Prioritising Prevention? Opportunities and barriers to inclusion, prevention and early intervention in Scottish Youth Justice

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February 2020

Summary of Key Findings:
- Increasing thresholds and decreasing budgets were seen to be a challenge to the prioritisation of prevention.
- Relationship based practice was seen as key to inclusion and early intervention, and a potential antidote to increasing system pressures.
- While the nature of offending was noted as changing, there were still key issues in the lives of young people who often become involved in offending including: domestic abuse, going missing from home, those excluded from school and other services. Many said that services and support could be better designed if they had robust data about this population of young people and their journeys.
- Spaces such as youth clubs or leisure facilities are reduced or are out of reach for young people, particularly those deemed as 'troublesome'. More should be done to promote positive images of young people in and with their communities.
- Education should be the primary site to test and promote inclusive, preventative and early interventionist approaches to young people involved in or at risk of involvement in offending behaviour.

Introduction

Inclusion as Prevention (IAP) aims to support the re-design of services for children involved in offending, or at risk of negative outcomes, and their families - by shifting from the often acute and crisis driven approach, to providing earlier support when they are risk of becoming involved. It is not about developing another system or reinventing the wheel; rather, it is about fundamental system change. This may involve rethinking how services are delivered or the introduction of new services and supports.

The project is one of eight initiatives funded by the National Lottery, under their Early Action Change Fund. The project is operating in South Lanarkshire, focusing specifically in years two and three on the areas of Rutherglen and Cambuslang. CYCJ is a core partner, alongside Action for Children, South Lanarkshire Council and the Dartington Design Lab, supported by a wider steering group which comprises members from other local third sector organisations, police, health and education. In year one we aim to gather evidence from a range of sources to help inform our approach including children, young people and families, practitioners and managers, research and data, and current service provision. In year one CYCJ will gather information about national services, best practices and developments Scotland-wide, and research into prevention and early and effective intervention that can inform the project. The scoping study is part of this work.

For the purposes of what we are trying to achieve in South Lanarkshire, it is important we learn from practice in other parts of Scotland. There is significant learning around best practice, barriers and facilitators of how to work in an inclusive, preventative and early interventionist manner. This paper summarises the learning from authorities, agencies and projects who are trying to address underlying causes of offending, promote inclusion and co-produce change and the facilitators and enablers of working in this way.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the picture of prevention in youth justice across Scotland. Representatives from 15 areas took part in an informal semi-structured interview and were identified through CYCJ's practice development work in the area of Early and Effective Intervention (EEI). An invitation to take part was also shared with members of the mailing list of the EEI practitioner forum. The report is a reflection of the themes which have emerged from those interviews.

Findings

- *Prioritising Prevention?*

Across various different areas, agencies, projects and posts, one of the overwhelming themes to come out of the scoping study was the perceived de-prioritisation of prevention and early intervention in relation to low level offending or behavioural concerns within statutory agencies, particularly in children and families social work. Most participants acknowledged the duel concerns of rising demand for support and the increasing complexity of concerns, while relentless cuts in terms of budgets, resources and staffing, which were perceived to fuel many of the concerns, prevent the right support being provided when it is required. There was a view that the thresholds for action by statutory agencies was much higher than had previously been the case, which meant early intervention work or prevention was not part of the core duties or responsibilities for statutory workers and that there had been a significant reduction in capacity of universal services.

For those who did operate within a context of prevention or early intervention it was their dedicated role or a protected team which was seen to ensure that low level concerns were addressed, or prioritised by others in a wider context. They often saw their role as promoting the importance of prevention, and coordinating efforts on the ground to address low level concerns - almost acting as champions. Some positions were seen to be more suited to the type of engagement required for effective preventative work; for example campus cops who are able to be more flexible, pro-active and responsive to local need. Similarly, their proximity to working with young people facilitated opportunities for relationship-based practices (discussed further below).

However, even where dedicated posts are established, there was a recognition that individuals had limited ability to protect the position of prevention and early intervention in the face of wider, systematic challenge and competing demands, including statutory work. For example, staff in one local authority who had dedicated posts for early intervention had been placed on the child protection rota due to increased capacity required for this work. While most acknowledged that there was a desire across sectors and systems to do early intervention and prevention, the frustration was often that the systems and processes are not set up to support and respond to this level of need. There was a considerable sense that over time, resources and staff have repositioned to a higher threshold of need response.

Those undertaking prevention and early intervention work within youth justice spheres or the children and families sector claimed to find more support, in terms of its importance and prioritisation, in a community justice setting. This may be a somewhat surprising finding, given the focus on prevention as a key cornerstone of Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and practice with all children, and has important implications for youth crime prevention work and the importance of ensuring a 'child first' ethos in youth justice and youth services more broadly. This

also raises the question of whether increasing thresholds and a lack of investment in prevention has led to the exclusion of youth crime prevention all together.

Consistent with the messages around the lack of statutory support, there was also seen to be a lack of resource and capacity for prevention work by traditional community providers and universal services. Gaps in provision or the shrinking of the third sector, community learning and development, youth work and voluntary organisations/ activities were noted. Support that was provided seemed to be ad-hoc and removed from the statutory services, although this may be reflective of over-representation of statutory sector workers in the study. For example, very few knew of any targeted supports or programmes for young people at the cusp of offending (for example, those children for whom a detected offence had not yet taken place and who had not yet been referred to EEI processes). Additionally, where preventative activities did take place, such as youth centres or Duke of Edinburgh schemes there was a feeling that they were still missing out on groups of young people who are not only 'hard to reach' but 'hard to engage' due to a lack of ability to meaningfully reach out to these young people. This is an important issue for truly meaningful inclusion - how do those we ordinarily exclude remain excluded or become included?

Places, spaces and projects which were seen to be successful in this area were viewed as being entrenched and embedded in the community, and had existed for a relatively long time. They offered young people opportunities to engage in ways which were appealing to them, where they felt included and not judged, where there was consistency in approach and delivery which they could expect.

- *Relationship based practice*

There was also a recognition that the way we do prevention needs to be different from our current approach to engagement and that this has the potential to improve outcomes for children in the way we work in the current system. Participants spoke about the need to be creative and clever about how they work preventatively, and gave examples including: Maximising the use of existing provision by addressing needs and barriers (for example by addressing transport barriers); Co-producing services and supports, creating spaces and mechanisms for young people to identify their own needs and wants (such as Champions Boards); and applying problem solving within multi-agency contexts to more complex cases.

Relationship based practice was seen to be key to effective preventative efforts and included being contactable, approachable, available and flexible. There was also an acknowledgement that this type of work means investing in relationships, and that investment from both parties, takes time - which is often not factored in to the workload/tasks allocation in the current system.

Prioritising prevention and early intervention cannot simply create new systems for the same ends or expand existing systems. By developing trust between partners and robust procedures, a scaled approach to intervention can be achieved. One early intervention worker spoke about the key to their role, and EEI work as not replicating efforts by others, but joining up work being done; not taking on the roles of other agencies but not stepping back completely, just because other agencies are involved.

A scaled approach was explored in a number of the discussions, some more informally than others. In one area of practice the team use the 'Three Conversations Model' an innovative approach to needs assessment and care planning. It focuses primarily on people's strengths and community

assets, recognising that traditional needs assessment often lead to long waiting lists for service users and excess paperwork for staff; and instead starts with a simple conversation in which practitioners ask the person to identify what it is that they need or would like to happen.

- *Who are the 'young people at risk'?*

There was a sense that the nature of concerns in the lives of young people are changing, whether looking at national trends; local themes; or changes which arise from shifts in policy, which have an impact on the direct provision of services and support for young people and the way in which children and young people want to engage. Current examples include sexual offending and the increase in sharing of images online; online offending more generally such as online bullying; and theft of new desirable items such as e-cigarettes. While important to be mindful of these 'new' trends, issues were still raised including the perennial problems of young people having nowhere to go and therefore becoming subject to complaints of anti-social behaviour, or underage alcohol use. Some areas had adopted simple but effective approaches to address these concerns. For example, in one area the local leisure centre used to be available to young people free of charge at certain times, when they stopped that some of the young people started hanging around and lighting fires there.

There were still seen to be patterns in the 'groups' of children who were likely to be identified as presenting concerns and requiring support later in their childhood and into their young adulthood.

Domestic Abuse was the issue most frequently noted as having impacted the young people who require the most support in relation to their behaviour. This was closely followed by young people who are **reported missing**, and this was also raised in relation to the potential criminalisation of already marginalised and vulnerable young people such as looked after children and care leavers. There was a suggestion, although only anecdotally, that a combination of both domestic incidents and missing persons concerns early in life would be quickly followed by offending behaviour, often leading to charges. Children and young people who faced **exclusion from school** (both formal and informal) were also identified as vulnerable to future offending; and that those who had met school leaving age were no longer a priority for support, regardless of the potential detrimental impact of not staying on, and that once they had left they often fell through the gaps in terms of accessing support from agencies. An additional concern for agencies were those young people who were themselves, or were from families whom are **already disengaged from services and support**, or who are perceived to have a mistrust or dislike toward support services. Having disengaged from a lead professional was seen to present barriers - often preventative or pro-social efforts aren't offered to these groups; or their initial disengagement or mistrust makes future engagement efforts more difficult (as they are out with the flexibility of the current system); or prevention or early intervention in regards to offending is seen as secondary to other issues which they may be facing (despite these issues often being out with their control such as parental substance misuse). While it is important to focus on the needs and strengths of children and keep them at the centre of efforts, many respondents spoke of how often these are intertwined with the needs and strengths of the family. For many, where appropriate, **prioritising young people while supporting families** was seen as the only way to ensure change is sustainable, and in some occasions focusing exclusively on the young person could be counter-productive. **Transitions** were also identified as a key time for young people and a key to offering preventative or early intervention supports around managing behaviour and the underlying causes of behavioural issues. Reverse transitions, such as returning to parental care, were seen as just as important but perhaps less well understood and subsequently acknowledged as impacting on young people as significantly.

There was also an acknowledgement that socio-structural disadvantage meant that there was a pernicious intergenerational cycle of poverty and disadvantage which meant anecdotally, workers know the families and young people who need support. In response to the multi-faceted and entrenched nature of some of the concerns the system alone in its current form isn't enough - it is only able to offer what is already available and is not flexible enough to coordinate support round their needs or in a truly holistic way.

While practitioners were able to suggest the above experiences as causing concern from their extensive working knowledge and intuition, many identified that they couldn't support these assertions with data. Developing databases beyond the remit of case management, or reviewing existing information to track trends and patterns was beyond the capacity of individual workers and not seen to be a priority for agencies. It was also suggested that the lack of data able to evidence improved outcomes may have had an impact on the progressive de-prioritisation of preventative and early interventionist efforts. There was seen to be a need for data which is 'useful' and able to help inform approaches. Similarly it was noted that feedback and similar types of service data which may inform priorities or service delivery in future was often based on those who have contact and who are already engaging but that this is only half the picture, as those who have disengaged, are excluded from services (for example due to eligibility criteria and thresholds) or choose to self-exclude are voices we very rarely hear, particularly if we use existing methods. Similarly, we tend to record what we think is significant and not what families or young people might identify as significant, or that where we do record information we only share what we think is significant, for example an agency might have recorded a bereavement in the life of a young person, but might not think it relevant to an EEI referral.

- *Community Space*

It was also acknowledged that the nature and state of 'community' has changed over time and that many of the voluntary, informal activities that young people could take part in and be part of, such as youth clubs, Girl Guides or Boys Brigade, are in shorter supply. As well as providing spaces for young people to be and providing activities for them to do which could keep them out of trouble, they often provided an offer of support and assistance for children and families who may be struggling; and were aware of individual and community issues which could be shared with services where appropriate, or signpost people to support. There was an acknowledgement that as thresholds have increased, there is less and less provision which offers signposting, informal advice or low level, ad-hoc support. Additionally, being in and part of that community meant that those young people who were beginning to disengage were less likely to be excluded as the 'community' would continue an offer of support beyond that of services.

Similarly, it was acknowledged that more generally there tends to be a deficit focus to discussions about young people overall, often focusing on connotations of disorder of anti-social behaviour, which is compounded when young people are involved in offending behaviour. It was concluded that more could be done to promote positive images of youth, and reframing our discussions and presentation of young people may go some way to communities liking, trusting and wanting to support their young people. For example, one practitioner spoke about how friends are like family for young people and form a large part of their identity which means they want to spend time together in groups - yet we engage with them largely on an individual basis and where possible try to split them up, particularly if we feel their behaviour is becoming problematic.

It was acknowledged that trends and interests of young people are rapidly changing and that any new community supports must keep up with these interests, such as gaming and online trends, if they are to remain attractive to young people going forward; similarly when young people don't have access to community spaces this can often lead to perceived or actual anti-social behaviour. Where there isn't provision for young people, and they subsequently get into trouble for accessing general community spaces it was seen as important to consider: do they have a choice of being there, where else can they go, and where do they want to go? The creation of community spaces for young people offers the opportunity for situational prevention which was identified as key in preventative efforts. The need to pro-actively target where young people go and are already engaging, and in some cases where they may be engaging in negative behaviours, can't be overstated.

- *System Barriers*

Aspects of the system and service provision at present were seen to be barriers to prevention and early intervention efforts. Access to services due to a lack of signposting was seen as a barrier to meaningful engagement. Universal provision was seen as minimal, with the majority of support having to be accessed via a threshold for support. Eligibility criteria to access support was viewed as confusing, counterproductive and as creating a notion of those deserving and undeserving. Providing services based on need rather than criteria was seen to be more in line with a GIRFEC and inclusive approach.

Similarly the current system was noted in a number of ways as being inhumane, largely process driven and bureaucratic. Putting relationships back at the heart of service design and delivery would be key to any preventative service success. Practitioners gave examples such as contacting families to ask them about any concerns they have about their young people if low level concerns were being raised; making people feel welcome, safe and supported; and physically introducing children, young people and families to services rather than signposting.

The ACES awareness and trauma informed movements, particularly within Education and Police were seen to have made good advances in system awareness of young people who present problematic behaviours. However, it was felt that more could be done in these areas as we are still to be see a tangible change in response to young people.

In one area where it was perceived they were moving away from process to a more relationship based way of working, they identified that key to the transition was the impact and influence of the lived experience of young people, particularly those in the care experienced movement. Arguably there has been significant local and national change in respect of the care experienced population, a disadvantaged and marginalised group of young people both at a systematic and interpersonal level and there is therefore potential learning which can be extended to other groups such as young people involved in offending behaviour.

While there were examples of process, much of what came out of the scoping study was about the way in which people work and how the system supports or hinders them to carry out the work in a meaningful way to themselves and young people who need support. It was important to see the system as a human experience rather than a set of processes. There was a recognition that while the will on an individual basis was often there for practitioners, this was constrained by organisational pressures. Organisational culture takes a more concerted effort to change, and tangible changes

longer to emerge. Supportive systems, processes, leadership and adequate resources were identified as being key to culture change.

- *Education*

One agency was repeatedly identified as that which should hold a central role in the provision of prevention support, and early identification of need related to offending behaviour. Education usually has the most contact with young people and families and as such often has a good level of knowledge and understanding of the protective factors and adversities in their lives. This understanding is key to the development of any interventions, either on an individual or group basis via school provision or through an external organisation. The autonomy of individual schools meant that decisions on issues such as this, or whether to share information with other agencies varied and this could be challenging for external agencies, who identified that this could impede prevention and early intervention on a consistent basis. A perceived frustration on the part of education was that they are struggling to manage behaviour which doesn't meet the ever increasing thresholds for support. On the other hand, some felt that education could for a number of reasons hold concerns in-house when they should be shared with partners, and that when concerns are subsequently raised it can be too late for the young person and/or other to offer support. The failure to share information was attributed to differing thresholds and lack of multi-agency working. This potentially offers the opportunity for the education sector to share learning about where the gaps in provision are in a prevention and early intervention context.

Conclusion

Through IAP we have the opportunity, resource and commitment to prioritise prevention which through the scoping study emerged as an area often neglected, despite best intentions. Participants were clear that the answers of what requires improvement is often obvious from spending time in the current system , examining and exploring it, and hearing from all those involved -practitioners, young people and families. Relationship based practice was emphasised throughout as important in ensuring prevention and early intervention efforts are effective, and should be considered as a potential area of exploration with practitioners as well as young people and their families. Additionally it was reiterated that there is considerable knowledge which exists in systems at current that should be interrogated to help prioritise preventative efforts, which is not currently utilised to best effect.

You can find out about the progress of Inclusion as Prevention on Twitter @IAPSouthLan or through updates on the CYCJ website and in the CYCJ e-bulletin. If you would like to get in touch please email: InclusionasPrevention@actionforchildren.org.uk