Learning and Development Practitioners:
Their Experience of Sharing 'Understanding Age in Adult Support and Protection Legislation and Child Protection Guidance'

Hannah Martin

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Background

Following a review of the ['Understanding Age in Child Protection Guidance and Adult Support and Protection Legislation'](#) (Understanding Age) resource, it was highlighted that there was a role for Learning and Development (L&D) colleagues to more widely disseminate the resource with social workers in their local areas. An open call was made to L&D practitioners to attend an online session to discuss:

- How local awareness of the resource can be raised

- How using and embedding the resource in practise can be promoted

- If or how the resource is built into local learning currently; and

- Promoting knowledge and use of the resource throughout local teams

Ten practitioners in total took part in a one hour online session to share their thoughts and experiences on sharing the 'Understanding Age' resource, which doubled as an opportunity for Iriss to promote the dissemination of this work. Nine participants were from social work, and one was from the NHS. Participants represented a spread of local authorities across Scotland, including remote and island locations.

Notably, twentysix practitioners signed up for the session. While apologies were not received from the sixteen that did not attend; it could be interpreted that their absence might be reflective of the busy schedules and intense workloads across social work roles and teams. Some of those sector wide themes were raised as part of this discussion; for example, the saturated information environment as a barrier to the dissemination and embedding of useful tools and information, including 'Understanding Age'.

Given the sample size, the following themes cannot be attributed to the whole of Scotland. However, they are indicative of the challenges that L&D staff face in sharing this, and other resources; and serve as a reliable illustration of the key routes that L&D staff have to disseminate and embed information and

resources like this. There remains opportunity to continue to raise awareness of 'Understanding Age' among L&D colleagues, recognising the wider social work context they are operating in, and how this challenges their ability to disseminate and embed knowledge and resources.

Knowledge and Use of the Resource

Echoing the experiences of participants in the review of 'Understanding Age', there were varied levels of familiarity with the resource, with some having shared and embedded the resource more thoroughly than others.

And it's just to say that the resource itself is new to me and having read it very, very quickly, it will be very, very helpful. I'm still relatively new to my role…

Overall, all practitioners taking part in the session, welcomed the resource and some highlighted specific positives, including the comparison table which was found to be helpful in allowing practitioners to look at the processes possible via each avenue:

in terms of the table, it's a very useful resource in terms of the compare and contrast aspect and you can see side by side.

This was particularly helpful for L&D practitioners who felt more comfortable and well versed in one area of practice than another.

And I really like the comparison table. I think I find that really useful. I think it's great… I'm kind of looking through the ASP lens quite a lot, so I think comparison tables, like we're crossing the acts, is really good to help people see the differences…

The general discussion of the challenges for 16 and 17 year olds included in the report, was welcomed by colleagues, offering context and information about the specificities of working with young people in this age bracket.

I think there's some very valuable stuff and especially the quotes from other organisations who support children and adults… I think it was from the NSPCC, who said 'we have to be wary of treating children like adults because the

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professional curiosity might not be as strong as it would be roundabout children'. And I think that should be a banner everywhere.

One NHS practitioner shared that they find the resource useful to support their professional decision making, informing the support that they give to colleagues around working with this age group:

When staff phone me looking for guidance and support especially when they're getting sometimes that knee jerk reaction about that age group and 'oh, they're 15 and they're only weeks away from their 16th birthday.' You know, as if a date in a calendar is going to make all the difference. So it's for me it's a good resource to be able to, to be able to challenge that and give my fellow colleagues the confidence to be able to respectfully challenge decisions. So that's how I've used it so far.

Sharing the Resource with Social Workers

As was raised in the review, and indeed prompted this session; the limitations of highlighting and sharing resources with social workers via email was expressed by practitioners:

…we can send emails all day, but actually they're not hitting the mark…

Despite being a direct link with social workers, emails were not considered to be an effective way of ensuring practitioners know about resources; nor an effective way of promoting and embedding their use.

All practitioners expressed a desire to share this resource specifically with their workforce, although were at different stages of doing so. Participants in the session had made use of various ways of sharing the resource, depending on what avenues were available locally and what time they had had to familiarise themselves with the resource.

How the resource was shared:	Practitioner Quote:
Using the resource to inform training developed locally; including using the resource as a prompt to create case studies, stories and scenarios to bring the information in the tool into practice.	*Myself and my child protection colleague… will be working together to produce a resource, a training resource, for the 16-17 year old age sort of bracket and we will be using the local guidance and we'll be using yours as well. I think there's some very valuable stuff and especially the quotes from other organisations who support children and adults…*
	I think from having brief conversations about this topic with the Through Care Aftercare team; one thing that they've said… is to use a guidance like the one that's been created and embed two fake scenarios with two 17 year olds… and see the path where actually for one 17 year old this would be child protection, and another 17 year old, it's completely different… when it's a story that's being told, you do remember that information more…So if we create those, I'll definitely share them with you…
Making use of local intranet and specific online areas for the sharing of these types of resources; as well as sharing the resource through established information sharing channels, such as newsletters.	*In terms of sharing resources, making them accessible… the [local] Knowledge Hub has been a place, obviously a source and a location… we have an external site now which is in the development of being able to host e-learning and the additional resources, so it will be a place to… advertise there, in terms of the multi*

	agency space which we would be able to then promote…
	Our web team are really good… We have a HSCP weekly news bulletin, that's via e-mail, and there's also a weekly one for the whole of the council, and you can advertise on both of those. They're always looking for stuff for that. And there's links to those on the internal Internet sites as well.
	We've got kind of a dedicated site to child and adult protection where a lot of this kind of thing is shared… it's kind of managed more by people who understand what resources are relevant to it. We also have a Teams site that has up to date stuff for adult protection where it'll be shared.
Practitioners sharing the resource with relevant teams directly, and using it to support discussions with social work teams.	*We've been looking at a bit of work around creating training… I have been involved in using the resource and the report… [in] discussions at our practitioner forums. So we've been using it there. So we've had kind of face to face forums, where that's been one of the topic points and we've also created some newsletters and things.*
	When this guidance came out, I shared it with our Public Protection team… I've shared it on our Intranet as well. I find the guidance really useful.

Aspiring to use e-learning to share information in the resource with teams, including embedding this resource in e-modules.	*I've been going around on different social work teams since I started… at the end of last year and our Through Care Aftercare service for example, I know from having spent a day with them, they likely don't know about this resource, but absolutely a lot of our discussions were about this very issue, so I know that sharing it with them in various trainings that we'll do will be highly beneficial… It's trying to make use of e-learning as much as we can.*
	I think there would be massive benefit to this type of thing being embedded in the ASP modules and actually looking at it in there because I don't think it's really covered at all - this age group in those modules, I mean I think it's kind of brushed over briefly…

Challenges to Sharing and Embedding the Resource

There were some challenges in disseminating the resource that were specific to local areas, connected to the ease, or lack of, in using online pre-existing spaces to share it.

… but the struggle we're having… and I don't know if other councils are having the same problem is our internal intranet. So the thing that your whole Council has access to, they can be really funny about us trying to advertise a service specific thing. So, I can never go to our broad intranet and say 'hey, this document is going to benefit a whole service within our Council. Can we advertise it?' They'll say no. So I'd be really interested to hear from other areas

what you're doing that goes outside like training or emails to try and make sure that documents like this hit the right audiences?

Shared across the group, is the sense that the resource is landing in a busy landscape, where L&D teams are already working with large volumes of resources that require to be shared and embedded with social workers.

It's constant. And then there's stuff coming from learning reviews. And 'how do we incorporate this? What have you got with this?' So constantly creating new ways of sharing the information that we've maybe shared before already, but 'What do we do on this? What do we do on that? Create something for this…'

Not only are practitioners tasked with thinking of effective ways to share information; the volume of resources, tools and approaches has an impact on how well L&D practitioners are able to understand them for themselves. This in turn impacts on how able they are to share it with social workers.

I don't know whether people are feeling the same as me; but there seems to be something new every week. Every week, there's something. It's just information overload constantly. You're going from like one meeting to another, to another, to another. You're not really not really being able to prepare fully. Like I said, I've scanned this document quickly this morning knowing I've had it for a while. Would love to have read it in depth…

The participants recognised that if they are feeling overloaded by the volume of resources, tools and approaches to share and deliver training on; this too will be felt by social work practitioners, who have to use and apply them:

… as a trainer, it just feels like you're constantly having to deliver. 'It's a new tool. It's a new approach. It's a new theory.' And you can just see sometimes the glaze… you can make it as interesting as you want, but the glaze comes over, like 'Another way, really!?'

It was shared that this feeling of overwhelm can limit to what extent social work practitioners actually use resources in their practice:

So I think it's it's a shame because then stuff like this, that's really important and that will give answers, is overlooked sometimes because there's just so much stuff coming from so many other areas…

and

You're just like if it's overloading for us, what's it like for, for frontline people as well?

Relatedly, there are challenges with recruiting and retaining staff; raised in particular by a practitioner in an island context.

we struggle with staffing as it is… obviously in terms of recruitment, it's even more difficult up [here]. And consistency - we do have quite a few agency staff that come and go.

The changeover in staff can make it difficult for knowledge to stay within teams; and even where training or knowledge of a resource is delivered by L&D teams, the staff may not remain in post. To overcome these challenges, one practitioner shared that time to learn is needed:

…the only way that we will ever, I think truly tackle this ongoing problem is to meaningfully and properly give every practitioner safe, protected time in their calendar every month… like an enforced thing… I think honestly that's the only way that we would ever get on top of this… be that once a month, once every quarter, whatever that would be - to really allow people to get on top of learning…

Another shared that until teams are able to tackle one area of challenge at a time, key resources and learning about discrete areas of work will remain a challenge to disseminate and embed:

It's almost like having to do one thing well at a time and then get that. So we're having discussions at the moment about our audit schedule. And again, I appreciate we need audit schedules, but we can keep auditing when we know what the issues are. Let's just pick one thing, do that well, embed it and then move on. And I think if we can accept that, we're not going to get everything great...

Working with 16 and 17 year olds

Participants also shared that more is needed both for practitioners, and for young people in this age group, in order to more fully support them. This mirrors findings in both the resource, and the review. There was a sense that the distinct needs of this age group are being increasingly uncovered, and there is a need for more attention to be paid to supporting them:

But yeah, I am aware that our children's services, kind of youth team, Throughcare, they deal with kind of all that range of things... we've recently had some of our team trained up on the age assessments. So I think that's kind of highlighted all this age group to me and that we really do need to be doing more...

A lack of attention or awareness of the needs and experiences of this age group was felt to contribute to trepidation around working with 16 and 17 year olds, particularly in relation to practitioners' knowledge and comfort levels of how to work with both ASP and CP processes.

I think there's a fear [of working with this age group]. I think with that fear comes people just trying to avoid it because they actually don't know how they can work together across the two bits of legislation and what resources can be pulled from the two bits, and how they can actually complement each other... thinking about who has the right knowledge... We do have people in our adolescence team who have been kind of trained up as Council officers. And the difficulty is, is that actually they don't feel confident enough because they're not getting enough experience. So perhaps the need for them using it within the adolescence team is only happening once or twice. So their confidence in their

ability to manage thresholds… so that's been quite an interesting learning curve as well.

There was concern that young people not effectively or adequately supported by children's services and CP processes, were also at risk of being lost or overlooked in the adult services system:

But this 16 to 18 group in terms of specifically exploitation, vulnerability… where there are vulnerabilities, and where we're kind of feeling that, you know, that [person] does meet the three-point test potentially because you can interpret it that they do, and we're putting referrals into adult services because we feel that these young people really are extremely vulnerable and not getting that service and not getting that need met. You know, we may have care experienced young people persistently drinking, persistently taking substances, not looking after themselves, but deemed to be doing that because they have capacity to do so, which is questionable because it's really, really putting them at risk. This is the worry. So we're finding ourselves in a situation where we're saying we'll put the referrals into Adults and then they can make the decision… It's really worrying because we're getting into this position where I feel like we're back covering… but we don't have any other legislation to be able to protect these young people…

This echoes the findings in the original report and the review, which highlights that the specificities of working with 16 and 17 year olds, and their needs, is an emerging area of focus for practitioners. There was a shared sense that L&D practitioners know that social workers need more support to effectively work with this group of supported people; but clear challenges in L&D teams being able to provide such support.

Next Steps for L&D Practitioners

The session itself appeared to inspire confidence among the practitioners, with some sharing that talking about the resource had given them ideas for how to share it more widely with practitioners.

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I have a good relationship with the ASP leads and we do a lot of joint working… there seems to be a kind of appetite out there for staff having these kind of bite sized sessions. And we're always looking for topics and so they seem to go down really well. So probably after today I'll probably approach the leads and put this forward that this is something that I think we've overlooked… I think there will be interest on this subject and it's getting that resource out there as well. So I think I'll probably be taking that forward after today.

and

Our Learning and Development coordinator couldn't come today so I'm just wondering if it's worth a conversation with her and kind of looking at how we put it into the current training we've got because to pick up on the Council Officer, obviously everyone has to go through that...

Echoing findings in the review of the resource, there was some appetite for joint training or opportunities for colleagues across adults and children's services, given the different interpretations and understandings of thresholds and needs of young people that can exist between the two teams.

…I can interpret that resource and the legislation in one way and my colleagues in adults are going, 'no, it doesn't meet that [threshold]' And I'm like, but it does. So yeah, I think that there's all that. But if there was anything like, even if it was online kind of a bit of a conference or anything or sessions, we could all come into. That would help…

and

But I'm just wondering about maybe a kind of a working group… kind of between the adult and children services… with actual practitioners who are doing this day in day out… examples could be shared… because I know there's frustrations - for everyone with the three-point test and things like that, so where maybe that falls down. Or where child protection feel like they've covered something that they maybe shouldn't of…

Future work regarding this resource may consider where to promote shared learning opportunities, and capture learning from those areas that have undertaken joint training and learning between adults and children's services.

Next Steps in Sharing the Resource

It is important to recognise that many of the challenges for L&D practitioners in sharing this resource, overlap with the challenges raised by practitioners in the review, who discussed opportunities and barriers to using the resource. Workloads are intense; teams are stretched; there is a lack of general confidence in working with this age group; and there are limitations on the time teams have to develop training based on, or incorporating new resources.

It was clear that participants had ideas of how to more effectively embed this resource, for example via e-modules and training, and that they were keen to do so. However, the challenge could be finding the time, and prioritising this resource amongst the many other resources and learning that are being released to the workforce.

The review suggested that the resource can be used by teams to scaffold and complement existing learning resources; and to support identification of any gaps in knowledge and skills. The following questions were suggested as facilitators to reflective practise, for individuals and teams to consider:

- what are the experiences of, and considerations made when supporting 16 and 17 year olds in context?
- are there recurring themes or challenges when working with this age group that the team needs to respond to, or consider more fully?
- what, if anything, needs to be done to support social workers and other professionals in the team working with this age group?
- how does, or can this resource support best practice in the team?
- how does, or can the resource be embedded in learning and practice; and folded into working processes, like supervision?

These prompts are included in a short one page leaflet, that could be shared again with L&D colleagues, as well as wider social work, to ease some of the time needed to create training around this resource. The context however, remains important to understand. Social workers themselves are busy, with their time in high demand. This limits the capacity they have for learning, which impacts on L&D colleagues.

Overall, participants welcomed this resource as a supportive tool to practitioners working with 16 and 17 year olds; and had made efforts to disseminate and embed it locally. A challenging operating environment could act as a barrier to L&D practitioners sharing it as fully as they aspired to.