

Exploring the effectiveness of the multi-agency sexually harmful behaviour risk assessment pilot: Fife and Forth Valley

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Introduction

Practitioners need to accurately identify the level of concern about a young person's sexually concerning behaviour in order to distinguish between those young people who require targeted support and interventions and those for whom being drawn in to high-risk service provision could be detrimental to their outcomes. It is clear that not all young people will require a specialist risk assessment or intervention in order to address their behaviour. With this in mind, CYCJ developed a screening matrix designed to be used by a range of professionals who may not be experts or specialists in this field, but who are involved in decision-making for young people who have displayed concerning sexual behaviour. The screening tool took the form of a matrix, in which a range of behaviours were categorised into three columns (low; moderate; or high concern), and the column with the greatest number of items checked indicated the overall level of concern.

A small research study was conducted in Forth Valley in 2013 in order to test the usefulness and effectiveness of this matrix. Fourteen young people aged under 16, who were charged with an offence with a perceived sexual element and who resided in the pilot area, were referred to in the study. The research involved staff from Early and Effective Intervention, Police and Social Work, and each member of staff completed the Matrix independently for each referral and then jointly discussed the results in order to resolve any discrepancies and to assist in decision-making.

Findings

The use of the matrix as a screening tool to inform decision-making is not yet clear from this small-scale research study. In relation to **validity**, the analysis revealed that practitioners completing the matrix tended to agree on the overall *level* of concern about the young person. However, there was variation *within* each of the three categories of concern (for example, one practitioner may have checked off a different *number* of items in the moderate category to another practitioner, even though they both agreed that the concern was moderate overall). As concern increased from low to high within the matrix, discrepancies among assessors also increased. Thus, while assessors tended to agree on what constituted behaviour of 'low' concern, there was less agreement on what constituted behaviour that caused 'high' levels of concern. This may reflect the validity of the tool, the existence of a training need among practitioners, or both.

In relation to **utility**, again the findings are mixed. Practitioners found that the matrix was less useful in clear-cut cases (those that were obviously low or high risk), but that it added value to decision-making in 'middle-tariff' cases where there was more potential for differing views between professionals. The matrix also proved useful for gathering information, gap analysis and structuring thinking among professionals who are not experts or specialists in sexually harmful behaviour, but who do have some understanding about working with children and young people. Using the matrix sometimes slowed down the information-flow between agencies, but at the same time led to fuller consideration and discussion of the young person's circumstances. Assessors also highlighted some areas of the matrix that might benefit from further clarity or amendment, for example in how to incorporate victim narratives into risk assessment and risk management.

What will happen next?

Following consideration of the research findings from this small study CYCJ will not be developing or testing the matrix any further. However, practitioners may wish to use the matrix as a reference tool in their own practice. For further information you can access the full research report and the matrix [here](#).

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