

Inclusion as Prevention

Fern Gillon, CYCJ and Inclusion as Prevention

Inclusion as Prevention is an innovative system change project in South Lanarkshire. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, with partners including Action for Children, South Lanarkshire Council, Dartington Design Lab and CYCJ. The project aims to test out what happens when you meaningfully include those who are most often excluded, and explore whether this can lead to a reduction in negative outcomes.

This Info Sheet outlines the research and evidence which inspired the project and underpins its ethos, highlighting the complexities of working in prevention and early intervention and the opportunities it presents for system change. It reiterates well established learning that is often difficult to put into practice due to the complexity and scale of the forces that work against change, constraints like budgets and long established processes and ways of working. IAP is trying, through small but ethos driven tests of change, to promote empowerment and a different way of working to improve practices which support crime prevention.

Windows of opportunity

There is an established evidence base which tells us that children who become involved in a pattern of offending, or who are involved in more serious offences, are almost always our most vulnerable, victimised and traumatised young people. In many instances, they have been known to services, including statutory services from a young age, and despite being recognised as being on the edge of offending, these needs have gone unrecognised, undiagnosed or unsupported/insufficiently supported (Nolan, Dyer and Vaswani, 2016). As the link between vulnerability and offending is retrospective not predictive, this suggests there are windows of opportunity for positive relationship building and offers of support which are missed.

Windows of opportunity can be missed for a number of reasons and it is important to acknowledge that despite individual and service efforts, the constraints of the system are often a factor in missed opportunities to intervene. Despite substantial support for the prioritisation of preventative and early interventionist efforts ([Christie Commission](#), [GIRFEC](#), [Whole System Approach](#), [Justice Vision and Priorities](#)) this area of practice faces a lack of strategic investment in times of increasing financial constraint, which has led to substantial loss of services and interventions. Where support is available it is often constrained by thresholds, or criteria which put limits on the support or intervention which can be provided, when, or to whom. Often how or by whom support is offered can affect take up.

- *IAP aims to identify 'windows of opportunity' where we can respond differently by understanding the system from the perspectives of all those involved, including children, young people and families themselves. These activities will be our tests of change.*

The problem with prevention

When we try to meet needs earlier in order to prevent future escalation of behaviour, often our response expands formal systems. While this is a logical and benevolent intention, a complex and difficult reality is that this approach can sometimes be counterproductive, and can lead to more

negative outcomes. The Edinburgh Study found that the earlier children come into contact with formal systems, the more likely they are to become caught in those systems, often irrespective of offending behaviour, due to their status as the 'usual suspects' (McAra and McVie, 2010). Prevention is often targeted at those who are considered at potential future risk, this in turn categorises individuals and labels them as problem children, families, communities or groups. This can create stigma which prohibits the positive development of those affected. The impact of labelling and stigma is to reinforce and potentially amplify negative behaviour.

- *IAP will explore what happens when we focus the system on including people and helping them to do something rather than preventing something. Our hope is that people feel included and better supported and have better outcomes as a result.*

Overarching Exclusion

Prevention can exclude individuals from co-producing the solution, as often the problem is individualised: focused on individual circumstance, family dynamics or a community issue. Attempts to hear from those most affected by the issue - the children, young people, their families and communities - can be tokenistic or happen after the fact. Too often we prioritise professional voice and organisational power. We are beginning to realise that enabling those affected by issues and with lived experience to share their understanding and perspective is a more effective way to devise meaningful solutions and sustainable fixes; and are developing effective tools and mechanisms to support this shift in power, in order for people to design the systems they want to see.

- *In IAP a key group of decision makers in this project will be children, young people and their families and the wider communities of South Lanarkshire. We want to shift the balance of power across all the aspects of the work we do, and encourage working in this way.*

Inclusion as Prevention

IAP has a dedicated Engagement worker who will ensure the project prioritises the knowledge and experience of children, young people, families and communities about what they need, and support collaboration with the services and supports they come into contact with. By coming together to make small but meaningful changes and innovations to the support they receive and the way they receive it, IAP seeks to understand the impact of inclusion, both on preventing negative behaviour but also wider outcomes which we know contribute to poor outcomes more generally. A programme of leadership training will support those working in the system, who we are asking to undertake the change. As we learn from these small tests of change, we can explore where there is opportunity for improvements to be scaled up, across the locality, or where further changes need to be made. There is also learning to be captured about our approach to this project and the impact it is having, which may be helpful in supporting other projects of this kind, within and outwith children's services and justice.

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