

**Response to the What Works Centre 2018
Review of the Signs of Safety**

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The What Works Centre for children's social care recently released a systematic review of the Signs of Safety (WWC 2018), a summary of which was published in Community Care on November 15. In this short paper, Andrew Turnell, Eileen Munro and Terry Murphy offer a brief response to the review.

We want to thank the What Works Centre (WWC) and Cardiff University's Cascade team for their intelligent and nuanced mixed methods review which provides a balanced, valuable summary and critique of the published evidence that supports the Signs of Safety.

The review had the specific focus of investigating 'whether, how, for whom and under what conditions Signs of Safety works to safely reduce the number of children entering and re-entering care, and to increase the number of children re-united with their family'.

The review's overall finding was that there is '*little or no evidence that Signs of Safety is effective at safely reducing the need for children to enter care, equally, we have not found evidence to suggest that Signs of Safety is not effective at achieving this outcome*'.

Based on the review's standards of evidence we completely accept this assertion and we want to make three points:

- 1 Until the early 2010's, the international Signs of Safety community did not seek to build a formal outcome focused evidence base. As a practitioner's model, the primary research endeavour focused on building practice-based case by case evidence (Ferguson, 2003) of what works in actual cases across the entire children's services continuum. The extensive body of published Signs of Safety practice based evidence was not within the scope of the WWC review which focused solely on the Signs of Safety impact on the English government priority of reducing care placement numbers.
- 2 The review did not include relevant published administrative data that evidences reductions in placements (for example, see Reeves 2018) nor did it explain why this data did not meet their evidence standards.
- 3 We share the WWC's concern to demonstrate the effects of Signs of Safety and under what circumstances they occur, so we are already actively encouraging and supporting research projects in the UK and Ireland that address many of the issues the review has identified.

Beyond its detailed exploration of the evidence base, the review also offers a formulation of the Signs of Safety programme and implementation theory. They identify gaps based primarily on 2012 published descriptions of Signs of Safety practice and organisational theories of change. We had already identified these same gaps and have subsequently been systematically addressing these through the revised theories of change (Munro, Turnell and Murphy 2016 and Turnell and Murphy 2017) which are now being applied in England, Northern Ireland, Ireland and North America.

Given the scope of the review and the fact the reviewers state they didn't read Signs of Safety practice guidance not linked with research, and it seems they did not familiarise themselves with the v2.0 Signs of Safety practice theory of change, we were somewhat surprised that the review team would view itself able to analyse limitations in the Signs of Safety practice approach. The review called out limitations in applying the approach to cases of violence and exploitation which are in fact explicitly addressed in the practice based

evidence that supports the approach (for example, see McLaughlin and O'Brien, 2018). The review also names the issue of how to fully engage naturally connected networks in the safety planning process. These gaps in the practice theory were certainly accurate six years ago when the 2012 practice theory of change applied, but since then they are all being actively addressed.

The review misunderstands Signs of Safety in formulating a parental 'turning point' as the key change driver in the practice approach, when the literature has clearly stated that the Signs of Safety follows a systemic approach to change and problem solving. Thus, the Signs of Safety practitioner is not so much setting out to change the light-globe (a faulty parent) as to install a whole new lighting system of a naturally connected safety network around the child (Turnell and Essex, 2006).

In their critique of the 'practice theory' the review team also does not seem to appreciate that the Signs of Safety brings a process not a content focused approach to assessment. The Signs of Safety assessment framework provides a clear structure for how to think, and what to think about, and does not prescribe what to think or what theories to draw upon. The Signs of Safety has always recognised that practitioners must bring the most up-to-date professional knowledges to the practice encounter about many contested issues such as childhood development, the impact of trauma, dynamics of grooming, power, control and violence, as well as wider social issues such as race, class, gender and sexual identity.

The WWC review comes at a very opportune moment in the development of the evidence base that supports the Signs of Safety and will be an important driver in helping us to focus the English local authorities and agencies, and other collaborators across the UK, in building a Signs of safety evidence base that meets recognised academic standards. We accept fully the recommendations of the report that:

- The evidence base for Signs of Safety urgently needs developing
 - A clear, practicable specification of high quality Signs of Safety practice is a first priority.
- We can assure the UK children's service community that we and the leading English Signs of Safety implementing authorities are already working hard on exactly these priorities.

We again thank the WWC and the Cardiff team for the impetus their report provides to the Signs of Safety community in the UK and would welcome the opportunity to work more closely with the WWC in establishing whether the Signs of Safety is effective in improving the safety and wellbeing of children served by the English children's services system.

References

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