach.*

Mentors reported that their mentees had demonstrated this outcome. The impact of the project on one mentee's ability to lead their team, as reported by their mentor in the online survey was profound: '*Fewer complaints, earlier intervention with positive outcomes, no "near" miss cases, effectively building positive multi agency working and maintaining relationships. Leading an effective team*'.

One mentor went on to use some of course materials to develop multi-agency reflective practice workshops, which quickly became very popular and were over-subscribed. Following the success of this initiative, the Consultant and the mentor co-drafted a one page 'How to do it' briefing for all members in the community of practice (see Appendix C). This was an unanticipated outcome of the project; and it was particularly gratifying to see this timely multi-agency initiative getting off the ground as a result of the learning and some of the resources from this project.

## **Front line managers will develop, through application & ongoing evaluation, a robust model of practice standards.**

The innovative evidence-based participatory model, outlined in sections two and three of this report, encouraged exploration and promoted ownership such that over time team managers began identifying more subtle quality standards in their own practice.

Children and young people started to come into focus more in assessments with a renewed sense of the importance of finding out what the reality of the child's day to day life was like and looking for evidence of that in assessments. An example of a child who was persistently late arriving at school was shared in one of the ALSs: "*Nobody described what it was like for that child to be going to school every day, smelly and dirty. OK, he was in uniform but . . . still very, very grubby . . . it was grim for that child*". This participant and her/his team derived significant benefits from the project; s/he really appreciated the input on analysis and keeping the child at the centre: "*I fed that straight into the team and built on that*". Seven out of eight ALS participants agreed that they were now finding out more about the child's experience.

Another area, which would be useful to look at in more detail, relates to whether or how frequently team managers accompany social workers on visits, and if they do how well they use it as a learning opportunity afterwards. The information about a child's home circumstances, which a team manager works from, is mediated through the social worker's particular configuration of knowledge and experience, including their own life experiences, and their ability to recognise patterns and form judgements:

*. . . There was a social worker said to me "The house is getting pretty bad." And I said "What do you mean by pretty bad?" And I couldn't get a real feel for it so I went and it was horrendous [laughs], it wasn't "pretty bad", it was grim, one of the worst I've seen actually . . . why didn't I pick up what they meant by pretty bad? . . . And the social worker could then describe it much better . . . if your feet are sticking to the floor . . . that's exactly what you're feeling, you know walking on Velcro almost, isn't it?*

This realisation led to improved supervision: the manager decided to gain a better understanding of the accuracy of her/his newly qualified staff's assessments and of their reflective capacities:

*Revisiting something I used to do a long time ago . . . that was going out with social workers . . . I've done that with three newly qualified social workers in the team and so now when they describe something I've got a slightly better feel . . . in the next supervision we went back over that visit and that was their reflective bit. So I could gauge what their reflection was and that was really useful*

Seven ALS respondents broadly agreed that this outcome had been met; one mentor ranked the outcome in terms of having been met by their mentee(s) as high, three as medium and one as low.

Other areas which could be used to assess quality and identify more practice standards are: the frequency and quality of group supervision sessions, assessed through a team resource file and discussions with team members; and the quality of the analytical framework used to record the reflective component of supervision and track a social worker's professional development. When considered together, the standards could be developed into a tool which measures the all-important organisational or workplace climate in teams, which as discussed in section two, creates the right environment for staff to practice effectively and generate positive outcomes for children (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998; Gibbs 2009). These points are developed further in the final Recommendations section of this report.

**Front line managers will report increased knowledge, understanding, skill and consistency of practice in relation to recording, sound analysis, and consistency of thresholds.**

**Front line managers and Heads of Social Care will report improved decision - making and practice standards.**

This evaluation collected feedback from ALS participants and mentors; feedback on the second outcome is being gathered independently by the Project Manager from Heads of Social Care.

The approach to this project emphasised the importance of team managers leading and inspiring their staff to be more engaged, curious and emotionally aware practitioners, combining compassion, relationship-building and getting things done with service users (Jones 2007; Sharp and Jones 2010, Sharp and Jones forthcoming 2011) alongside respectful uncertainty (Lord Laming, 2003), and an intellectual evidence-based rigour and curiosity derived from the key references and ALS discussions.

The ongoing evaluation evidence on emerging benefits and programme impact, collected in September and December 2010 from ALS participants and mentors, convincingly showed that that the project had revitalised team managers' approach to assessment and supervision practice, helping get her/him out of "*the rut*" as one Team Manager put it.

Throughout the duration of the project there was growing evidence, from a number of sources, that these two outcomes had been met, particularly by those who had an attendance score of five or more and had received at least three mentoring sessions. Seven out of eight ALS respondents in the online survey agreed that decision making and practice standards had improved in their teams; and there was now more consistency around thresholds. Four agreed that concrete and beneficial outcomes for children and families had come about as a result of the project.

The questionnaire responses also confirmed that participants considered their knowledge of child protection research had increased through the content element of the ALS. They were more consciously reviewing previous plans with a critical eye; and as mentioned previously, this scrutiny was from a more child centred perspective with improved questioning of their social workers. There was also evidence from different sources of the ALSs helping prepare participants for inspection. For example, those who had recently been through inspection shared the duty systems and processes they had in place with those awaiting inspection. Some were at different stages regarding recording the reflective element of supervision:

*We have had a file audit of supervision file from our Director and it was commented on about how thorough and reflective my supervision notes were . . . It's a sense of achievement because it's not only recognised that it's what the supervisees want as well, it's a learning curve for me because you get to know so much more about who they are as individuals and who they are as practitioners.*

However despite these improvements, in the online responses five of the eight respondents indicated they were still struggling with how best to record the reflective component of supervision. This is an important area, which could easily be explored by a voluntary sub group of ALS participants sharing effective ways to do this, and disseminating best practice across the region.

Six of the eight respondents broadly agreed that the various components of this outcome had been met, as did four of the five mentors. They similarly reported raised standards in supervision, and improved analysis, decision making and performance. Mentors also mentioned emerging culture change and good practice around looking at 'near misses'; dissemination of the research used on the project with team members followed by discussion; and mentees using team meetings more productively to look at practice and assessment.

### **Front line managers will report benefits in sharing learning with colleagues across the South West region.**

This outcome was clearly demonstrated with positive feedback gathered across all the sources of data. These comments come from the discussions at the final ALSs:

*Just to meet other local authorities, see how they're working and seeing how things fit together and the systems, the systems are what makes duty work.*

*We're coming to these learning sets to inquire about how certain things are done in different authorities . . . and for me that's been really helpful.*

Where this outcome had substantial impact within one ALS's member's local authority, s/he had a clear mandate to maximise the learning from other local authorities, travelled quite extensively on fact-finding visits and fed back to senior management afterwards. Her/his mentor added: *'This has been an extremely valuable project. I have learnt that you get out what you put in and you need to prioritise to get the most from it. I would like to cascade a similar model across the wider group of managers in [my local authority]'*.

In the very early stages of the project two LAs reported a successful outcome in working closely together to safeguard children who had moved areas across the region within 24 hours. Bridge building and improved communication with a neighbouring local authority also came about across another two local authorities, even though there was relatively short term involvement in the project with regard to one of the councils: a *"difficult relationship"* had significantly improved through participation in the set. The positive effect was almost immediate and was reported as having been maintained at the end of the project with much improved communication between teams in the neighbouring councils.

## **7. Challenges and recommendations for councils**

There are clear gains to be had from regional initiatives, but these need to be considered in the light of:

- Selection i.e. who and how many managers will be nominated;
- How participation in a project like this fits with strategic plans for service development;
- How will nominees be supported to attend i.e. cover arrangements;
- How travel considerations and personal circumstances need to be taken into account;
- How the learning will be disseminated within the authority;
- How this will be evaluated to design new initiatives?

When a local authority gets this about right, there are far-reaching benefits, not least that managers sent on a programme like this feel valued. These are some important observations from one ALS participant on selection, the organisational and personal commitment required and the clear gains to be had regarding leadership of her/his team:

*[My colleagues] feel very envious that I've had this opportunity and they haven't because it wasn't a case of a name being drawn out of a hat, it was very much "You will go". And I've been committed to the course and certainly they've been very supportive in ensuring that I can get to all of them. I think there's only one I*

*missed because I was on holiday but they've ensured that there's cover for me . . . so there's been a big commitment . . . but more of, that's what we need. Because it's about good leadership isn't it? And that's what we are, you forget, we're the next generation of teachers.*

S/he went on to give some very wise advice, with a dash of humour, about succession planning and talent management in local authorities. This related to her/his two very able Assistant Team Managers, one of whom was just 25 years old:

*They're amazing . . . hungry to learn and to do really good . . . very professional approach. Well, you know, I'm just paving the way, and before long, as I said, I'm really nice to them, because they're going to be my boss one day!*

The biggest challenges to councils relate to the sheer day to day pressures and how, with best intentions, these can thwart nominees' plans to take part in a development initiative like this.

Senior managers are influenced just as much by cultural busy-ness as everyone else so that the clear advantages of signing up to a project like this, as some ALS survey responses indicated, are either not appreciated in the first place, not supported or not followed through. This is not intentional on anyone's part, but given the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the 'finishers' on this project, it is indeed a professional loss to those councils and their nominees who fell by the wayside during the course of the project.

A project like this also has the potential to support leadership development at all levels and would certainly equip senior managers to 'walk the talk' (Lord Laming 2003), taking a genuine interest in practice developments: this comment comes from a senior manager/mentor:

*Senior managers need to embrace a reflective model for practice and would benefit from keeping up to date with research and practice. There is a danger that Senior managers become remote from practice developments.*

In the context of pruned and flattened management structures and all levels of management needing to lead, this is a rather more fundamental observation from a Team Manager:

*There's very little teaching of how to be a manager. They teach you how to dismiss someone, you can go in half a day on that and perhaps fill in a form . . . but they don't actually teach you how to manage. And you know some people do Degrees in how to manage and it's really interesting. I was lucky because I did [one of those courses] . . . which was really helpful . . . but I look at people now coming through the system and they go from social work task to more of a management task and all they base it on is the management that they see around them . . . there's no teaching of management . . . it's a big jump.*

This was a regionally inspired initiative, but local service delivery improvements can be made using similar models, for example, training talented middle managers to become facilitators of locally delivered ALSs with support from a mentor or consultant. This feedback came from an ALS participant in yet another local authority:

*More of the same with other managers in our organisation would be very helpful, and support ongoing reflection on our work by us as a discrete group, stimulated by an experienced facilitator.*

Local models need to sit alongside higher level regional initiatives for employees, identified as 'the next generation' or the 'bosses' of the future. For those fortunate enough to be selected for regional projects especially, there needs to be a clear remit to maximise their learning from other participating councils and return to their own departments with examples of best

practice from elsewhere. This is the essence of 'double loop learning', which seeks to ask whether we are doing the right thing, and is a key step on the way to becoming 'an adaptive learning organisation'(Munro 2011), characterised by a culture which values its employees, is responsive and in a continuous drive for improved performance.

## Recommendations

1. More consideration needs to be given to the lead in time for projects of this nature so that the context and expectations are clear at the outset. Cover arrangements need to be agreed and regularly reviewed throughout the duration of a project like this or where local group supervision arrangements are set up by team managers: duty work is the social care equivalent of an accident and emergency unit. Any time out for professional development by individuals or teams has to be planned well in advance.
2. The selection process should be transparent and service development focused to maximise the impact and help steer the legacy of the project in each local authority. Helpful questions for the senior team and a selection panel to ask at this stage include 'What are our priorities?', 'Where do we most need to make service improvements?' and 'Which managers are in the strongest position in their careers to make the most impact?'
3. Nominees need to feel valued by being asked to participate, rather than being directed to attend with back up to call on in the event of an emergency. They also need reasonable notice to take account of the practical and professional expectations placed upon them. Preferred learning styles should be taken into consideration: where a choice needs to be made, some participants may prefer one to one mentoring and others to learn in a group. Ideally two or more people should participate to help share and embed the learning in the authority.
4. Where events are run regionally, consideration needs to be given to centrally positioned locations and to car sharing. Accessibility, preferably within one to one and half hours maximum from a nominee's home, promotes higher levels of participation; car sharing keeps travel costs down, helps reduce carbon emissions and adds value in the form of peer mentoring en route to and from the venue.
5. Initiatives like this need to take place at both regional and local level. Like this project, they should be properly evaluated against outcomes, and disseminated, building an evidence-based bank of what works in the region. This will also improve accountability within the local authorities, especially where they have regional funding.
6. Where projects like this, or similar to this, are commissioned at local level, for example training ALS facilitators, careful attention needs to be given to the timing of change and development projects and how they are marketed internally to promote buy in. Preferred learning styles vis a vis mentoring or being in an ALS, as indicated above, also need to be discussed.
7. If not already in place, there might also be some merit in offering ALS membership to newly qualified social workers, perhaps facilitated by a trained internal facilitator.
8. Where a content element is requested in the design of an action learning project, it is recommended that ALSs include a half hour or so lunch break and end mid afternoon to allow sufficient time for experiential learning. For regionally based projects in particular, this would help maximise the learning against the time spent travelling to and from each session.

9. Given the success of this project, it is recommended that further work on identifying practice standards be taken forward within a small voluntary sub group from the ALSs. This would identify standards in relation to:

- How often team managers accompany social workers on visits, and if they do how well they use it as a learning opportunity afterwards.
- The frequency and quality of group supervision sessions, assessed through a team resource file and discussions with team members;
- The quality of the analytical framework used to record the reflective component of supervision and how that links to improved outcomes for children and families and a social worker's professional development.

The standards could supplement the organisations and workloads 'health check' proposed by the Social Work Task Force (Social Work Task Force 2009) to help measure the all-important organisational or workplace climate in teams, which creates the right environment for staff to practice effectively and most importantly to generate positive outcomes with and for children and young people (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998; Gibbs 2009).

10. This project has identified two areas for further leadership development: one at front line manager level; and the other at a more senior level to help Service Directors and others understand and appreciate the evidence-based importance of reflective practice in improving outcomes for children and families. This needs to take place within organisational cultures and workplace climates that actively go about noticing, commenting upon, and celebrating good practice as well as picking up on and responding to underperformance. The same good practice at the front line with children and families, characterised by attention, encouragement, alertness, curiosity and 'noticing' positive and negative change, needs to be evident throughout the organisation.

It is therefore recommended that Senior Managers be offered the opportunity to participate in regional or sub regional 'Master classes', based on the content element of the ALSs, to keep abreast of new applied research findings to support front line staff and to assist with local service developments. With the publication of the final Munro Review report due later this month, it is vital that the tomorrow's leaders are able to inspire their staff and generate opportunities for double-loop learning, as they strive to become adaptive learning organisations.

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## 9. Appendix A: Programme for mentors September 2010

### Promoting and improving high quality assessment/planning/intervention and review (APIR) practice

#### Session for mentors (1 of 2)

**Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2010, 10.00am – 1.45pm (including coffee on arrival and lunch)**

**Venue:** Somerset College of Arts and Technology (SCAT) Conference Centre, Wellington Road, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 5AX

#### Project Outcomes – April 2010 to March 2011

##### By the end of the project as a whole:

- Front line managers will report increased knowledge, understanding, skill and consistency of practice in relation to recording, sound analysis, and consistency of thresholds.
- Front line managers will develop, through application & ongoing evaluation, a robust model of practice standards.
- Front line managers will have more creative and improved supervision skills.
- Front line managers will be more analytical, reflective and enquiring.
- Front line managers and Heads of Social Care will report improved decision -making and practice standards.
- Front line managers will report benefits in sharing learning with colleagues across the South West region.

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#### Session Outcomes

##### By the end of the session mentors will have:

- Shared new approaches to supervision being put into practice by mentees
- Shared their own approaches to mentoring, and tools and techniques to promote critical reflection
- Had an opportunity to clarify any key issues arising from the project
- Worked in action learning trios on problem solving a specific issue related to mentoring
- Identified success criteria for mentors to track progress against project outcomes.
- Contributed to the ongoing evaluation of the project by identifying emerging benefits & challenges, and early impact of the project thus far.

##### Learning method:

- Experiential group work, group discussion and feedback

## Programme

- 10.00 **Arrival and coffee**
- 10.15 Reconnecting: Welcome, introductions and ground rules
- 10.25 What's working? Story circle on the theme of a change in either your practice as a mentor/ supervisor or a mentee's supervision practice since the start of this project
- 10.55 Cross circle dialogue
- 11.10 Building a best practice toolkit: Identifying tools and techniques for mentoring/ supervision on the APIR project
- 11.25 *Coffee*
- 11.35 Improving mentoring practice: Action learning exercise in trios
- 12.35 Identifying our actions
- 12.40 Evaluation: emerging benefits, challenges and early impact.
- 12.50 Identifying key success criteria for mentors and looking ahead to our next session on 30<sup>th</sup> November
- 13.00 **Lunch**
- 13.45 **Depart**

## 10. Appendix B: Programme for mentors November 2010

### Promoting and improving high quality assessment/planning/intervention and review (APIR) practice

#### Session for mentors (2 of 2)

**Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> November 2010, 10.00am – 1.45pm (including coffee on arrival and lunch)**

**Venue:** Somerset College of Arts and Technology (SCAT) Conference Centre,  
Wellington Road, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 5AX

#### Project Outcomes – April 2010 to March 2011

##### By the end of the project as a whole:

- Front line managers will report increased knowledge, understanding, skill and consistency of practice in relation to recording, sound analysis, and consistency of thresholds.
- Front line managers will develop, through application & ongoing evaluation, a robust model of practice standards.
- Front line managers will have more creative and improved supervision skills.
- Front line managers will be more analytical, reflective and enquiring.
- Front line managers and Heads of Social Care will report improved decision -making and practice standards.
- Front line managers will report benefits in sharing learning with colleagues across the South West region.

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#### Session Outcomes

##### By the end of the session mentors will have:

- Shared new approaches to supervision being put into practice by mentees
- Shared their own approaches to mentoring, and tools & techniques to promote critical reflection
- Had a further opportunity to clarify any key issues arising from the project
- Worked in action learning trios on problem solving a specific issue related to the mentoring role and extending impact of the project
- Identified emerging benefits, challenges & early impact thus far as part of the ongoing evaluation for the project
- Agreed key success criteria for their role to contribute to the final evaluation questionnaire - to be circulated February 2011

##### Learning method:

- Experiential group work, group discussion and feedback

## Programme

### **10.00 Arrival and coffee**

10.15 Reconnecting: Welcome and introductions

10.25 What's working? Story circle on the theme of a change in either your practice as a mentor/ supervisor or a mentee's supervision practice since the start of this project

10.45 Cross circle dialogue

10.55 Building a best practice toolkit: Identifying tools and techniques for mentoring/ supervision on the APIR project

11.05 Report back on presenter actions from September's action learning exercise

### **11.15 Coffee**

11.25 Interim evaluation: emerging benefits, challenges and early impact of the APIR project

11.45 Extending impact within and across South West Region LAs: Action learning exercise in trios

12.15 Identifying our actions

12.25 Agreeing success criteria for the mentoring sessions (a few examples to be circulated on the day)

12.45 Any other issues and evaluation of the day

### **13.00 Lunch**

### **13.45 Depart**

The project is being facilitated by Dr Jocelyn Jones, Mindful Practice Ltd, 16 Hazle Close, Ledbury, Herefordshire, 07985056572, [jocelyn.jones@mindfulpractice.co.uk](mailto:jocelyn.jones@mindfulpractice.co.uk)

Jocelyn has extensive experience as a practitioner and manager in children's services, expert witness, senior academic (child protection studies), post qualifying external assessor and qualitative researcher. She has worked on a number of high profile action learning/research projects in the UK, and has published widely on child neglect, post qualifying education and training of social workers, the nature of competence, and the importance of reflective practice. As an experienced facilitator, Jocelyn is committed to creating the right climate for quality dialogue with all those with whom she works. She is respectful of different ways of 'knowing' and has the ability to enable these to be articulated so that new shared knowledge and interconnections are made. Current action learning/ research projects include a CWDC/ GOWM commissioned action learning programme to improve social work retention in children's services through high quality supervision (2009-2010); and an action research evaluation of a multi agency domestic abuse project for the Scottish Government and Scottish Women's Aid (2009-2011). Jocelyn holds a Doctorate in Action Research in Professional Practice from the University of Bath, and is an Honorary Research Fellow at Royal Holloway College, University of London.

## 11. Appendix C: Service development briefing on multi-agency reflective practice workshops

With acknowledgements and thanks to Liz Jones, B&NES for sharing how she applied some of the learning from the APIR project to set up these workshops. Further details from: [Elizabeth.Jones@BATHNES.GOV.UK](mailto:Elizabeth.Jones@BATHNES.GOV.UK)

The following bullet points are derived from an edited version of Liz Jones' report dated December 2010 to the LSCB.

- Not training sessions – promoted as peer group discussion based on dialogue and shared learning.
- People have consistently said that the opportunity to reflect on practice, including thinking through the emotional impact of safeguarding work is a real gap.
- They have had an informal tone - people feel comfortable and able to contribute.
- Held on a monthly basis – lunchtimes 12-2
- Introduced to supplement the important yet somewhat linear and individualized approach to quality assurance through auditing all Child Protection Conference minutes and reports
- Reflective practice workshops were thought to be one way of looking at emerging themes from this quality assurance work and considering what constitutes effective practice in specific areas of safeguarding.
- First piloted with Children's Social Care before extending invitation to other agencies
- Themes covered in the workshops so far include:
  - 'The place of analysis in assessments and agency reports for Child Protection Conferences'
  - 'Understanding the daily life experience of the child and the capacity of parents to change the child's experience for the better'
  - Understanding and fostering emotional resilience in children who have suffered or are likely to suffer significant harm'
  - 'Working with parents who are assessed as being resistant to change'
- The workshops on analysis and emotional resilience have been repeated on request as they were particularly popular, and in one case, over-subscribed.
- Each workshop has started with a briefing paper on the theme, drawing on research and examples of effective evidence based practice. The participants have then discussed a 'live' anonymised case study in small groups, with questions to guide the discussion. A chronology of significant events in the children's lives has usually been provided to assist in an understanding of family history, patterns of behaviour, progression of concerns etc.
- The issues arising from this case study have then been discussed in the larger group.
- Numbers attending these workshops have averaged between 12 and 14. One workshop was attended by 18 people. The optimum number is around 12, to allow for full participation and for the depth of dialogue necessary for the reflective component of these workshops to come to the fore.
- Preparation, in terms of some formal input at the start on the theme, and then preparing the case study is fairly time intensive.
- Leading the group has also needed careful thought with such a wide range of people from different agencies.
- The subjects for the next three workshops are ;
  - 'Assessment of emotional abuse and its impact on children and young people'
  - 'The importance of understanding family history or functioning where children and young people are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm'
  - 'The role of fathers and male carers where children and young people are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm.'

The workshops are evolving further now, with offers from professionals from other disciplines to co-facilitate the workshops with Liz Jones. This is a positive development.

Dr Jocelyn Jones, Mindful Practice Ltd,  
February 2011