Effective Practice Prioritisation Exercise 2012

Stage 1b: Results of the focus groups

Ben Archer, Youth Justice Board
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Introduction

This report presents the findings from the second stage of the YJB’s effective practice prioritisation exercise (stage 1b of the annual Effective Practice Cycle). 2012 is the second year that the YJB has consulted the sector using this exercise to identify their priorities for effective practice over the coming year. The pilot of the exercise in 2011 resulted in YJB projects being initiated in response to the following priorities:

1. Evaluating programmes and using evidence-based methodology
2. Effective practice in working with young people with conduct and developmental disorders
3. Effective practice in working with young people who have experienced domestic abuse
4. Working with girls who offend

To identify potential effective practice priorities for delivery against in the financial year 2013/14, an online survey was used to gather the views of practitioners and others involved in the youth justice system, whereby participants rated the five areas of highest priority on which they would like the YJB to disseminate effective practice information. As with last year, the practice areas were arrived at following a process of internal and external consultation. For details of this process, and the results of Stage 1a, please refer to the previous report, Stage 1a: Results and analysis (Appendix A).

This year, as the initial list of priority areas was shorter (23 compared to 58 in 2011), the top five priorities were taken forward to the focus groups stage, as opposed to a top ten in 2011.

The results of the report will be taken forward by the effective practice team and incorporated into the YJB’s corporate planning process for potential delivery in 2013/14.

Methodology

The purpose of Stage 1b is to further explore the top priority areas identified in Stage 1a, to gain a greater understanding of why they were felt to be particular priorities for effective practice, and what the sector’s needs are in relation to them.

Figure 1. The top five YJS priorities
To gain this detailed qualitative understanding of the above priorities, focus groups were used as the principal method. Six YOTs were included in the focus groups, from as geographically diverse a sample as was possible to achieve within the resources available. Unfortunately, due to difficulties in securing engagement with the secure estate, it was only possible to hold one group in a secure establishment (Hindley YOI). The final list of focus groups held as part of Stage 1b was therefore as follows:

- Devon YOS
- Neath Port Talbot YOT
- Lancashire YOT
- Hindley YOI
- Norfolk and Suffolk YOTs (combined group)
- Brighton YOS

In general, the groups were comprised of between 6-10 participants and reflected the variety of roles within YOTs and secure establishments, including Operational Managers, Case Managers, specialist workers and support staff.

Participants were provided with a brief overview of the wider context in terms of the effective practice prioritisation exercise, and how the top five priorities were arrived at. The majority of the time was then given over to discussion of these priorities, focusing on three main areas:

- Why these are particular priorities
- What is needed in relation to each of them (i.e. specific resources, training, research etc)
- How the materials should be delivered

The notes from the focus groups were complied by priority area and the findings are provided below.

Summary of findings and recommendations

The results of the Stage 1b focus groups indicate that, of the top five effective practice priorities, those emerging as key priorities for the sector and with shared views on what materials are needed in relation to them are as follows:

**Child development and psychology (e.g. attachment and trauma theory)**

This area of practice had been identified in stage 1a as the top priority (see Appendix A). Across the focus groups, there was a general consensus that these issues are becoming more prevalent within caseloads, and that a more contextual view, and one that explores young people’s experiences of early life events, was needed when carrying out assessments and delivering interventions.

Diminishing access to specialist services (such as CAMHS) was a common theme, and in response to this, the identified need was for information and advice for case managers and other non-specialist staff that can equip them with the knowledge and skills to carry out their work with young people in a way that accounts for these issues.

Participants agreed that this would be best delivered through a package of materials, including summaries of key research and practice advice, hosted on the YJB website.
Recommendation
Based on the significance of this priority and the needs identified by the sector, there is scope for a project to deliver the following:

- Summaries of key pieces of research into attachment theory and the psychological effects of trauma
- Translating this information into practical advice for non-specialist staff to use when assessing and delivering interventions with young people
- Signposting relevant training providers and further information

Looked-after children (and the specific needs of the client group)
Discussions regarding this priority area focused on two main themes – the challenges of multi-agency working, and the particular needs of looked-after children in the youth justice system. In the majority of the focus groups, participants felt that multi-agency working in such cases could be improved, with often a lack of clarity over the specific roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved. There were examples of good working relationships, however, and participants felt that a useful response to this area on the part of the YJB would be to promote these examples of effective practice through the use of case studies.

It was noted in several of the groups that this represents a very broad area of practice, and the scope as it currently stands could be too large, not least with clear overlaps with other priorities in this year’s exercise (such as attachment theory and sexually-harmful behaviour). It was suggested therefore to focus on one or two specific areas of practice with looked-after children (for example, working effectively with residential care homes) to ensure that the quality of the project’s deliverables did not suffer as a result.

The YJB website was again mentioned as a good tool for disseminating effective practice examples or case studies, but in addition to this the suggestion was also made to hold practice sharing events that bring together YOTs and children’s social care teams where effective practice can be showcased.

Recommendation
Based on the data gathered from the focus groups, and given the high ranking of this priority in stage 1a of the prioritisation exercise, there is a need for some work in this area. This work would require careful scoping, however, to ensure that it produced useful and relevant information for the sector. The work would also need to recognise the challenges of providing practice advice from the centre on an issue that is often shaped by local partnership arrangements.

Speech, language and communication needs (post-identification)
This area of practice was felt to be a priority again because of difficulties in accessing specialist provision for young people with identified speech, language and communication needs SLCN. The YJB has done a lot of work in recent years in partnership with organisations including the Communications Trust and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to improve the identification of these needs among young people in the youth justice system. The message received from the sector, and echoed via these focus groups, is that more needs to be known about how to work with young people who have these needs, as specialist resources cannot manage the demand coming about as a result of improved assessment and identification processes.

Part of the response to this need was felt to be advice about how to tailor interventions in general, including how to carry out assessments differently, and how to adapt intervention-planning documentation so that young people understand it more easily. It was also felt that more could be known about the use of techniques such as pro-social
modelling (itself a priority that was in the top ten highest this year). The needs with regards to this priority area are very similar in nature to those described in relation to priority areas one and four, and represent a desire on the part of practitioners for information about how to work with specialist issues where access cannot always be gained to a specialist worker or service.

The method of delivery for this priority was also similar to those described above, with the YJB website being seen as the most useful channel for dissemination of practice advice and case studies. Specialist worker-led effective practice forums were also suggested, on a business area basis, so that YOTs who don’t have access to such services could benefit from practice sharing with those who do.

**Recommendation**

In response to this priority area, future work could potentially deliver the following:

- Information about approaches and techniques that non-specialist staff can use in tailoring their interventions with young people with identified SLCN, such as pro-social modelling or work to address the needs more directly
- Examples of templates or intervention planning documentation that have been adapted for use with young people with SLCN.

**Sexually-harmful behaviour (including managing such behaviour in the secure estate)**

Focus group participants who had undertaken training in this area (for example, AIM and Good Lives) said it had been very useful, but needs were identified across all the groups in relation to different aspects of work in this area. Participants felt that access to specialist services wasn’t always easy to get, due in part to resources, but also the thresholds for interventions such as Good Lives being relatively high. This can restrict those services to all but a very few cases, whereas several groups reported that these issues are becoming more prevalent across their caseloads, but also that the learning from these training packages and approaches can be used effectively in a preventative capacity with young people in general.

Participants in the secure estate focus group highlighted the challenges that the very different secure environment presents in terms of young people understanding boundaries, and practitioners knowing how to apply these with different young people. As with the YOT groups, colleagues from the secure estate also discussed the difficulties in working with young people displaying this behaviour in the secure estate who have not been sentenced or remanded for offences of this nature, and pointed to some uncertainty among practitioners as to whether they are able to do work with young people on these issues. It was agreed that the matter was a lot clearer for young people convicted or remanded for sentences of this nature, and practitioners felt more confident in being able to do direct work in these circumstances.

That being said, the secure estate participants also agreed there was a lack of knowledge among practitioners about how to intervene or challenge inappropriate behaviour or “know the right thing to say”. The participants from the secure estate focus group therefore highlighted the same need in this area as those in the YOT groups, which is for basic training and information that would allow them to do direct work with young people on these issues.

As with other effective practice priorities this year that would deliver a similar format of information (practice advice and tools for use by practitioners), the YJB website was felt to the best method for disseminating these materials on an on-going basis, allowing a single point of reference for practitioners and meaning that access to training would become less of an issue in this area.
Recommendation
As with all the priority areas, a project initiated in response to this priority area would need to ensure that it met the needs of practitioners working in both the community and secure estate. The focus groups suggest that the needs of both groups of practitioners are similar however, so this should be possible to deliver. The positive feedback given in relation to existing training in this area suggests that the issue is more to do with access to this training, and wanting to apply the benefits of it to a wider group of young people. Scoping the project should therefore include an exploration of existing provision to ensure that lessons from this can be learnt.

Effective services – engaging young people and parents/carers
The discussion in regarding this priority area varied somewhat across the groups, highlighting how differently this area can be interpreted (and the need for a clear scope to any resulting project). In some groups, it was closely tied to compliance and enforcement, with particular relevance to the impact on levels of custody use. In other groups, the discussion focused more on the development of the worker/young person relationship, what the engagement of young people means for the delivery of an effective intervention, and what a model of ‘good’ engagement looks like (for example, empowerment versus ‘rescuing’).

The needs that arose from the discussions were for information about effective methods and techniques for engaging young people, both at an individual or one-to-one level, but also at a service level (for example, young people’s user groups, and involving young people in the recruitment of staff). This illustrated a potential broadening of the scope to include elements of participation as well as engagement. One group in particular suggested an ‘engagement framework’ that outlined these techniques and approaches at the various levels of practice and service delivery.

It was also noted in several of the groups that parents/carers should be included in the scope of this priority also, as achieving lasting positive change with young people can often depend in large part on the successful engagement and inclusion of parents/carers in the work with young person, so that it can be continued following the YOT’s involvement.

Recommendation
The discussions highlighted the need for this area to be carefully scoped prior to the development of any potential project deliverables. The variations in definition illustrated that ‘engagement’ can mean different things, often linked to the culture and ethos of the team and individual workers.

This priority area reflects a set of skills that the YJB is keen to promote across the youth justice system, in all areas of work with young people, and which feature highly in effective practice workforce development materials. This therefore provides an opportunity for the YJB to link its work currently underway in relation to workforce development, and also effective programme development, to an area seen to be at the heart of effective practice in youth justice.

The recommendation is that a project be scoped to respond to this need, and as part of that scoping exercise, existing workforce development materials and research (for example, the YJB KEEP Engaging Young People Who Offend) be considered with regard to the extent to which they can form part of a response to this priority area.

Priorities specific to Wales and the secure estate
The Stage 1a report (see Appendix A) contains breakdowns of the survey results for Wales and the secure estate. Priority areas specific to these groups were discussed at the relevant focus groups, but responsibility for resourcing (or not) these priorities will rest with the relevant division. The following emerged from these discussions:
Wales

Responding effectively to the changes in the remand legislation

This discussion focused particularly on the impact that the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Bill will have on looked-after children. It was agreed that the work of the YJB in supporting YOTs through this change in the legislation will provide the appropriate response to this priority area.

Pro-social modelling and motivational interviewing

These were skills valued very highly by those in the group, and felt to be effective methods for working with young people with a variety of needs. The group identified a need for more training in these skills, so that their use can be expanded and staff previously trained can refresh their learning.

Working with young people - Delivering group-work

The group discussed a need for more training in relation to the skills and competencies required to effectively deliver group-work. The YJB website was also discussed as a possible channel for the dissemination of materials in relation to this, should the format be suitable.

The secure estate

The sanctions system – what is effective?¹

The discussion revealed a number of issues with the sanction system in place, including confusion among staff as to how it operates and some inconsistencies across the different wings of the establishment. The group felt that the system was negatively focused in that targets were often to ‘not do’ something rather than ‘to do’ something. The group recognised that a balance was needed between a system that could be consistently applied, and one that accounted for young people’s individual needs. There was a clear call from the group for a review of sanctions systems across the estate to highlight effective practice, so that this could be shared with a view to systems becoming more consistent. It was agreed that this would have benefits for young people moving within the secure estate.

Pro-social modelling and motivational interviewing

As with the Welsh focus group, it was agreed that these are important skills for youth justice practitioners to possess. The group felt they were used more by older staff and not employed so much by newer staff, as result of there being less of a focus on these areas in recent training packages. The group highlighted the issue of limited access to information about theories and intervention skills, such as pro-social modelling and cognitive-behavioural therapy, as a result of limited IT access in secure establishments (particularly YOIs). This issue was felt to be compounded by there being far less training bought now, due to financial pressures, and so access to free online materials would be an effective way for practitioners to learn and develop their skills.

Conclusions

The prioritisation exercise this year has identified the following themes, across both stages 1a and 1b.

- Youth justice practitioners (particularly case managers and non-specialist staff) have highlighted a need for more basic awareness and knowledge about the

¹ It should be noted that this discussion focused on the system in use at the establishment where the focus group was held, and so the views may not be representative of sanctions systems in place at other establishments across the estate.
more specialist areas of practice (see priorities one, three and four). This is partly in response to not always being able to secure access to specialist services for young people, but also because they want to feel skilled and confident enough to do direct work with young people on some of these issues.

- Given the similarities in the type of need in relation to priorities one, three and four, there is a potential opportunity for the YJB to consider a method of delivery that could be adapted to fit future effective practice needs of a similar nature. The 2011 priority of Conduct and Behavioural Disorders (due for delivery in 2013) could offer the pilot for such a model.

- The YJB website was frequently mentioned as the best method for the dissemination of effective practice materials, allowing practitioners on-going access to research and practice advice that more sporadic (and often costly) training and conferences cannot provide. Despite this, however, the website was criticised for being poorly organised and its design being off-putting to users searching for information on it.

- Feedback from the focus groups was that involvement in the exercise was felt to be beneficial and participants appreciated the opportunity to be able to voice their opinions and experiences of these issues and areas of practice.