



## Response to 2020 Children's Workforce Strategy Evidence Submission in relation to:

### **Building Brighter Futures: Next Steps for the Children's Workforce**

DCSF, 2008, <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/childrensplan/implement.shtml>

Submitted on behalf of the organisation **research in practice** ([www.rip.org.uk](http://www.rip.org.uk))

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### **Introduction**

For over a decade **research in practice** has actively supported a collaborative network of agencies working with children and families in England and Wales. The network has grown to over 100 public and voluntary sector agencies. The network's roots are in children's social care but its reach spans all disciplines, working to promote positive outcomes for vulnerable children through the delivery of evidence-informed services at all professional levels. Many methods have been developed to promote the utilisation of research findings and evidence-informed decision making across the workforce.

**research in practice** works primarily with qualified professionals although the collaborative partnership with the University of Sheffield is essential. This has enabled the development of evidence-informed practice modules and workshops for MA and Post Qualifying Social Work awards and more recently, an MA in professional practice for children and their families.

The evidence presented here illustrates what **research in practice** has learnt about the benefits of keeping evidence-informed practice highly visible on the workforce development agenda. This approach encourages critical thinking, inter-agency involvement and is a motivator for continuing professional development (CPD). We also believe that the approach has been the foundation for improving professional practice across professions working with children and families and for these reasons is an essential factor in workforce development strategy. **research in practice** recognises that outcomes for children are inter-dependent and joined up working to enable prevention, early identification and effective intervention is essential. Evidence-informed practice offers the opportunity for sharing expertise, increasing understanding across disciplines and evaluating the impact of interventions. **research in practice** is currently striving to fill the knowledge gap about impact of evidence-informed practice on service improvement through the development of a systematic evaluation process for all its learning methods.

### **Building Brighter Futures: Next Steps for the Children's Workforce**

**research in practice** welcomes the *Next Steps for the Children's Workforce* document which shows commitment to social workers, play, youth and early years workers by linking with the strategy for the school workforce, and recognises the importance of the core and wider children's workforce. The establishment of the expert group is particularly welcomed as a means of scrutinising the proposals. We provide comment on relevant areas from our

work that are highlighted in the document and that the group might find useful.

## Leadership

**research in practice** aspires for a children's workforce dedicated to continually updating their knowledge from new research and 'what works'. Hodson and Barratt (2006) provide a framework for organisations dedicated to developing such a culture and identified that strong and committed leadership was essential in getting evidence-informed practice into the bloodstream of an agency. Hodson and Cooke (2007) also found that models of transformational leadership can be motivational, engender critical thinking and facilitate initiative (Alimo-Metcalf, 1998). *Next Steps for the Children's Workforce* sets out commitments to improving leadership skills across schools, play work, information advice and guidance, youth support, and early years work. Commitment to developing high quality leadership and management across integrated working is also set out (3.28 – 3.35).

**research in practice's** work in this area offers evidence of an approach that cuts across professional boundaries, promoting behaviours and skills that encourage integrated working through leaders who are committed to evidence-informed practice. The findings are relevant for directors, service leaders, middle managers and team leaders who all have a role to play in developing organisations and teams committed to continual learning through engaging with research and also developing their own local knowledge base. **research in practice** also advocates evidence-informed commissioning as a means of getting best value through the commissioning of services that are based on sound evidence of what works and decommissioning services that are not working. Evidence-informed commissioning should be a factor in the development of training and the National Occupational Standards for commissioning services for children, young people and their families.

## Integrated working and learning

Integrated working on the front-line also benefits from the principles of evidence-informed practice. Over many years of running Change Projects, **research in practice** has learnt much about collaborative working and what works in winning commitment and engagement of staff to CPD opportunities in Children's Services. The Change Project method brings together a group of children's workforce professionals to address a practice dilemma and find evidence-informed solutions. Change Projects typically last three years and evaluation has shown they are effective because they:

- Create a sense of mutual responsibility in the collaborative learning effort
- Are about exchange of knowledge not purely transfer
- Create a sense of ownership of the new learning and guidance that is developed
- Bring together professional groups who might otherwise not learn together therefore increase understanding about inter-professional expertise and roles in relation to the child and family
- Are inspirational as the learning generated is shared and becomes influential
- Develop research skills, critical thinking and knowledge
- Are about continual change and reflection rather than a linear learning process

The success of Change Projects in retaining engagement throughout the learning process seems to overcome many of the well-documented barriers to evidence-informed practice (Sheldon and Chilvers, 2002). It is also a delivery strand that stands out in terms of retaining engagement and making a direct impact on practice when compared to other strands of **research in practice's** own work.

**research in practice** has developed case-studies which illustrate the benefits of change

projects in developing and empowering individuals and also influencing change in organisations. An example of this might be the Change Project 'Social Work and the Use of Research Evidence in the Family Court'. This project sought to develop guidance about the use of social worker expertise in drawing upon research to inform evidence in Care Proceedings. The learning process also fully involved Cafcass and also brought in the views and expertise of Local Authority Solicitors, Barristers and the Judiciary. Consequently inter-disciplinary dialogue and learning was instigated at national and local level with agencies reporting a shift in culture and increased understanding about expertise and roles (Eccles and Erlen, 2008).

*Next Steps for the Children's Workforce* also sets out an aspiration to build consensus around the vision for integrated working building on what has already been achieved through good practice examples. **research in practice** would advocate that to strengthen the evidence base for integrated working in improving outcomes, the group might look to initiatives such as the Local Authority Research Consortium (LARC) which aims to enable Children's Services to identify and evaluate their progress in improving outcomes through integrated working. The first year report can be found at [www.nfer.ac.uk/larc](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/larc)

**research in practice** would like to see a workforce development strategy that highlights the value of collaborative, evidence-informed learning models such as change projects, which provide high quality continuing professional development.

### **Quality and Expertise**

It is encouraging that *Next Steps for the Children's Workforce* includes evidence-based programmes such as Evidence Based Parenting for parenting practitioners with the emphasis on providing parenting experts (2.35 – 2.37). **research in practice** has found that developing expertise in the children's sector is aided by improving inter-disciplinary understanding of that expertise so that other professionals working alongside parenting experts, for example will also understand and appreciate the scope of their expertise and knowledge base. There is scope for using research and evidence-informed practice methods to increase the knowledge and expertise of the workforce on many contemporary issues that cut across professions, for example safeguarding.

Paragraphs 3.12 – 3.15 set out an aspiration to bring strong identity to all professions within the Children's Workforce. Paragraph 3.12, states that strong professional identities are already established in many vocations such as teaching and social work. While this is the case, we would add that the professional identity of social work is still not fully understood by other professionals and service users and that attention to the profession and its development as set out in Paragraph 2.14 should aim to improve the professional standing of social workers. Paragraph 3.12 also sets out an aspiration to develop and pilot a framework for professional development for social workers, including those in specialist roles, which will set out the standards and competences expected at different career stages. This would do much to help assert the expertise of social workers and improve inter-disciplinary understanding of social work expertise. **research in practice** would advocate for attention to the development of critical appraisal and analytical writing skills, particularly in relation to assessment, which are not consistently held across the profession.

Harnessing the enthusiasm and learning of graduates is something **research in practice** also promotes. We encourage sponsoring agencies and students to link their learning and research to local priorities so that learning makes an impact in the workplace. Graduate leadership (3.39 – 3.42) in the fields of play and early years would have the potential to improve evidence-informed approaches including commitment to CPD. There will be

common threads across professions working with children at this level, although expertise and specialisation is equally as important particularly in being able to understand and apply the knowledge base for a particular profession.

The drive for improving the quality of the Children's Workforce through regulation and inspection will, we suspect, have an impact on the number of professionals entering and continuing learning within professions. However, the quality of the learning experience must be paramount and not lost in the drive to get professionals qualified. Accessible routes into accreditation systems for quality training provision from agencies such as voluntary organisations for example would be welcomed. Opportunities to link into accreditation systems for those agencies whose primary responsibility is outside Higher Education would be welcomed under any new framework for CPD and qualifications.

Annex B of *Next Steps for the Children's Workforce* sets out Attributes for the Children's Workforce Network's values for integrated working with children and young people and we feel there it would be a help to be explicit under the heading of 'Key attributes' to add that a key attribute of the Children's Workforce would be to continually update their knowledge base, develop their own expertise and ensure practice was informed by the best available evidence within the realms of their expertise. This would be particularly helpful as under the following heading of 'Integrated work with a range of colleagues' it is made explicit that there needs to be 'a willingness to bring their own expertise to bear on the pursuit of shared goals' and 'not acting beyond their competence or responsibilities' and 'be committed to reflecting on and improving their inter-professional practice and engaging with relevant research and other evidence'.

## Conclusion

**research in practice** are not alone in striving for evidence-informed practice in Children's Services. The Government has recently launched the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes which brings together partners from the NCB, NFER, SCIE and **research in practice** to help identify national evidence of 'what works' by bringing together evidence from the research and practice worlds with a view to providing the workforce with evidence about what makes a positive difference to the lives of children and young people. It will be the continual drive to develop a sector, which can understand and utilise such evidence that will make a difference to policy and to practice. This is why **research in practice** is motivated to ensure the workforce development strategy promotes the approach to all agencies working with children and families. Linking research to practice has the potential to help define specialist skills within integrated settings. Applying collaborative evidence-informed models of learning has the potential to aid integration through development of shared understanding around key issues and also to develop common skills for example in relation to assessment.

Evidence-informed practice strives to make learning a life-long process for every member of the workforce. There is an increasingly diverse and freely available collection of on-line resources accessible to practitioners, and the workforce development strategy should aim to encourage personal responsibility for updating knowledge throughout professional life. Once qualified there should be an emphasis not only on the hours spent on CPD for purposes such as re-registration, but on the quality of learning and the impact this has on practice.

## References

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