

## Operating Systems for Children's Services

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In the current economic climate, there remains an urgency to improve child well-being, but there is a much sharper interest in the economic costs.

There are many routes towards this goal. For example there are in existence or emerging good methods to:

- Introduce evidence based programmes, proven to have impact on children's health and development.
- Calculate the costs and benefits of competing investment options
- Use new evaluation techniques that give a reliable estimate of programme impact
- Improve the quality of implementation of new policies and programmes
- Integrate innovation into mainstream systems instead of leaving them to sink or swim in the stream of short-term funding
- Cutting the volume of data collected permitting re-investment in high quality epidemiological data
- Shifting the balance between prevention, early intervention and treatment, for example by using reductions in rates of children in care to re-invest in prevention programmes
- Fostering local innovation and contributing to the growing international evidence base about what works
- Realise economic benefits so that money saved as a result of better prevention is re-invested to further improve child well-being.

All of these methods can be applied individually. But what if there were a desire to apply several approaches at once, perhaps as part of a single strategy across a community or local authority to improve child outcomes at zero net cost?

That would require combining methods and linking high quality evidence with consumer and community engagement (because that will optimise the effectiveness of the strategy) and worker participation. Ideally, a local authority or community pursuing such a course will be serious about evaluation and discover whether new investment decisions lead to better outcomes in a cost-beneficial way.

This is where 'operating systems' come in. It was David Hawkins, creator of *Communities that Care* that coined the phrase. He made the comparison with operating systems that underpin computers. If you use an Apple computer, you will be familiar with the operating system that supports programmes like 'Pages', 'Numbers' and 'Keynote'. Those using a PC will be familiar with Windows, the operating system that supports programmes like 'Word', 'Excel' and Powerpoint'.

In each case the programmes use the same language. The operating system permits cutting and pasting data across programmes. The operating system makes each programme intuitive to use. If you know how to use 'Word', you are not going to have much trouble with 'Excel' or 'Powerpoint'.

Operating systems in children's services provide a platform for the introduction of evidence based programmes, to undertake cost-benefit analysis, high quality evaluation and other activities described above. They allow cross over and efficiencies between these activities.

And they provide an interface between high quality evidence, consumer and community engagement and participation of the workforce.

There are many operating systems for children's services, arguably too many. But there are some that cross agency and disciplinary domains. The most prominent are:

- Communities that Care, which has the strongest evidence base since there is experimental data showing that it contributes to child outcomes over and above the impact of the interventions it sponsors

- Common Language, the only one developed in the UK for local conditions
- Outcomes Based Accountability, sometimes called Results Based Accountability or Turning the Curve, which is probably the most widely used in the UK, and
- Getting to Outcomes, which is the only one of the four to yet to be applied here in the UK.

Each of these operating systems have their strengths and weaknesses. None is perfect. But, by our reckoning, all can make a substantial contribution to human well-being.

And all are underused in the UK, which arguably helps to explain the huge amount of uncoordinated activity, the volume of unsustainable innovation, the continued investment in activities that not only fail to contribute to child outcomes but are potentially harmful, and the absence of learning (one wonders how many of the 1,000 pilots sponsored by the government in the last decade will be remembered a decade from now).

Common Language, the operating system prepared by the Social Research Unit, has been applied in many ways. On the island of Ireland it has been used to underpin a \$200 million investment in prevention that has seen a rash of evidence based models installed, higher evaluation standards and a renewed commitment to the quality of implementation.

In Birmingham, Common Language has been used to underpin an ‘invest to save’ strategy called *Brighter Futures* that will see a £41 million investment in evidence based programmes reap £102 million of savings to the City Council. If these savings are evidenced, using experimental methods, the money comes back to children’s services for re-investment. The *Total Place* initiative may see the Birmingham approach extended to adult services.

The Social Research Unit is exploring further applications of the method in Atlanta, Glasgow and London.

But our primary concern is to promote the much greater use of all operating systems, not just our own. The publication from the IDeA on operating systems used in the UK is a start in what we would like to see as a much broader effort to promote, refine and learn from these approaches.