

AssetPlus Rationale

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1. Introduction

Assessment and intervention planning are demanding professional tasks requiring high levels of knowledge and skill. Structured assessment tools or frameworks can assist with these tasks but will be of most use if individual practitioners and organisations see them as supporting professional practice, rather than replacing it (Baker et al., 2011).

This new framework builds on previous assessment tools used in youth justice settings (for example *Asset*, *Onset*, *SQIFA*, *SIFA*) incorporating both the lessons learned from their use since 2000 and new insights from research and the academic literature. It is also designed to reflect the changing context for practice in which greater emphasis is now being placed on flexibility and the importance of professional discretion (Munro, 2011).

Details of the process of development for the new framework have been set out in the Statement of Intent. This document does not repeat that information but the purpose here is to highlight the key ideas, theories and research that have shaped the new framework. The development of the new framework reflects lessons learned from the literature on assessment practice in a range of disciplines and contexts – not just youth justice but also, for example, social work, healthcare and probation.

The range of literature drawn on includes the following areas:

- reviews of developments in assessment practice (for example, Andrews et al., 2006; Burman et al., 2007);
- discussion of different approaches to assessment and implications for assessment tools (for example, Hoge, 2002; Schwalbe, 2008);
- theoretical debates (for example, Case and Haines, 2009; O'Mahoney, 2009; France et al., 2010; Wikström and Sampson, 2009);
- data and discussion relating to *Asset* (for example, Baker et al., 2003; Smith, 2006; Webster et al., 2006; Phoenix, 2009; Wilson and Hinks, 2011);
- other assessment tools (for example, Borum et al., 2003; Schwalbe, 2007; Debidin, 2009; Peckover et al., 2011);
- the perceptions and experiences of practitioners and offenders (for example, Mair et al., 2006; Ellis and France 2012).

The relevant literature is extensive, but also constantly developing, and new ideas will continue to emerge. The new framework steers a complex path through this varied literature and attempts to balance a range of perspectives. It is not within the scope of this paper to provide a detailed critique of specific academic texts or to list every relevant article but the aim is rather to highlight the main implications from the current literature for assessment and intervention planning activity and show how these have been included in the new framework.

2. Key ideas – foundations of the framework

These are ideas which have influenced the model as a whole and apply across different sections of the framework, regardless of case stage, the type of assessment, or the particular needs of a young person.

2.1 Understanding young people's behaviour

Assessment will involve identifying risk and protective factors in a young person's life, but it is not enough just to note their occurrence (YJB, 2006 and 2008; Case, 2007; Baker et al., 2011). Different factors will interact with each other in different ways at different points in time. For example, there will be interactions between a young person's personal situation, their attitudes and their social setting. There are a number of theories exploring these connections and mechanisms (for example, Sampson and Laub, 1993; Thornberry, 2005; Wikström and Sampson, 2009) and the relevance for the assessment practice centres on the importance of explaining the significance of factors in a young person's life at particular points in time and/or in relation to particular behaviours.

Secondly, it is important to understand young people's perceptions of the choices that they face and their views of the costs/benefits associated with offending or anti-social behaviour (Kemshall et al., 2006, Sharland, 2006; Ward and Bayley, 2007; Boeck and Fleming, 2011).

Thirdly, there may be similarities with other behaviours. The 'Good Lives Model' (GLM) suggests that people who offend are (like everyone else) trying to obtain primary human goods such as a sense of belonging or knowledge and skills (Ward and Maruna, 2007). The GLM also suggests that people pursue secondary goals – such as friendships or work, for example - as means to achieve these primary goods. If young people find it difficult to achieve these goods through pro-social means they may try to obtain them through offending or antisocial behaviour (McNeill, 2009). As the GLM is a relatively new model there is a need for more empirical research regarding its validity and there may be some cases where it is less appropriate (Andrews et al., 2011) but it can provide a useful perspective when working with young people and will be relevant for intervention planning.

Implications for assessment and intervention planning:

- Importance of looking at the interaction between different aspects of a young person's life;
- Assessments of behaviour need to take account of context and situation;
- Importance of considering a young person's own perspectives on their behaviour;
- Assessments should consider the needs or goals underlying behaviour.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- Scope to record detailed contextual information (e.g. in ‘personal, social and family factors’ and ‘offending/antisocial behaviour’);
- Overlapping timelines which can show the interaction of events and factors;
- Explanations and Conclusions: ‘behaviour so far: interactions and interconnections between factors’ section;
- Explanations and Conclusions: specific question in the ‘factors affecting desistance’ section on the goals/needs a young person is trying to achieve through offending or antisocial behaviour.

2.2 Understanding and using the concept of ‘risk’

Much has been written about the increasing preoccupation with risk in society, the way in which risk has come to be central to the practice of many criminal justice and social care organisations, and the question of whether ‘risk’ is an appropriate concept to use when working with young people (for example, Gray, 2005; Muncie, 2006; Kemshall, 2008; O’Malley, 2008).

Several key points emerge from the literature with particular relevance to the new framework. Firstly, it is important to have a clear concept of ‘risk’ and the framework reflects the description given by Carson and Bain: ‘An occasion when one or more consequences (events, outcomes and so on), could occur. Critically (a) those consequences may be harmful and/or beneficial and (b) either the number and/or the extent of those consequences, and/or their likelihood, is uncertain and/or unknown’ (2008: 39).

There are two key elements of ‘risk’ – impact and likelihood (Kemshall et al., 2007; Carson and Bain, 2008) and section 3.5.2 below gives further detail on how these are used within the framework. Risk is not an inherent characteristic of a young person but rather depends on particular situations and circumstances. Assessments of impact and likelihood can vary frequently and/or rapidly as a young person’s circumstances and opportunities change.

Risk should not be the only focus of work with young people but neither can it be completely ignored (McNeill, 2009; Whyte, 2009) as practitioners have a responsibility to work towards preventing adverse outcomes. ‘Risk’ and the Risk Need Responsivity model continue to be useful, for example, in highlighting cases requiring intensive resources and/or immediate action (Andrews and Dowden, 2006; Andrews and Bonta, 2010).

Implications for assessment and intervention planning:

- Risk is an important component of assessments, to be balanced alongside consideration of a young person’s needs, goals and strengths (see also 2.3 below);
- Any judgement about ‘risk’ needs to make clear what the outcome would be, who would be affected, in what way, and how likely is it to occur;
- Assessments and plans need regular review to reflect the dynamic nature of risk.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- The 'Explanations and Conclusions' section breaks judgements about 'risk' into the specific components of impact and likelihood (see 3.5.2 below).
- The intervention plan in the Pathways and Planning section balances goals associated with minimising risk and harm to others with goals linked to promoting the young person's own positive development;
- The 'dealing with changing circumstances' section in Pathways and Planning reflects the dynamic nature of risk and prompts consideration from practitioners of what could be done to manage future changes in risk;
- Risk reduction and risk management are covered in more detail where relevant e.g. planning for long term sentences, parole.

2.3 Identifying strengths

The framework draws on research relating to concepts such as protective factors and resilience (for example Schoon and Bynner, 2003; Lösel and Bender, 2007; Rennie and Dolan, 2010). There is ongoing discussion as to exactly how such factors operate in practice (Case and Haines, 2009) but, to summarise a complex debate, it seems that they can usefully be viewed as contributing to the following:

- helping to prevent offending or anti-social behaviour – for example, reducing sensitivity to risk factors or reducing the impact of risk factors;
- helping to achieve positive outcomes – for example promoting self-efficacy or providing new opportunities (YJB, 2008).

The Good Lives Model discussed at 2.1 above, is one example of an approach which emphasises the importance of identifying strengths (Ward and Brown, 2004). There are debates over the extent to which including strengths really improves the assessment process (see for example Ogloff and Davies (2004) who suggest that it could distract attention from the priority of reducing risks) but if used in balance with information regarding difficulties or risks it can provide an important motivating element. As McNeill argues, practitioners should aim to 'balance the promotion of personal goods (for the offender) with the reduction of risk (for society). Too strong a focus on personal goods may produce a happy but dangerous offender; but equally too strong a focus on risk may produce a dangerously defiant or disengaged offender' (McNeill, 2009: 85).

Implications for assessment and intervention planning:

- Assessment should identify existing and potential strengths in a young person's life;
- Any strengths and protective factors need to be explained and contextualised;
- Intervention plans should specify how strengths and protective factors will be incorporated into and developed during a period of intervention.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- Prompts to record strengths in the Personal, Family and Social Factors section;
- The Foundations for Change section;
- Self-assessment questions for young people and parents/carers to identify positive factors in their lives;
- Prompts in the Pathways and Planning section to specify how strengths identified during the assessment can be developed during interventions to support positive change.

2.4 Desistance and the process of change

If, as discussed in section 2.1 above, a young person's behaviour is shaped by numerous interacting factors, desistance from offending or anti-social behaviour can also be a complex process. Desistance research focuses on the routes out of offending and the literature includes a range of theories and explanations of how this process might occur (for example Bottoms et al 2004; Farrall and Calverly, 2006; Serin and Lloyd, 2009 in relation to adult offenders and Mulvey et al., 2004, Barry, 2006 and 2009, in relation to young people).

Several key themes emerge from this extensive and varied literature. Firstly, that desistance is best viewed as a process rather than a one-off event. Secondly, that understanding desistance involves taking account of both individual factors (such as goals and attitudes) and social context (such as the opportunities available to a young person in their community). Thirdly, it is useful to distinguish between 'primary desistance' i.e. 'any lull or crime-free gap in the course of a criminal career' and 'secondary desistance' which relates to adopting a new 'non-offender' identity (Maruna et al 2004: 274).

Implications for assessment and intervention planning:

- Need to assess 'desistance-readiness' (McNeill and Weaver, 2010: 8);
- Assessment needs to be ongoing to reflect the desistance process;
- Need to have a clear focus on the aims and aspirations of an intervention (Farrall and Maruna, 2004);
- Importance of understanding the individual's perspective on the change process – hopes, fears, costs, benefits and barriers.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- The timelines which provide a visual reminder of periods of desistance;
- The 'resilience, goals and attitudes' section of Foundations for Change explores some of the internal attributes associated with desistance;
- The 'factors affecting desistance' section of Explanations and Conclusions;
- The move away from doing assessments at fixed points in time and towards a continuing process of review and updates.

2.5 Involvement of young people and parents/carers

The framework draws on literature exploring the importance of participation by young people and parent/s carers in assessment processes and ways of promoting this (for example, Mason and Prior, 2008; NACRO 2008; Hart and Thompson, 2009; Smith, 2009; Young People in Focus, 2010; Ellis and France 2012).

Implications for assessment and intervention planning:

- Ensure that views of young people and parents/carers are thoroughly considered;
- Need for regular discussion with young people about their views on activities and interventions (not just at the start of a period of contact);
- Importance of helping young people and parents/carers to 'own' or contribute to intervention plans.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- Self-assessments for young people and parents/carers available in different formats;
- Self-assessments that can be built on and added to as intervention progresses;
- The 'engagement and participation' section of Foundations for Change.

3. Specific topics – content and structure of the framework

The purpose of this section is to summarise the reasons for the inclusion of new elements in the framework or aspects which represent a significant change from the way things were done in previous tools such as *Asset* and *Onset*. However, it does not attempt to cover every section of the framework (relevant information for practitioners on the specific details of the framework and how to use it can be found in the *AssetPlus* Guidance).

3.1 Further exploration

A key feature of the framework that recurs in many sections is the use of ‘further exploration’ sections. These are triggered by specific questions within the framework and provide the option for practitioners to consider and record more in-depth information about particular aspects of a young person’s life or behaviour if they think it is relevant. This allows practitioners to decide how detailed an assessment needs to be depending on the circumstances of each case, in line with current policy developments emphasising the importance of professional judgement (for example Munro 2011).

3.2 Ratings and scoring

Asset scores have been shown to have good predictive validity (Wilson and Hinks, 2011) However, over time a situation has developed where there are too many demands loaded on to one *Asset* score (e.g. it is used to indicate likelihood of reoffending, to trigger referrals, for performance management etc). This means that the purpose of the scoring has sometimes become confused. There is also little evidence available in relation to *Onset* scores and the *Asset/Onset* scoring is often misunderstood by those outside youth justice.

The new framework separates out the various functions of the previous *Asset/Onset* scores and incorporates a number of key ratings and judgements:

- Desistance factors and ratings
- Likelihood of Offending
- Overall safety and wellbeing concerns judgement
- Risk of Serious Harm

AssetPlus also uses the Youth Offender Group Reconviction Scale (YOGRS) as a static predictor to provide an indication of likely re-offending¹ which is based on Offender Group Reconviction Scale (OGRS) (Howard et al 2009). OGRS is based on extensive research and analysis of empirical reoffending data and seeks to provide the practitioner with an estimation of the likelihood of

¹ This does not apply to prevention cases.

reoffending. While originally devised as an aid to PSR writing, it has been developed for use throughout the assessment journey of the individual. Previous versions of the OGRS were modelled on reoffending data relating solely to adult offenders, but YOGRS has been validated for use in the youth justice system, through the incorporation of reoffending data of those under 18 years old.

Actuarial predictions have a high level of accuracy when predicting outcomes such as reconviction and YOGRS can be used to provide an initial indicator of likelihood of proven reoffending. It is also used by NOMS and its inclusion in this framework helps to promote greater alignment with OASys which may be beneficial when young people move into adult services. There are also limitations to YOGRS however - see 3.5.3 below on how to use it appropriately.

3.3 Personal, social and family factors

As with *Asset*, the new framework prompts practitioners to consider a wide range of factors relevant to young people's lives (Rutter et al 1998; DoH 2000; Communities that Care, 2005; DCSF, 2009). New specific areas included in the framework are outlined below.

3.3.1 Speech, language and communication needs

Research shows that a significant proportion of young people who offend have difficulties with speech, language and communication (Bryan et al, 2007). This can make it more difficult for them to engage with professionals and also means that they may not understand the language used in court (Crawford and Bull, 2006) or indeed by the YOT.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- Specific questions in the 'personal, family and social factors' section;
- Simplified language in the [optional] young person's version of the intervention plan;
- Information and further links provided in the guidance for practitioners.

The questions used in the framework have been adapted from resources currently used in some YOTs (for example, Crew and Gregory, 2008).

3.3.2 Sexual exploitation

Recent research and policy guidance have prompted renewed attention to the problems of sexual exploitation of children and young people (for example, Harris and Robinson, 2007); DCSF, 2009; Barnados, 2011; Howard League, 2012) and highlighted the need for all professionals working young people to be alert to the 'tell-tale signs or indicators that a child is being groomed for sexual exploitation' (Barnados, 2011: 7).

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- Scope to record whether a young person is susceptible to manipulation or exploitation in the ‘personal, family and social factors’ section;
- Guidance for practitioners and links to further information.

3.3.3 Lifestyle and behavioural development

This section includes some new topics that were not explicitly mentioned in previous tools. Research suggests that problem gambling amongst young people, whilst not as prevalent as in older age groups, may still be higher than typically thought (Ipsos Mori, 2009; Gamcare, 2010). For some young people this will be a relevant part of an assessment because, as with other addictive behaviours, there are questions over how a young person obtains funds for gambling activity for example. Inappropriate use of technology is another issue that has been included. This can cover a variety of behaviours such as gaming addiction (see for example Young, 2009) and possible associated difficulties with distinguishing real and virtual life. It can also include cyberbullying i.e. using technology to assert power over others in ways which cause harm (Campbell, 2005; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2008).

These topics have been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- Specific prompts and questions in the ‘lifestyle and behavioural development’ part of the Personal, Social and Family factors section;
- Guidance for practitioners and links to further information.

3.4 Offending and anti-social behaviour

Offence paralleling behaviour

This concept refers to behaviours committed within secure establishments which are functionally similar to behaviours present in criminal offences in the community (Jones, 2004; Daffern et al., 2007). Offence-paralleling behaviour does not include behaviours within establishments that could themselves be considered as offences e.g. violent assaults. Rather it refers to behaviours which are indicative of attitudes, expectations, or plans related to offending and which may be significant for assessing the risk that a young person would present to others on release.

This has been incorporated into the framework through, for example:

- A prompt in the ‘other behaviours of particular concern’ part of the Offending / Anti Social Behaviour section;
- Guidance for practitioners on using information about offence-paralleling behaviour for sentence plans and for release preparation.

3.5 Explanations and conclusions

The ‘Explanations and Conclusions’ section is a critical part of the framework and represents a significant change from some of the assessment tools previously used. It focuses on analysing the information collected during an assessment as the basis for making decisions about the action and interventions that may be required in any individual case.

3.5.1 Drawing information together

Assessment tools provide prompts about questions to ask and can improve the range of information collected. However, this does not necessarily lead to improvements in the way in which practitioners analyse or make sense of the information (for example, Crawford, 2007; Baker, 2008). Munro's point about social work practice also has relevance for youth justice, namely that "[i]mprovements in collecting information have not been matched by improvements in assessments. To use the jigsaw analogy again, social workers have become better at drawing together the relevant pieces but have difficulty in fitting them together' (Munro, 1998: 91). Assessments should therefore aim to join up different pieces of information in order to develop explanations for situations and behaviours which take account of all relevant factors (for example, Sheppard et al., 2001; Baker et al., 2011).

To help promote this approach to practice, the Explanations & Conclusions section contains questions intended to encourage assessors to look at information in a rounded way:

- It uses a variety of approaches to record and present information - text, graphs/diagrams and tables - to provide different perspectives on the information;
- Information recorded in other sections of the framework can be pulled through, for example into the timelines, to facilitate analysis;
- Specific prompts to explore possible explanations for both offending/antisocial behaviour and periods of desistance;
- Scope to review whether the explanations provided cover all the relevant behaviours or whether there are elements which are still unexplained.

3.5.2 Making judgements

Assessment forms the basis for judgements and decisions about a case. As this involves looking at possible future outcomes, there will always be an element of uncertainty involved. It is important therefore for assessors to use patterns of thinking which facilitate clarity and provide evidence of reasoning for decisions (Munro, 2011).

When considering the possibility of future events, a useful first step is to exclude outcomes which, whilst theoretically possible, are extremely unlikely to occur (Carson and Bain, 2008). Having filtered out the implausible options, consideration of what might realistically happen should (as noted at 2.2 above) focus on the two elements of impact and likelihood. This requires specific of what might happen, who would be involved and what the situations/circumstances might be (HMIP, 2009). This approach avoids the problems associated with phrases such as 'high risk' or 'low risk' – where it is not clear whether terms such as high/low relate to the impact of an event or the probability of it occurring – and instead allows for much greater clarity regarding any perceived 'risks' to a young person or to other people from a young person's behaviour (Baker 2010).

The Explanations and Conclusions section reflects these points through for example:

- The 'filter question' at the beginning of the 'future behaviour' section which encourages assessors to focus on events which they think might realistically happen;
- The sub-sections 'type of behaviour and impact on others' / 'Context for behaviour, likelihood and imminence' require specific information about impact and likelihood;
- The 'matrix of impact/likelihood judgements' which provides a visual summary of the impact and likelihood judgements made about a range of possible outcomes. This disaggregation shows that different events could have different outcome/likelihood ratings and the matrix can therefore reflect to some degree the complexity of some young people's behaviour and circumstances. For example, there might be a low impact/high likelihood rating for offence type A and vice versa for offence type B. The matrix can show these specific differences which can more usefully inform the intervention planning process than just a label of 'high risk' or 'low risk'.

3.5.3 Using and comparing different indicators

The 'summary section' of Explanations and Conclusions requires assessors to compare static and dynamic indicators. Actuarial and clinical approaches to assessment both have strengths and weaknesses so it is important for judgements to take account of both static and dynamic factors because no single indicator can capture all relevant elements of an assessment (Kemshall et al., 2007).

As described at 3.2 above, the framework uses YOGRS to provide one indication of the likelihood of re-offending. There are some advantages to this but the limitations are that static predictors are less useful with young people who have little offending history, they do not necessarily reflect the rapid changes that can occur in young people's lives and they are less accurate at predicting rare events. They are based on group data, but cannot tell practitioners whether or not an individual is an exception to the group (Hart, Mitchie and Cooke, 2007).

The key issue therefore is that a static predictor such as YOGRS should not be used as the sole indicator of a young person's future behaviour (Wilson and Hinks, 2011) nor should it be the primary basis for determining the level or type of interventions. Instead it needs to be compared to and considered in conjunction with other indicators, as part of the process of professional judgement (Schwalbe, 2007; Baker et al., 2011).

The importance of considering various indicators is reflected in the framework through questions such as:

- How do the different indicators compare? What are the similarities/differences between them? Where there are differences, what reasons might there be for this?

This provides the opportunity for practitioners to compare a young person's history with their current situation and patterns of behaviour in order to provide a more complete picture.

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