

Speech: Social care commentary: using models of practice successfully

As more local authorities (LAs) are starting to use a model of social work practice, we are often asked about what is most likely to lead to success and what can improve the children and families' experiences? In this commentary, we reflect on our experience and findings from inspection over the last year.

When we talk about 'models of practice', we mean a particular way of, or approach to, working with children and families. It is values-based and, when successful, transformative. The accumulated challenges that our children and families face need systemic responses (the response is focused on how children and family relationships and their social context shape their experiences and thinking). The models we choose must reflect and respond to these challenges. They must provide the knowledge, tools and skills to enable great social work practice with children and families to thrive. It is critical that any model of practice used ensures a continuous focus on children's experiences and progress.

New ways of working can really support a profession that is striving to improve. What we shouldn't do though, is forget the basics. We have seen significant investment and innovation as models of practice have developed. When it's done carefully and well, innovation moves social work forward and that leads to better decision-making and more impactful direct work with children and families.

I want to build on a [previous blog about models of practice](#), repeat some of the key messages and answer some questions to support you to deliver these models:

- what works best in implementing a model of practice?
- what are the ingredients that make a model effective?
- does Ofsted have a preferred model of practice?

Social work practice continues to evolve. We are all still learning what works.

I want to begin by highlighting again some of the important elements of leadership that are essential for success. There needs to be a clear operating model that sets out:

- the local authority's vision and values
- the LA's philosophy of social work
- the structure of teams
- how cases move through the system
- how social work practice will be carried out
- the provision of help, protection and care for children
- what the thresholds are
- what services are expected to do and monitoring services for their

quality and effectiveness

What works best in implementing a model of practice?

As highlighted in [‘A preferred model of practice’](#), we’ve found significant variation in how well some models are implemented. It is critical that, whatever model is chosen, there is a clear implementation programme that makes the most of its benefits.

The name of the model does not tell you what it is or what it does – the same named model can be implemented quite differently in different places. It is important that you know what you are trying to achieve and what success looks like. The same approach is not necessarily right for every local area.

A whole-system approach

Through our inspections, we have seen that a carefully implemented whole-system approach is critical to success. If a model has just been tagged onto the existing system or ‘dragged and dropped’ from elsewhere, this can lead to tools not being used effectively or being used mechanistically. It can also mean a less coherent experience for children and their families and the opportunity to impact positively on practice can be missed. At worst, it can impact negatively on the progress, experience and even on the safety of children.

We are finding that when models have been well implemented strategically and operationally over time, they permeate the culture and thinking of social workers and leaders.

A whole-system approach means that, at each part of the child’s journey through the system, the principles of the approach have been embedded in the way professionals work with children and their families.

For example, in Hillingdon the dedicated and knowledgeable leadership team models a child-centred approach to all strategic and operational interventions for children. This is replicated throughout the staff group. Their consistent use of the ‘analysis of risk’ model is effective in identifying areas of risk and strength for children.

In North Yorkshire over a sustained period, leaders have built on an established philosophy of practice, which is clearly understood both across the service and by partners. At the heart of this approach is a belief that stable relationships with workers, who know their children and families extremely well, is the key to creating and sustaining positive change.

LAs stressed how important it was to ‘co-produce’ the plan to implement a chosen model of practice. Co-production means the plan is developed with, and therefore owned by, all partners, social workers, managers, families and young people. Planning also needs to be long-term and actions measurable.

A clear ethos

The Children Act sets out the main ethos for working with children and their families. A model of practice is most effective when the LA's own ethos is clear and underpins the approach.

For example, in Bexley, the ethos behind the well-embedded social work methodology is that children should grow up in their own families and other family networks when it is safe for them to do so. Family-based relationship work starts with the whole-family network and is supported and underpinned by a clear operating model.

Developing a confident and committed workforce

LAs need to provide the whole social care workforce with the language, knowledge, tools and skills to deliver any model they have chosen. A model won't work unless there is ongoing training and support for all staff. Managers have a crucial role. They need to believe in and 'own' the model. That way, they can embed the model through all learning activities, supervision and management oversight. This will support staff in being both confident and skilled in delivering the model of practice. I cannot overstate the role of effective management oversight and supervision in ensuring that a model of practice makes a positive difference to the quality of practice.

A well-articulated approach to social work can also support good morale and help with staff retention and recruitment.

In Calderdale, social workers, aided by their practice managers and Calderdale Therapeutic Team (CTS), are helped to reflect on their practice and its impact and to identify ways to further help children, using an embedded and systemic social work model. Social workers told inspectors that they feel safe and enabled "to make a real difference in children's lives".

Models that set out clear expectations

Every practitioner needs to understand what is expected of them. At both an individual and organisational level, everyone needs to understand what success looks like.

A consistent approach means applying the same operating model at all levels, with the same principles and philosophy behind it. However, consistency does not mean rigidity. The best models are adaptable and flexible so that practitioners can modify them for specific situations. Models should support social workers to do the right thing and not become a mechanistic way of responding to families.

Building on solid foundations

When the conditions for social work to flourish are not present, then it is likely the model won't work. Implementing a model is not a 'quick win'.

Models need to be built on some solid foundations, as highlighted in [our](#)

[blog](#):

- a stable workforce
- manageable caseloads
- effective management oversight and frequent supervision
- highly visible leaders and managers
- a strong culture of learning
- good qualitative assurance, performance monitoring and performance management arrangements
- mature partnerships with other agencies

Retaining focus on core social work tasks

When implementing a model, there is a risk that it may inadvertently lead to a loss of focus on some of the basics. For example, previously we have seen an LA implement a model of working in 'pods' (small groups of social workers who work closely together with a 'practice lead', who has a close working knowledge and oversight of their work). This led to good reflective discussion and assessment. However, with the shift to this new way of working, professionals lost their usual level of focus on timely decision-making, leading to delays for children. The best social work practice is founded on both values and professional standards, which are applied with discipline.

Monitoring the impact of the model

There will always be unintended consequences of implementing a model that need to be responded to quickly. It is critical that:

- the impact of the model is very closely monitored
- a robust quality assurance and performance management system is in place
- where necessary, remedial action is taken promptly

The best places evaluate their model over the longer term, being clear about how far success criteria have been met. They involve their practitioners well in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the model.

What are the ingredients that make a model effective?

So, are there certain ingredients across different models of practice that enable them to be effective? I think there are, and I want to begin highlighting these.

A family-focused approach

Models that tend to make the biggest positive difference to the progress and experiences of children take a whole-family, holistic approach. They address key needs and risks while identifying and using strengths.

For example, practitioners in Bexley use a family-based relationship model

involving the entire network of family and friends. This approach is underpinned by the belief that families have strengths and can identify solutions to their difficulties using their relationships with workers who know their children well. But, as with anything, there is a balance. A focus on the family must not lose a focus on the child.

Valuing stable relationships

Most models focus on the importance of stable relationships with social workers. They see this as a critical element of achieving sustainable, positive change for children and their families.

For example, in East Sussex the model of 'connected practice' (a methodology that supports practitioners to create change through meaningful and helpful relationships with children and families) has been comprehensively rolled out and is fully embedded. It is now resulting in helpful, enduring and trusting relationships between practitioners, children and their families, sometimes over many years.

In Kensington and Chelsea, the social work model is a strength. It means children and families receive consistent, stable social work support for as long as they need. Children's services staff are trained as systemic practitioners. The social work model ensures that children and families experience minimal changes of social worker, even though their service needs may change, so that the relationship can remain stable.

Leeds has established a well-understood practice model that promotes child-centred work and productive working relationships between workers and families. Everyone is clear about what successful outcomes look like. The LA uses a restorative approach, which promotes working 'with' a family rather than doing work 'to' them. This includes early help. For example, the Restorative Early Support (RES) teams work intensively with families, setting clear goals that are reviewed weekly. Families 'own' the plan promoting sustainable change.

Relationship-based practice is a clear feature of all work in Leeds. Children are allocated a social worker in a timely way and, whenever possible, they remain with the same social worker. This helps build trusting relationships and reduces the number of professionals in the family's life.

A shared model across agencies

Models of practice can be particularly effective when used across agencies.

Our report ['Growing up neglected'](#) (a joint targeted area inspections (JTAI) overview report of the 'deep dive' theme 'older children living with neglect') found that some local areas took a strategic multi-agency approach. This ensured that staff across agencies had the support, training and tools needed to tackle neglect of older children. These areas had a more consistent and considered way of working that was having a positive impact on many children.

Islington and its partner agencies are embedding a model of trauma-informed practice. This is driving a cultural shift across the partnership. Their model promotes developing a skilful and confident workforce that builds good relationships with children and their families and keeps children at the centre of interventions. Professionals have commented to inspectors that this training has transformed the culture in schools, for example by providing a safe space for children to disclose abuse and by helping teachers to be professionally curious.

Focus on strengths and balance with risks

Any model should have a focus on families' strengths and their capacity to change but must also clearly identify the risks. The implementation needs to ensure that the model guards against over-optimism and against assessment and intervention becoming too adult-focused.

For example, in North Yorkshire the vast majority of assessments are of a high quality. Professionals use a well-embedded model of practice to explore strengths and areas of concern within a family.

Essex uses the 'relationship strengths-based' practice model, which is fully embedded and well understood by staff and partner agencies. This model helps professionals to understand children's lived experiences and to develop effective and sustainable solutions. Staff have a clear understanding of the model and build strong relationships, getting to know children and families. They use a family's strengths to help identify strategies for them to achieve and sustain positive changes and improve outcomes for their children.

Purposeful direct work

The best LAs see purposeful direct work with children and families as a fundamental part of their practice model.

For example, in East Sussex, creative and purposeful direct work with children is widespread. Professionals use a range of direct work tools, as well as a neglect toolkit, to enable effective communication and participation with families. Their work is all underpinned by the well-embedded 'connected practice' model. The strength of these relationships and the care that children and young people receive substantially enrich and improve their lives.

In North Yorkshire, professionals use purposeful, sensitive and imaginative direct work to gather the wishes and feelings of children and to understand their needs. There is a clear and well-embedded practice methodology that is well understood. This guides the work of all practitioners, both within children's social care and the wider multi-agency partnership.

Summary

Ofsted does not have a preferred model

I want to reiterate that Ofsted has no preferred model of practice. We do not

endorse one over another. What we look for, as in all areas of inspection, is the impact that the model has on children's progress and experiences. Embedding a new model is a challenging process. It is not a quick fix!

A whole-system approach to implementation will give the model the best opportunity to improve practice. It is critical that there is an unrelenting focus on the basics of social work practice, alongside good support for staff and strong management oversight. What success looks like needs to be clearly defined. The impact on children's experiences and progress needs to be evaluated through a robust quality-assurance process.

I will continue to return to this important issue because it's clear from our inspections to date that models of practice implemented well can have a positive impact on the lives of children and their families.