Project report

Recording practice with East Ayrshire Health & Social Care Partnership

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Introduction

In this report we describe the background, purpose, process and learning outcomes from a project Iriss delivered with East Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) in 2019/20 to explore case recording practice. The report offers insight to the approach and methods that were used as well as the learning and outcomes generated about recording practice in a cross service context.

Part 1: Background

This project was established in response to a request from East Ayrshire Social Work to work with Iriss to explore case recording practice and how records can be more inclusive and accessible. In part, this request was informed by the recommendations coming from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia around accessibility for care leavers to their records. Following a scoping review and initial workshop undertaken in early 2019, we ran a series of three half-day workshops over winter 2019/20 with participation from practitioners across HSCP services. Uptake and commitment from services was strong throughout the workshops, with an average of 17 practitioners and managers from Social Work, Children's Homes, Out of Hours, Community Care and Health Visitors taking part.

Project purpose and anticipated outcomes

The purpose of the project was to bring together a mixed-service group of practitioners from the HSCP to share experiences and perspectives on case recording and work collaboratively through cycles of test, reflect, review to explore ideas for improving recording within day to day practice. Project aims and outputs were:

Test and act on ideas to develop recording practice

- East Ayrshire HSCP learns from practitioners' knowledge, experience and other evidence to inform good practice within the Partnership
- EA HSCP practitioners have an opportunity to learn from colleagues working in other service teams, and have time to reflect on their own practice.

Iriss develops a resource to support practitioners with improving recording practice. The resource will be informed by practitioner knowledge, experiences and learning from the workshops along with our wider research. Through the resource, the learning from East Ayrshire workshops can be accessed by other social services practitioners to support their recording practice.

Overview of approach and methods

The series of three half-day workshops ran in November 2019, January and February 2020. These were underpinned by a ‘test, reflect, review’ approach in which practitioners would identify small tests of change for their own recording practice, with potential to expand this to their teams, for the time periods in between the first and second, then second and third workshops. Iriss also met with a senior manager group after each workshop to update and reflect on emergent learning.

Workshop One framed the context and purpose of the project, exploring with the group a working definition for what recording practice involves. We started to frame the personal element of recording along with surfacing perspectives from the group around assumptions, assets and challenges related to the multiple contexts, purposes and audiences that recordings are produced in, and for. Participants identified elements of practice that they wanted to test out doing differently for the first iteration of the test, reflect, review process.

Workshop Two focused on sharing and reviewing the first cycle of testing. Individually and in small groups, participants reflected on; what happened; how they think it went and if any difference had been made; what resources supported this change (e.g people, systems, culture, other); and what still needed to change. We drew out these individual observations at a whole-group level. Building on the first cycle of testing participants then planned for the second round, whether that was to continue testing the same idea with or without small tweaks, expand to involve other team members, or try out something else.

Workshop Three used the second round of ideas testing as a platform for bringing out key messages in the main thematic areas that participants had been exploring. These were: person-centred style and tone; using less jargon; balancing information and decision making and analysis. We also looked closely at the recording of decision making before drawing the workshops to a close by identifying core principles for a 'gold standard' of recording from a multi-agency perspective.

End of project photo with some of the group members and Iriss Project Manager Louise

Setting the context

Defining recording practice and the scope of the workshops

Linking back to the scoping workshop earlier in 2019, we continued to use the following working definition of recording practice:

- Writing down the work that is done
- Noting progress towards outcomes
- Including views of person being supported
- Analysis and assessment
- Life history of the person being supported

Adapted from: *On the Record — getting it right*, Social Work Inspection Agency, 2010

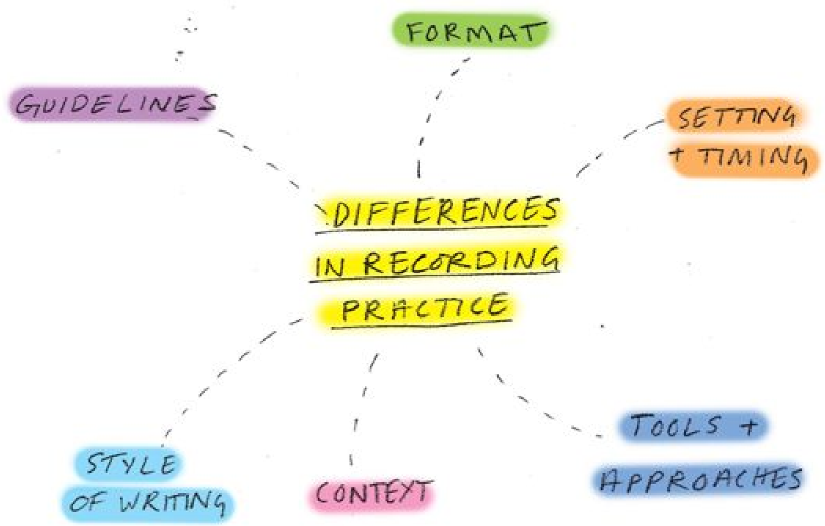
The group discussed this and agreed that as an overarching definition, it covered the key elements of recording - providing facts and description, linking to outcomes, showing analysis and including the perspective of the person the practitioner was working with (or alternatives in particular cases).

We continued to check in over the course of the workshops to see if this definition was still fit for purpose.

In the first workshop discussion, and over the project, it was acknowledged that case recording is a broad field. It is much more than producing case notes alone and recordings are made for different purposes- such as case reviews and Protection meetings- as well as in different practice settings. In a multi-agency HSCP, practitioners from different services will be working with their specific professional requirements, using role-specific tools and templates and often using different electronic systems.

Shared challenges and recording for multiple audiences

We embedded the workshops in recognising these common differences as well as the shared challenges that practitioners encounter in recording.



Common differences in recording among individual practitioners and services

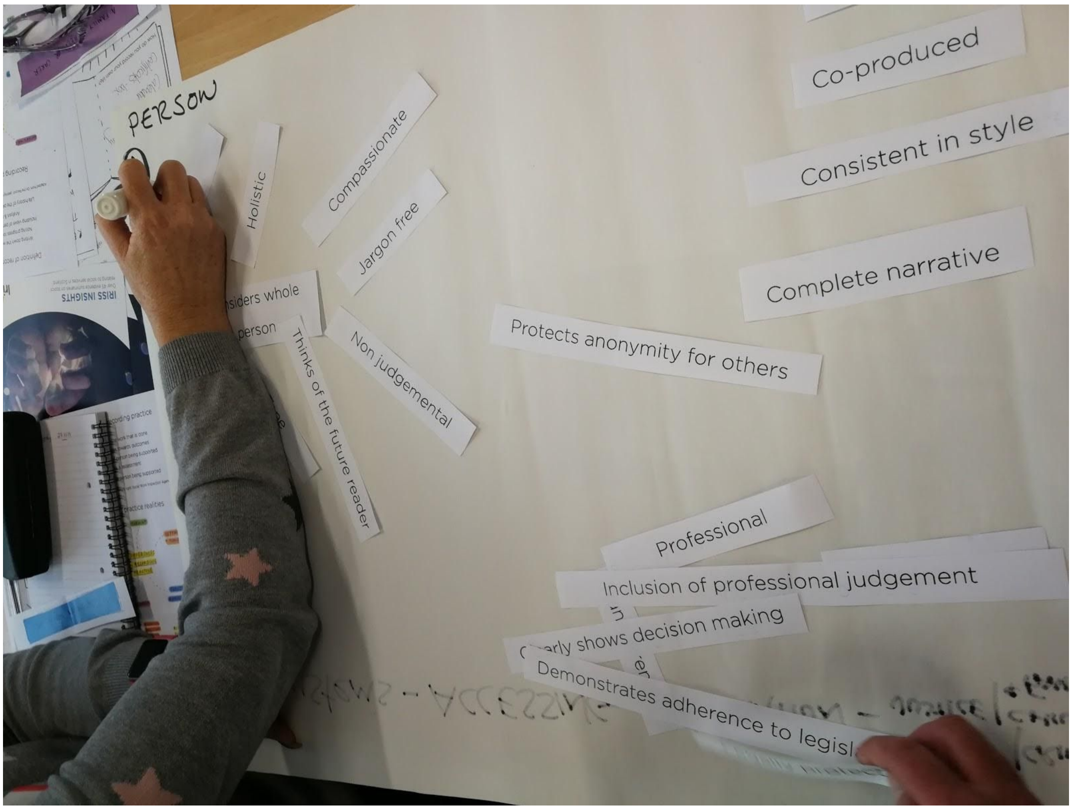
Shared challenges

From these themes we explored writing for mixed audiences in more depth. Small groups identified priorities when recording in order to surface these for discussion through the wider group. We framed this by asking people to think about the requirements the following audiences had of a case note: the person or people the case note is about; a practitioner from a different service — accessing and using recordings; the parent/carer of a child; a lawyer; the practitioner (you) writing the recording.

This was helpful in understanding more about how individual practitioners and services approach recording. While there were some small differences in order of priorities between groups, there were overarching similarities:

- Making truthful and accurate records are a top priority
- Other very important elements are: evidencing that work is adhering to legislation; showing kindness; showing clear decisions and professional judgement, and being jargon free
- When considered in conjunction with other elements it was felt that it is less important that the recording process is quick and easy and that

notes have a consistent style



Prioritising activity in action

Reflections from the group highlighted that it is hard to prioritise core elements of recording as a number of these are of equal importance, and it can be difficult to think about the perspectives of different audiences as ‘you’re programmed to write in a particular way’. Another challenge raised was some services across the HSCP use different systems that don't ‘talk’ to each other, which can lead to duplication of records, however AYRshare was seen as a useful shared system.

Use of jargon and acronyms is a long established challenge in recording, although from the perspectives of those who had been working in the sector for a number of years there was a sense that there is less of this than previously. The key takeaway from our discussions around this was that although case notes need to meet the needs of multiple audiences there could be ways to focus on making what is documented more inclusive and accessible to read and understand.

Part 2: Main project themes

This next section highlights key themes explored in workshops. These themes arose from practitioner ideas about what they wanted to focus on within their tests of change as well as from Iriss-led activities. The three overarching themes we cover are:

- Connecting with the person and personal experience
- Making information in case notes clearer and more accessible
- Improved evidencing of decision- making

In each theme we look at main points raised in the workshops, emerging outcomes from practitioners' tests of change and their reflections on the testing process.

Connecting with the person and personal experience

A core thread running through the workshops was making recordings more inclusive and accessible - thinking of the future reader- the person who might access and read their records at a later stage in life. This section gives highlights of how we approached this and what we found.

We started exploring the topic in Workshop One by **reconnecting with the personal experience and values** behind recording. What do we record in our own lives when it comes to both the happy and the hard times? What does it, or would it, feel like when other people see what is recorded about us? What role does the element of choice play in what we share or don't share with others? We then followed on to reflect on **making recordings with the person at the centre** — how do practitioners do that? What works well? What's difficult?

Reflections on the content of case notes

- Think about using language that isn't stigmatising or traumatising
- What is it like to read all those things about your life (a collection of your case records) sitting on your own? Be present to look at recordings together rather than alone, where someone can help to explain about how services work or answer questions.
- "It's not our (practitioners) data, it's other people's information. Practitioners should do more to promote data and records access and ownership. Explain what is recorded and why to people".
- The chronology is the place for documenting significant events, however it's not always straightforward where the most suitable place for recording certain details will be. E.g. Some people felt strongly that it was important to record somewhere that multiple attempts to visit a family had been made by an agency to show that someone was trying to provide support. This could be really important for someone reading their case record in later life and understanding more about their childhood.

- Writing from a risk management perspective and using jargon and acronyms can be barriers to making a case note that shows the person at the centre.

What works well already for practitioners

- Record what's gone well not only what's negative - e.g. in Children's Houses the 'My Day' format supports a more holistic record of the day. It was recognised this format is not suitable for shorter meetings or other interventions but that guiding principle can be applied to any recording.
- Be descriptive but not judgemental
- "While tools are important, the relationship is essential. Listening, taking time, 1 to 1, and having more regular contact helps to establish the relationship".
- See people in different settings if possible
- Using Getting It Right For Every Child policy (GIRFEC) and associated Wellbeing indicators (SHANARRI: Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Healthy, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included)
- Naming the person rather than calling them a service user. Using names is now more common practice across agencies and services rather than 10 or 20 years ago. Records need to be personal.

Case notes are more person centred: Tests of change

Tests of change showed signs of shifting the balance in case notes towards writing in a way that prioritises the voice of the person being worked with and finding ways to emphasise that the case note is first and foremost about, and for, them, rather than the worker. Emerging outcomes suggest a positive ripple effect for some practitioners of increasing reflexivity about the content that went into the case note and how that was generated and then written up. The table below presents actions and emerging outcomes from group members who tested out ways to make their case notes more person-centred. This includes focusing on:

- Naming
- Changing the style of writing
- Reflecting before writing
- Including the young person’s point of view

A number of people tested out the same idea so their actions and observations were summarised collectively.

Emerging outcomes from tests of change

Anticipated outcome: Case notes are more person-centred	Action tested out	Practitioner observations and emerging outcomes
Naming	Using given names instead of ‘mum’, ‘baby’ or ‘service user’	Actions and outcomes are more clearly linked to the person — individualised Shows that the practitioner knows who the person in the case note is - not just an anonymous client
Style of writing	Writing a ‘letter to’	Feels like analysis is stronger than before because it is weaved into the account of what happened. Feels like it’s honest and shows relationship between worker and young person. Needs to be shared with young person for feedback as a next step

Reflecting before writing	Taking time to pause and picture the child being written about before starting to write	Case note was more focused on the child rather than parents or siblings Feels more aware of what I was recording and how Found this encouraged more reflective conversations with peers
Including young person's point of view	Making time to discuss this with the young person	Notes feel more co-produced but isn't always easy to do

Reflections from practitioners testing changes to make case notes more person-centred

What helped you to test these changes?

- Thinking more about language and content
- Taking time
- Getting other colleagues on board

What will help you to continue doing this?

- Inspiration in our culture to do so
- Permission to take time to improve
- Focus on involving people (colleagues) who are prepared to change
- Being brave

Recommendations for other practitioners trying this out:

- Think of your future reader
- Accept there will be different writing styles
- Aim to get a balance of focusing on the person and analysis

Making information in case notes clearer and more accessible

This topic was interwoven with discussions about the experience of someone reading their case records in the future and ‘writing forward’ with that experience in mind. However, it was also relevant for the present day in relation to making records more accessible for other practitioners to read and use. What we found in discussion of the tests of change is that when some practices make key information harder to find within a recording, they can effectively be ‘reset’ by taking a team approach to change. Changes to practice that people tested out include:

- Addressing how acronyms or jargon are used
- Ways to make content more succinct
- Improving use of chronologies

The table below gives more details about what people tested out and the emerging outcomes. Some people chose to focus on their approach to producing chronologies as a starting point to examine how and what they record, and in what format, while others looked more closely at language use and evaluating where information could usefully be removed from a case note. These tests of change highlighted that almost immediately there were visible impacts on improved information sharing and clarity of what was being communicated between colleagues in teams and, in some cases, across services.

Emerging outcomes from tests of change

Anticipated outcome: Information is clearer and more accessible	Action tested out	Practitioner observations and emerging outcomes
Addressing how acronyms or jargon are used	Remove acronyms, or if using an acronym explain in full the first time used in the case note. Avoid jargon - but give an explanation in Plain English if it is unavoidable.	Colleagues found the notes easier to understand Support needs for the individual are clearer to see Questions from partner agencies related to the case note have reduced Feels like there's less risk when the notes are clearer to understand for all. Should be clearer for the future reader to understand
Content is more succinct	Not repeating information in the case note about referrals already provided elsewhere in the record Removing 'cut and paste' parts of emails chains	Colleagues say the note is clearer and more relevant
Improved use of chronologies (from Health Services perspective)	1.Decision making about what to record in case note and/ or in chronology	Practitioner feels that information provided is more focused on relevant details and clearer definition between case note and chronology
	2.Updating chronologies as soon as possible 3. Thinking more about what necessary information goes in the chronology	Safer for families and Child Protection if all the information is updated promptly Better multi agency information sharing

Another support for improved clarity was discussed more widely in connection to a change to a new Social Work electronic case management system (Liquid Logic). Having the facility to finalise a note at a later time allows for crucial information to be inputted very shortly after a contact, but then other details and analysis can be reviewed and refined when the practitioner has had time for their thoughts to settle and reflect.

The additional reflections below suggest that successful upscaling and embedding of these ideas would require buy-in and agreement within and across service groups alongside smaller scale team-based approaches.

Reflections from participants testing ideas to make information in case notes clearer and more accessible

What helped?

- Full team approach
- Support from colleagues
- Making a more conscious effort
- Being allowed more time to write
- New systems allow for finalising the case note later after the first input
- Chronology reminders at team meetings, post it on computer
- AYRShare - for sharing with partner agencies

What will help you to continue doing this?

- Teamwork
- Continuing to revisit and reflect - it can be hard to break habits
- Getting partner agencies on board
- Completing chronologies as soon as possible

Recommendations for other practitioners trying this out:

- Keep hold of why it’s important to do this and allow time
- There’s a risk of reverting back to old ways in light of increased pressures if you don’t have enough resources to maintain this approach

- Remember professional codes and requirements
- Be mindful of confidentiality - e.g. talking about siblings in each other's notes

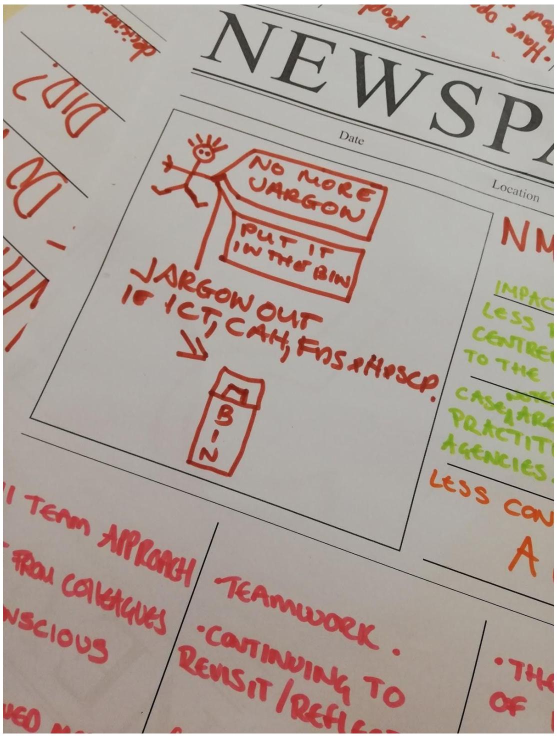


Photo of newspaper headline from a reflection activity: Jargon out!

Evidencing decision-making

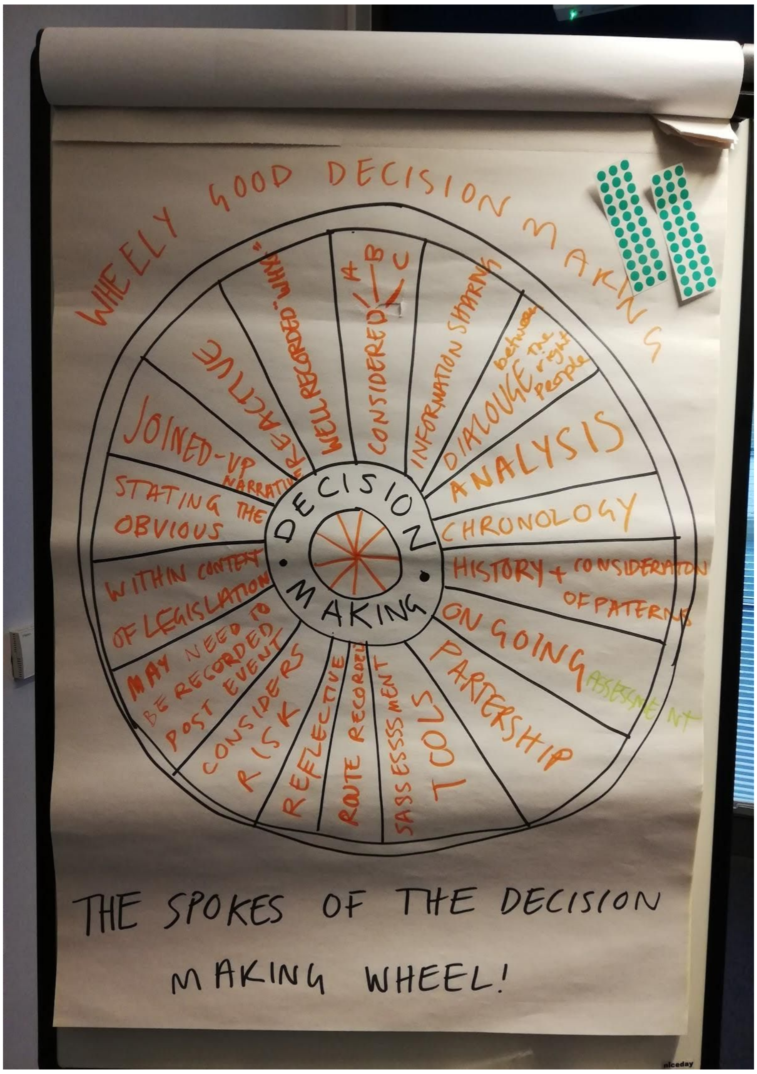
The way in which decision-making is evidenced and included in a case note emerged as a priority for a variety of reasons:

- Managers observed that team members often speak clearly about the purpose and rationale behind their decisions but this can be less well articulated in a case note.
- The details behind complex decisions made during crisis are not always written up in a way that provides useful background information for someone reading their records later in life. This is not to say that decisions are not well articulated in records, but that some of the details that provide deeper context for a person's life story may not be included. For example, explaining in detail why alternative options were not viable.

- It can be hard to write in depth about the evidence base for a professional judgement or decision in a case note when there is a concurrent demand to make notes succinct.

Through activities to identify the key components of decision-making we aimed to uncover some of the tacit processes and practices that are part of this day-to-day work, and explored the question: what and who is involved in decision-making?

Using the visual of a wheel, we created spokes to represent the elements that were identified as part of making and evidencing decisions from a cross-service perspective.



The decision making wheel

These ‘spokes’ can be further categorised into practices and processes that take place during decision making. Some of these may be a combination of the two :

Practices	Processes
• Reflection • Using assessment tools • Dialogue between the right people • Using chronology • Analysis • Looking at history and consideration of patterns • Considering the options • Reactive (being responsive to changing circumstances) • Working within context of legislation • Consider/weigh up risk	• Recording the route taken • Stating the obvious • Ongoing assessment and review • Working in partnership (with other agencies and person/ family you’re working with) • Information sharing • Documenting the options considered • Producing a joined up narrative • Recording post-event when necessary

The group then prioritised some of the aspects that they would value professional development (through further training or other supports like supervision, development days or written guidance):

- Writing up and including analysis in case notes
- Recording the ‘whys’ well
- Stating the obvious (in connection to making notes more accessible and information clear to understand by all readers)
- Showing how options were considered and chosen
- Weighing up and evidencing risk

The elements surfaced in this discussion echoed some of the testing that had been ongoing by some of the participants who had been examining the processes of recording decisions, and can be seen in the table below. These include:

- Analysing how decisions and judgements are written about in the case note
- Showing the alternatives (recording the ‘whys’)

- Case notes and records are more accurate in recording decisions about the behaviours of young people

Emerging outcomes from tests of change

Anticipated outcome: The basis for decision making is better evidenced in a case note	**Actions**	**Practitioner observations and emerging outcomes**
Analysing how decisions and judgements are written about in the case note	Checking back through case notes for fact or opinion and highlighting (creating a visual), to make an analysis of where judgements are well backed up with facts	It showed the practitioner how professional decisions are not always clearly justified - with the result that they look like opinions. This could be developed as a team activity for critical reflection on how to make the link between facts and judgements stronger.
Showing the alternatives	Making sure that notes explain what alternatives were considered. e.g. why we went with 'Plan B' and why Plan A and C were not possible	It will give a future reader more understanding why certain things couldn't be done - children may be told this at the time but they might not remember
Case notes more accurately record decisions		
Case notes and records are more accurate in recording decisions about the behaviours of young people	Looking at ways to reduce the frequency of young people in Children's Homes being recorded as absconders when they are not	Focus on understanding what is classified as 'breaking curfew' and if that is appropriate. Improvements here can lead to more accurate recording in a young person's record.

Reflections on testing ideas for evidencing decision-making

What helped?

- Using the question 'Why did we do what we did?"
- Liquid Logic (electronic case management system) helps by guiding the process
- Put yourself in the shoes of the future reader

What will help you continue doing this?

- Opportunities for feedback e.g. file audits
- Read other people's work
- Have open conversations

Recommendations for other practitioners trying this out

- Change your perspective - take the long view about what happens now and what it means
- Remember your accountability

Principles for great recording

Bringing our testing and learning to a conclusion in Workshop Three we looked towards our ‘gold standard’ - what does a great case note look like? Building up from paired discussion, to small group and then whole group, we wrote up core elements on sticky notes and mapped these out on the wall. We grouped the stickies as we brought them to the wall before reviewing and identifying key principles for each grouping. These six principles have then been reformulated as questions that can be used as prompts.

Six questions that great case notes answer with a ‘yes’

1. Is the context set out?
2. Can it be understood by all?
3. Is it person centred?
4. Does it ‘show the whys’ behind decision making?
5. Is the assessment process clear?
6. Is there an action plan?


Six questions that great case notes answer with a 'yes'
Is the context set out
Are contact details included up to date?
Sets out the purpose for worker's involvement. Why are you visiting, meeting, or phoning?
Identifies people, names, relationships and roles clearly. e.g. Amy (child), Lorraine (mother), Amanda (Aunt) and Claire Social Worker
Includes legislative framework and statutory responsibility
Describes the situation or incident
Can it be understood by all?
Would it make sense to any future reader?
Is the language 'reader friendly' for all audiences?
Information is easy to find and concise
Descriptions are included for a clear purpose
Gives specific facts
No jargon and acronyms are explained in full
Is analysis written in a way that is relevant to all readers, not only other agencies?
No extra, irrelevant information is included e.g copy and paste emails
Is it person centred?
Does it include positives?
Are you giving a holistic picture of what happened?
Does it help to form a picture of who the person is?
Have strengths based approaches been used?
Does it show what is important to person you're working with, and why?
Does it show kindness?
Includes thoughts, perspectives and feelings of person you're working with?
Is language non stigmatising or traumatising?
Does it 'show the whys' behind decisionmaking?
What happened and what does it mean to the child/adult/family? Why?
Shows the why/why not behind decision making
Links to personal outcomes
Gives an answer in analysis: 'what does this tell us?' So what next?
Clear analysis of the decisions that have been agreed. Your reasons for any decisions made are easy to find.
Includes reflection on decision making
Is the assessment process clear?
Sets out the evidence — 'how do I know this'?
Focuses on relevant details
Respects the rights and responsibilities of the person you're working with
Takes a wider view. e.g. Are there health issues to consider? What or who are the natural supports?
Weighs up risk and shows clear risk management steps
Assessment is linked to the plan for the person you're working with
Is there an action plan?
Is there discussion of contribution to personal outcomes and what this means for what happens next?
Does it explain what will happen next and actions assigned to people?
Bonus question: Is the chronology...
...up to date and complete?
...highlighting key information — not copied over in full from the case note?

Part 3: Project evaluation

We asked participants at the end of each workshop to comment on their main learning for the afternoon, how things had gone, and what we could do differently next time. In addition at the end of Workshop Three we undertook a longer reflection and review of the project. Overall the participants were very positive about their involvement, and this reflected the energy and commitment that they'd given to the three sessions.

What's been good about the project?

> "Making people feel valued by asking them for their views to take back as part of Iriss work"
>
> "Because of this workshop I found myself thinking more about what and how I write."
>
> "It was an opportunity to talk about an aspect of our work that we usually perform uncritically/ automatically"
>
> "Spending a wee bit more time thinking will mean less time doing so making changes can be beneficial"

What resonates most for you now?

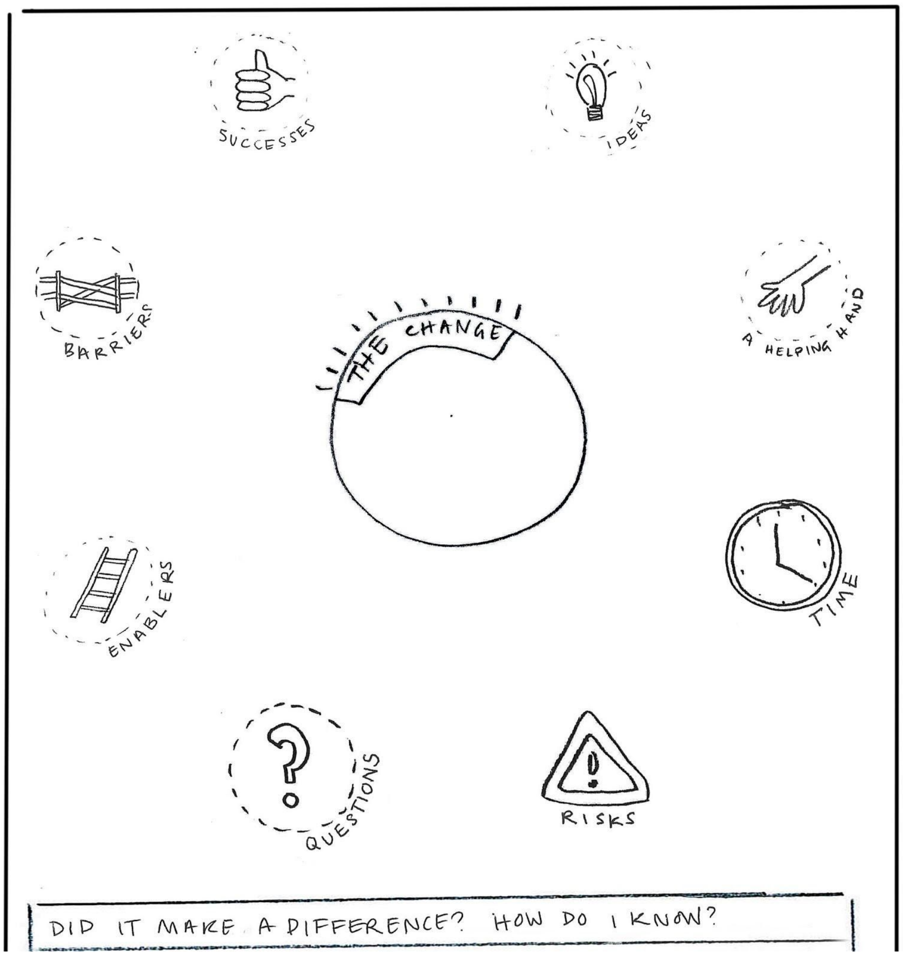
- Realising we do some things really well!
- How much thought we should put into what we record
- Remembering the future reader
- Evidencing decision making
- Recording in a person centred way
- Reflecting on my own practice
- Taking back messages to NSQWs who are always very worried about 'doing it right'
- Prioritising chronologies

Challenges encountered

- Making time to attend all 3 days
- Time management but taking more time when recording has been beneficial for my practice
- Implementing change takes time - everyday stuff takes priority
- Identifying that I can do things better and taking on board small changes I can make
- Some barriers of different understandings of things across teams
- Sometimes I've been confusing case notes with assessments and thinking about what needs to be in both
- Breaking down the decision making process - as we do so much on autopilot

We also have learning points about the process of working in the way that we did, gathered from facilitator reflections and participant feedback. In summary these are:

1. **Recognising complexity in a mixed service group**
2. **Critical reflection**
3. **Expect tensions or conflict to arise, and facilitate supportively**
4. **Practitioners value hearing from other services**
5. **Time is a factor in a variety of ways**
6. **Permission to test ideas**



Example of the visual tool for reflecting on ideas testing

1. **Recognising complexity in a mixed service group**: We found that as a group it was important to recognise complexity when talking about recording for a variety of purposes and in a range of settings, but not get stuck at the points where there were service-specific differences. It became apparent in the first workshop that working on some activities in service groups and then feeding back for wider group discussion would be the most effective way to identify and build on points of commonality, while also highlighting the points where different approaches to recording among services could create challenges.

2. **Critical reflection**: This approach is grounded in critically reflective practice. At all stages participants were engaged in activities to reflect on their own practice, but also that of teams and cultures, looking at how things are now, how they could be, and ways to get there. In a mixed service group, where people have different roles and training backgrounds, some people may be more, or less, comfortable and

accustomed to thinking in this way. The set up and delivery of activities needs to take this into account and is something that benefits from checking in on over the project.

3. **Expect tensions or conflict to arise, and facilitate supportively**: we asked participants to reflect on and test changes to an element of practice that is routine, but also very personal, and central to evidencing how they work with people and make professional decisions. This surfaced points of tension. This came from cross-service questioning about 'best practice' or approaches taken by other teams or agencies, as well as from discussions with colleagues in similar roles. It was perhaps to be expected that some people would respond defensively or feel threatened if their 'way' was challenged - either by direct questioning or by new ideas generated or discussed by the wider group.

   Also, as one practitioner reflected in their testing, discussion and thinking can lead to reflection that maybe the tools that they use are not as 'good practice' as they may previously have thought, which can lead to uncertainty about how to go forward. From a facilitation perspective, it was important to recognise this and also reinforce a framing of learning not criticism in group discussions.

4. **Practitioners value hearing from other services**: Participants commented widely on the value of hearing from other services as a way of increasing their understanding about the culture and practices of these services, and that it was helpful to know that colleagues encounter similar challenges with recording across their teams and services.

5. **Time**: Time was a factor in a number of ways. Within the workshops this came up as a challenge when factoring in space to account for explaining terms or practices that practitioners from other services were not familiar with. Many participants reflected that taking more time to reflect, plan and write differently was a difficulty but it was balanced with feeling that it was making a positive difference to their

recording. “Time can be an issue but the more you put an idea in to practice the less time is taken to action it” (from evaluation feedback).

6. **Permission to test ideas**: this feedback came from a number of workshop participants who felt it was really important that managers (both at service and senior management level) were supportive. This gave a sense of permission to experiment and try out ideas, which in turn enhanced a sense of ownership and professional confidence. Supervision was also mentioned as having an important role for reflecting on tests of change and recognising it as important work.

Future directions

The tool based on the work in this project is in process and will be published after further development. Iriss will be continuing recording practice work in 2020/21 with new partners and seeking to make further connections nationally to link out to other work ongoing in related areas, such as records access and management. To talk about anything in connection to this project or future work, please contact Louise Bowen.