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Pilots of alternative assessments to AssetPlus

Evaluation report

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Contents

List of figures	4
Acknowledgements	5
Key messages	6
Executive summary	8
Introduction	8
The project	8
The evaluation	9
Process evaluation key findings	9
Feasibility study key findings	10
Future evaluation of the alternative assessment pilots	11
1. Overview of the project	12
Project context	12
Project aims and intended outcomes	13
Project activities	13
2. Overview of the evaluation	15
Evaluation methods	15
Changes to evaluation methods	16
Limitations of the evaluation	17
3. Key findings	18
Programme theory and logic model development	18
Logic model findings	19
Process evaluation	20
Aims and rationale of the alternative assessment pilots	20
Service integration, coherence and consistency	21
Implementation plans	23
Governance	23
Design and development	24

Training and development	25
Experiences of implementation	26
Pilot models	26
Eligibility	26
Overview of pilot models' key features	28
Assessing movement towards intended outcomes	29
Limitations and recommendations for pilot programmes	30
Feasibility study	31
Literature review	31
Considered impact evaluation designs	36
Recommended design	38
4. Summary of key findings on 7 practice features and 7 outcomes	49
Features of good practice	49
Outcomes	50
5. Lessons and implications	52
Process evaluation indicative findings and lessons	52
Feasibility study key findings and lessons	53
Future evaluation	54
Appendix 1: Programme theory and logic model development	56
Appendix 2. Methodological appendix	61
Appendix 3. Literature review inclusion criteria and summary of findings	66
Appendix 4. Fieldwork documents	73
References	86

List of figures

Figure 1. Proposed impact evaluation timeline45

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Key messages

3 local authority pilots were selected to develop and trial their own assessment frameworks for young people whilst they engage with the Youth Justice System (YJS) under the auspices of the Department for Education's (DfE) Children's Social Care Partner in Practice Programme (hereafter referred to as 'PiP Programme'). The evaluation was funded through the DfE Innovation Programme (hereafter referred to as the 'IP Programme'). This evaluation used qualitative methods to explore experiences of implementation, delivery and perceived impact of the pilots and included a feasibility study to explore how best to measure the impact of the pilots in the future. Key messages from the study are as follows:

- The alternative assessment pilots were designed to improve the existing assessment approach (AssetPlus), which is widely used across the YJS. AssetPlus was perceived to act as a barrier to effectively engaging young people in the assessment process due to its inflexibility and length.
- It was hoped that the pilots would help reduce the frequency and severity of reoffending among young people engaging with the YJS through adopting a systemic, strengths-based approach which assesses the young person in context, enhancing collaboration to facilitate more accessible services for young people and families, and promoting a relational approach which allows time for youth services to build trust with the young people and families they work with.
- The process evaluation found early indications that the pilots were contributing to positive changes in key areas. For example, pilot assessments and intervention plans were felt by staff to be more accessible to young people and families because of the clear, strengths- and solutions-based framework, and shorter, simple layout. Interviews and written feedback from sites also indicated that there was improved collaboration between local services.
- Covid-19 impacted on the ability to complete all planned data collection for the process evaluation and economic analysis. It would therefore be beneficial to conduct a comprehensive process study in the future, building on findings from this research to explore the implementation and delivery of the alternative assessment systems in more detail. This would also ensure learning on all aspects of the pilot could feed into the ongoing development of assessment processes in the YJS.
- The feasibility study suggested that while a quasi-experimental design (QED) would be suitable for an impact study, it may not be possible to detect a statistically significant effect, due in part to the relatively low number of expected pilot participants. This would limit the ability of the impact evaluation to ascertain whether the pilots achieved better outcomes than the previous AssetPlus

assessment framework. It might however be possible to conduct an impact evaluation at a later point in time if the assessment systems were used beyond the pilot period as this would increase the number of participants that could be included in the study.

Executive summary

Introduction

This report summarises findings from the mixed-method evaluation of the alternative assessment pilots to AssetPlus, the nation-wide assessment and intervention planning framework which supports a child or young person whilst they engage with the Youth Justice System (YJS). 3 local authorities were selected to develop and trial their own assessment frameworks, funded through the Department for Education's (DfE) Children's Social Care Partners in Practice Programme (hereafter referred to as the 'PiP Programme'). NatCen Social Research (NatCen) was commissioned by DfE to undertake the evaluation of the alternative assessment pilots.

This report provides an overview of the pilots and evaluation as well as a summary of key findings, lessons and implications drawn from the data.

The project

A review of the YJS in England and Wales in 2016 highlighted concerns with the way that assessments for children and young people entering the YJS were carried out using the AssetPlus assessment framework¹ (Taylor, 2016). It called for a simplification of the assessment process and for more autonomy to be given to local authorities to be able to use their own assessment systems. In response to this, DfE invited their Partners in Practice² (PiP) local authorities to put forward proposals for the development and trialling of alternative assessment processes to AssetPlus.

3 PiPs (Lincolnshire, North Yorkshire, and Tri-borough³) were selected to test whether and how the use of different assessment and intervention planning models may lead to service improvements and better outcomes for children, young people and their families. The pilots build on the strengths-based framework⁴ delivered through AssetPlus and

¹ The AssetPlus assessment framework was introduced to the YJS in 2014 to assist practitioners in making high quality assessments about an individual's needs, risks and strengths. It is intended to allow for the development of focused individualised intervention plans to support the child or young person whilst they engage with the YJS.

² The PiP programme was established in 2016 to create a genuine partnership between local and central government, bringing together the best practitioners and leaders in children's social care to improve the system. There are currently 13 PiPs covering 17 local authority areas.

³ Tri-borough is a project between 3 councils in London to combine service provision. The councils are Westminster City Council, Hammersmith and Fulham London Borough Council and the Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council.

⁴ Strengths-based practice is a social work practice theory that emphasises people's self-determination and strengths.

strive for more integration across children's services. The pilots became operational between April and September 2019, implementing the delivery plans outlined in proposals to DfE. This included for example, developing a new assessment framework, training staff and using their new tools to support a cohort of young people.

The evaluation

The evaluation comprised of 4 strands of research activity which were carried out between September to March 2020 and included the following:

- **Set-up and scoping** to familiarise with key project documentation and further develop the pilots' theory of change models.
- **A feasibility study** comprising a literature review, 5 interviews with pilot leads, reviewing 2 anonymised datasets; case-level management data from Tri-borough (covering the second and third quarters of 2019) and mandatory case-level data collected by the YJB from all Youth Offending Teams, (for the whole of 2019), and an online workshop with DfE and Youth Justice Board (YJB). The purpose of the feasibility study was to explore how best to measure the impact of using an alternative assessment system to AssetPlus.
- **A process evaluation** comprised of depth interviews with staff, young people and their families to understand experiences of implementation, delivery (including facilitators and barriers), and perceived impact.
- **Economic analysis** to assess whether the alternative assessment pilots led to lower costs than delivering the previous assessment system (Asset) by analysing information on time, resources and costs gathered from stakeholders.

Covid-19 had a significant impact on the evaluation. Following discussions in March 2020, a decision was taken by DfE to bring all primary data collection to an end due to the feasibility of completing the work within the agreed timescales and to not place undue burden on pilot sites. This meant that it was not possible to complete all data collection activities including, interviews in some areas and with children and families for the process evaluation and the economic analysis (discussed further in chapter 2).

Process evaluation key findings

Though data collection for the process evaluation was limited due to Covid-19, the scoping work and interviews that were conducted highlighted promising features of the pilots as well as early challenges, as described below.

All 3 pilots were designed with the intention of overcoming challenges identified with the previous AssetPlus system (Taylor, 2016); to improve the experiences of the process and

outcomes for young people and families engaging with the Youth Offending Service (YOS). It was hoped that the pilots would help reduce the frequency and severity of reoffending among this group through:

- adopting a systemic, strengths-based approach which assesses the young person in context,
- enhancing collaboration between services to facilitate more joined-up and accessible services for young people and families, and
- promoting a relational approach which allows time for youth services to build trust with the young people and families they work with.

Due to the limitations collecting data for the process evaluation, is not possible to conclude whether local authorities achieved success in delivering the pilot assessment frameworks as intended. However, there were some positive signs in key areas, including for example:

- Staff suggested that the streamlined assessment documentation enabled practitioners to spend more time directly engaging with young people and their families (in comparison to the previous AssetPlus assessment).
- The pilot assessments and intervention plans were felt by staff to be more accessible to young people and families because of the clear, strengths- and solutions-based framework, and shorter, simple layout.
- Interview data indicated that the pilots had helped improve collaboration and consistency across local services and as a result, information sharing had become more manageable and efficient.

Participants also acknowledged early challenges with the pilots, which included systemic difficulties in developing a fully integrated model of assessment across partners with very different ways of working, for example Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS). There were also suggestions to improve training, using practical exercises and refresher courses to ensure staff had the skills and confidence to use the assessment systems effectively.

Feasibility study key findings

The feasibility study suggested that a quasi-experimental design (QED) would be the most suitable approach to assessing the impact of the alternative assessment pilots in improving key intended outcomes, for example, re-offending, severity of offending and participation in education, employment or training (EET). It would involve matching the young people assessed with alternative assessment systems (the treatment group) with similar young people in non-pilot local authorities (the comparison group). The YJB case-

level data extracts offer good quality data on the key determinants of re-offending and participation in EET and could be used to carry out an impact evaluation of this nature.

However, the feasibility study highlighted limitations with this approach which would make carrying out a robust impact evaluation challenging. One key issue is the relatively low expected number of pilot participants, which means that the impact evaluation would only be able to detect large effects. Specifically, the difference in binary reoffending rates between the treatment and comparison groups would need to be more than 10 percentage points for the impact evaluation to detect a statistically significant effect. The findings of any future impact evaluation using this design would therefore most likely be of indicative character.

Future evaluation of the alternative assessment pilots

It would be beneficial to carry out a full process study with pilot sites to address key research questions concerning implementation and delivery of the alternative assessment systems, as this was not possible due to pilot delays and Covid-19. Data collection could be planned to take place at a suitable point when youth justice services have resumed more 'normal' patterns of work post Covid-19, if possible, before the pilots come to an end.

A comprehensive process evaluation would help to understand views and experiences of the pilot and how staff, young people and their families perceive these contribute to outcomes in the logic model; for example, feelings of confidence among staff and improved wellbeing among young people. It would also ensure learning on all aspects of implementation, and delivery, including facilitators, barriers and perceived impact can be fully captured to feed into the ongoing development of assessment processes in the YJS.

Options for the impact evaluation are less straightforward. The findings from the feasibility study suggest that while a QED-design which matches similar young people in other local authorities would be a suitable design, it may not be possible to detect a statistically significant effect. This would limit the ability of the impact evaluation to ascertain whether the pilots achieved better outcomes than the previous AssetPlus assessment framework. It might however be possible to carry out a robust impact evaluation at a later date if the assessment systems were used beyond the pilot period as this would increase the number of participants that could be included in the study. These factors should be fully considered before a full impact study is commissioned in the future.

1. Overview of the project

Project context

AssetPlus is a standard, nation-wide assessment and intervention planning framework which allows for 1 record to follow a child or young person throughout their time in the Youth Justice System (YJS). It was established in 2014 to replace Asset (the previous framework) and aims to assist practitioners in making high quality assessments. By understanding young people's specific behaviours, risks, and strengths, AssetPlus allows for focused individualised intervention plans to support the child or young person whilst they engage with the YJS, with the aim of reducing risk and reoffending (see Baker, 2014 for further details).

There are several benefits to using AssetPlus that have been noted; for example, it considers a range of factors that are important in young peoples' lives, such as their speech, language and communication needs, lifestyle and behavioural development. It attempts to provide more nuanced approaches to assessment to suit each individual and improve data sharing between Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and the youth secure estate (Baker, 2014; Picken et al., 2019; Youth Justice Board, 2013, cited in Picken et al., 2019).

Challenges have also been highlighted with AssetPlus. For example, some practitioners have concerns about the amount of time that AssetPlus takes to complete, and others have experienced difficulties navigating the tool, which can cause issues with duplication of information (Picken et al., 2019).

Following a review of the YJS in England and Wales in 2016, concerns were highlighted with the way that assessments for children in the YJS were carried out (Taylor, 2016). The review called for a simplification of the assessment process, and for more autonomy to be given to local authorities to be able to use their own assessment systems. The review recommended that local authorities should create a 'one-child, one-plan system' that involves collaboration and shared ownership of young people's assessment plans between partners, for example health commissioners, the youth secure estate and YOTs.

Considering this, the Department for Education (DfE) invited their Partners in Practice⁵ (PiP) local authorities to put forward proposals for the development and trialling of alternative assessment processes to AssetPlus. Following assessment by a panel which

⁵ The Partners in Practice (PiP) programme was established in 2016 to create a genuine partnership between local and central government, bringing together the best practitioners and leaders in children's social care to improve the system. There are currently 13 PiPs covering 17 local authority areas.

included the YJB Chair and Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, 3 PiPs were selected to proceed; Lincolnshire, North Yorkshire, and Tri-borough.⁶ These areas were chosen as they demonstrated the necessary expertise to utilise their own assessment frameworks, have a proven track record in delivering innovative services, and were considered to have the ability to achieve ambitious outcomes for young people who offend, victims and communities.

Project aims and intended outcomes

The pilots were commissioned to test whether and how the use of different assessment and intervention planning models may lead to service improvements and better outcomes for children, young people and their families. The pilots build on the strengths-based framework⁷ delivered through AssetPlus and strive for more integration and streamlining across children's services and for better outcomes for young people in the YJS. Please see the logic model for the pilots in appendix 1 for specific intended outcomes for young people and their families, practitioners and the Youth Offending Service (YOS) more widely.

All 3 pilots introduce new assessment and planning tools, (for example assessment proformas) to support practice change. This is accompanied with a training programme to ensure these tools can be used as an effective framework for assessment, planning, relationship-building and other direct work. There are slight variations between the pilots in terms of how they aim to implement and deliver the new tools, which are explored in more detail in chapter 3.

Project activities

The 3 PiPs selected were due to start trialling the alternative assessments from January 2019, but there were delays in the early stages whilst assurances were sought that piloting the alternative assessments would not encourage local authorities to act in a way that is inconsistent with the rights of children and young people under existing statutory provisions and guidance. This meant that implementation was pushed back, and the pilots subsequently became operational at varying times between April – September 2019⁸, implementing the delivery plans outlined in their proposals to DfE. This included

⁶ Tri-borough is a project between 3 councils in London to combine service provision. The councils are Westminster City Council, Hammersmith and Fulham London Borough Council and the Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council.

⁷ Strengths-based practice is a social work practice theory that emphasises people's self-determination and strengths.

⁸ Pilot start dates were obtained in interviews with leads during the scoping phase of the evaluation.

for example, developing a new assessment framework, training staff and using the new tool with a cohort of young people.⁹ Due to Covid-19, pilot activities are likely to have changed since March 2020 as YOTs focus on delivering core activities.

Local authorities are required to submit quarterly case-level data extracts, and quarterly and annual summary level data to the Youth Justice Board information team. They also provide quarterly reports to DfE on the progress of their pilots as part of their PiP monitoring returns to DfE.

⁹ More detail on pilot activities is outlined in chapter 3.

2. Overview of the evaluation

Evaluation methods

When originally commissioned in August 2019, the evaluation of the alternative pilots to AssetPlus aimed to understand views and perceptions of implementation and delivery of the pilots and explore options for a robust impact evaluation.

The approach comprised of 4 strands of research activity which were intended to be carried out between September 2019 to March 2020, outlined in more detail below.

1. **Set-up and scoping phase:** Alongside working closely with key stakeholders and project leads to finalise the evaluation methodology, the purpose of the scoping phase was for the team to familiarise themselves with the project and further develop the pilots' theory of change models. This helped ensure research approaches and materials for the other 3 phases of the evaluation were sufficiently detailed and focussed.
2. **Feasibility study:** The purpose of the feasibility study was to explore how best to measure the impact of using an alternative assessment system to AssetPlus; and whether a quasi-experimental design (QED) that could provide evidence of impact at level 3 or higher on the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale¹⁰ would be feasible and suitable. It involved: a literature review looking at previous evaluations of interventions within the YJS, and factors associated with education, employment and training (EET) and reoffending in young people; 5 scoping interviews with the pilot leads; reviewing 2 anonymised datasets which contained demographic, offending history and other data on all young people who entered the youth justice system in a given period of time across all YOTs; and an online workshop with DfE and YJB to provide valuable insights on the recommended impact evaluation design for future research.
3. **Process evaluation:** The aim of the process evaluation was to understand experiences of implementation, delivery (including facilitators and barriers), and perceived impact, by collecting rich qualitative data from key participant groups. We aimed to carry out 48 interviews in total, involving the following participant groups:
 - senior stakeholders (3 interviews per site);
 - practitioners/support workers (3 interviews per site);
 - young people (6 interviews per site, and 4 observations of meetings with young people and support workers); and

¹⁰ The Maryland Scientific Methods Scale is a 5-point scale, that measures the robustness of research methods for impact evaluations. Impact evaluations that score at a level 3 on the scale include comparisons of outcomes and provide a counterfactual.

- families of young people involved in the pilots (4 interviews with parents/carers per site).

4. **Economic analysis:** This strand of the evaluation was intended to assess whether setting up and delivering alternative assessment pilots led to lower costs than AssetPlus by analysing information gathered from key stakeholders through a proforma (a copy of which is included at Appendix 4).

Further detail on methods across all strands of the evaluation is provided in the methodological appendix (2).

Changes to evaluation methods

Covid-19 had a significant impact on this evaluation. Following discussions in March 2020, a decision was taken by DfE to bring all fieldwork and primary data collection to an end. This was due to the feasibility of completing the work within the agreed timescale and so as not to place undue burden on the pilot areas. This meant that it was not possible to complete some data collection activities, and several changes to the evaluation design were introduced as a result, outlined below:

- We were unable to complete 42 planned interviews with stakeholders, staff, young people and parents for the process evaluation. The data presented for the process evaluation in this report therefore only covers one local authority in which we conducted 6 interviews with staff. To expand on the limited information gathered for the process evaluation, we offered key contacts across the 3 pilot sites the opportunity to share any final views and experiences of the pilot and relevant pilot documents via email. Feedback was received from 2 areas and was reviewed to feed into our understanding of pilot delivery and experiences across the 3 areas.
- We were not able to carry out the Value for Money (VFM) exercise for the economic analysis as we were unable to collect detailed information from all sites on the costs of the alternative assessments and AssetPlus. While some sites provided partial information, it was not enough to robustly explore spend and levels of resource in detail and we were also unable to compare with estimated running costs for AssetPlus. The data collection proforma for the VFM exercise has been included in appendix 4 to inform any future evaluation work.
- The literature review for the feasibility study was expanded to include studies which looked at the determinants of reoffending and participation in education, training and employment (EET) among young offenders. This was made possible after the scope of the process evaluation was narrowed because of Covid-19.
- We originally planned to invite the pilot leads to the online workshop alongside the representatives of DfE and YJB for the feasibility study. However, the timing of the

workshop and challenges with Covid-19 meant that it was no longer possible to include the pilot local authorities in this discussion.

Limitations of the evaluation

As mentioned above, we were unable to carry out 42 planned interviews for the process evaluation or collect the data necessary to undertake the economic analysis. This was due to Covid-19, which required the research team to stop all fieldwork activities from March 2020.

Due to the limited data gathered for the process evaluation, it has not been possible to fully explore implementation and delivery issues as originally intended. Instead, the write-up of the process evaluation in chapter 3 synthesises secondary data and information from pilot documents, written feedback from the sites and information collected during the workshops conducted as part of the scoping phase. Data from the 6 interviews that were conducted has been included where helpful and to provide additional detail and illustrative examples. However, as these were conducted in 1 local authority only, we have been careful about how we present this information as some of it will be disclosive to the area and individuals.

The main limitation of the feasibility study is related to the difficulties in predicting the final number of young people who will be assessed with an alternative assessment system by the end of the pilot activities. In particular, the extent to which Covid-19 will decrease the number of completed assessments is currently not clear. As the statistical power of the impact evaluation is directly related to the available sample size, uncertainty about the numbers made it more difficult to assess the strength of the recommended impact evaluation approach.

The information presented in this report builds capacity for future process and impact evaluations on the alternative to AssetPlus pilots. In Chapter 5 we have outlined our recommendations for future evaluation with a clear steer on which methods of data collection would be most suitable to fully explore impact and delivery issues.

3. Key findings

This chapter details information from all strands of the evaluation. The logic model for the pilots is presented first, describing how sites expect to improve outcomes for children and their families, practitioners and wider communities by using the new assessment systems. Key findings from the process evaluation are then discussed, setting out the aims and rationale for the pilots, implementation, delivery and perceived impacts. Finally, data collected and analysed for the feasibility study is presented. This begins with an overview of findings from the literature review and consideration of key data sets. Possible evaluation designs are then outlined alongside a detailed discussion of the recommended approach, which is to match young people across local authorities.

Programme theory and logic model development

This section outlines the logic model that was developed with stakeholders during the scoping stage of the evaluation.¹¹ The aim of this work was to understand how the pilots expected to improve outcomes for children and wider communities by using the new assessment systems. While some evidence has been gathered through the scoping work and process evaluation that can address certain outcomes detailed in the model, there are other outcomes which we have not collected data on for this evaluation. The combined logic model should therefore be used to inform any future evaluation of the pilots.¹²

Whilst we acknowledge that there are differences between the sites regarding the format of the new assessments, the workshops held with stakeholders identified very similar outcomes. The logic model therefore reflects a comprehensive depiction of the intended outcomes of the pilots across the 3 areas. Any future evaluation work that is carried out would benefit from further logic model development in each area, which would allow for the nuances of each new pilot assessment to be captured.

The NatCen research team worked with stakeholders across the 3 pilot sites to develop a combined logic model of the intended outcomes for the alternative pilots to AssetPlus.¹³ The process of developing the combined logic model included a document review of key programme materials (for example the pilot applications), a half-day workshop with each

¹¹ A logic model is a graphical representation of the programme theory that sets out the logical sequence of short- and medium-term outcomes that are required to produce the desired long-term outcome/s of a programme.

¹² The full logic model and detailed explanation of the outcome pathways is included at appendix 1.

¹³ The research team used an approach to logic model development based on the W.K Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide. W. K. Kellogg Foundation (2004). Using logic models to bring together planning, evaluation, and action: Logic model development guide. *Purdue University*.

pilot site and consolidation of workshop findings (full details on the methodology used to develop the logic model are included in appendix 1).

Logic model findings

The combined logic model specifies the desired long-term outcome of implementing the alternative pilots to AssetPlus as 'improved outcomes for children/young people and communities'. The long-term outcome of the pilots represents a series of more specific aims, which include for example, reducing the seriousness and frequency of offending, protecting children from harm and increased efficiencies in delivering services for young people and their families.

To support the long-term aim of improved outcomes for children/young people and communities, the logic model developed for the pilots sets out a sequence of short- and medium-term outcomes, identifying a process of change among key groups and systems. The outcomes are organised into 2 pathways as outlined below:

Outcomes at the practitioner and system level

Early intended outcomes for the practitioner and system pathway are focused on increased understanding and knowledge of the pilot, and improved skills among staff. Alongside this, it is expected that improvements to the provision of training for YOT workers will support them in delivering the new assessment tool.

Increased staff understanding of the rationale for the pilot and improved knowledge of, and skill in using, the alternative assessment framework is expected to translate into a series of improved service quality outcomes. These include for example, an increased sense of empowerment and confidence among staff who use the alternative assessment with young people. As staff are afforded more time to engage with young people and their families, and as they become competent at implementing the new assessment framework, it is expected that the quality and accuracy of assessments should improve. In the longer term it is hoped that more effective partnership working between the YJS and other local services will translate into a more collaborative and whole-system approach.

Outcomes at the child, young person, and family level

Early intended outcomes for young people and their families involve them having an increased role in the co-production of the assessment and intervention plans. For young people, the assumption is that their involvement in this part of the process will ensure their voice is clearly heard which should increase their sense of ownership and commitment to the plan.

When young people demonstrate increased engagement with the process of assessment and intervention planning, it is assumed that they will have more engagement with

support and other positive activities, for example, education and employment opportunities. It is further assumed that these sorts of activities will promote increased self-esteem, self-belief, and critical thinking skills in young people.

At the family level, the more collaborative relationship between YOT workers and families is expected to result in families feeling more supported. It is assumed that this will help them be better equipped to cope positively with adversity and support the young person with challenges they might face.

The full model and description of outcome pathways is included at appendix 1.

Process evaluation

This section provides an overview of the alternative pilots' implementation and delivery. It draws on analysis of data collated during the scoping phase of the research, including pilot sites' original bids and implementation documentation, as well as from data gathered by the research team during the scoping workshops, and the qualitative fieldwork conducted with 1 pilot site.

Aims and rationale of the alternative assessment pilots

The AssetPlus assessment has been criticised as unduly burdensome, inflexible, and unsuited for use with partners and service users because of its length and reliance on language and structures that are not aligned with those used outside the YJS (Taylor, 2016). The alternative assessment pilots were therefore developed in response to the view that the existing approach acted as a barrier to effective practice and needed to be replaced. Pilots aimed to do several things differently, which are described in more detail below and additional information on the pilot delivery models is provided later in this chapter:

- integrating the YOS with other Children's and Families services teams¹⁴ and statutory partnership approaches,
- reducing administrative burden to focus practitioner capacity on direct engagement with children and families, and
- using a more holistic, outcomes-focused assessment and working in a more collaborative, transparent way, to enhance understanding and support engagement.

¹⁴ Other services within Local Authorities' Children's Services and Family Services Directorates included, for example, Early Help, Prevention Service, Children's Social Care, No Wrong Door, Integrated Family Support Service, children's centres. Names and structures of teams differ between local authorities.

All 3 pilots were established with the intention of improving the experiences of and outcomes for young people and families engaging with the YOS to contribute to a reduction in the frequency and severity of reoffending.

Service integration, coherence and consistency

AssetPlus is specific to and used only by the YJS, which presented a barrier to effective joint working across relevant local authority teams and with statutory partners (Taylor, 2016). This view was also reflected in the interviews carried out for this study: AssetPlus was regarded as inefficient and contributing to 'over-assessment' and confusion for families engaged with multiple services.

'When they're within a range of systems [...] it would often be incredibly confusing for families in terms of different terminology, different ways of looking at risk, from a deficit perspective or a strength-based perspective, and therefore coming up with different and sometimes competing interventions.' (Senior stakeholder)

A key aim of all 3 pilots was to align the assessment more closely with those used by other teams within the wider Children's Services directorates (for example 'Signs of Safety'¹⁵), to reduce siloed working and facilitate more consistent service delivery to young people and families. For YOT teams and children's services teams more broadly, adoption of shared methods and language was intended to facilitate more streamlined collaboration and information-sharing between partners. This was intended to enhance the experiences of children and families by promoting greater consistency in how services were delivered, as well as opportunities for coordination between teams.

Scope and style of assessment

YOS staff and stakeholders described the previous AssetPlus system as a risk-based assessment model with a relatively narrow focus on the offending behaviour and risk presented by children to others. Practitioners described this approach as contrasting with evidence-based, systemic models, such as the 'Signs of Safety' assessment often used in Child Protection, which were perceived to be strengths-based, restorative, and supporting collaborative assessment with children and their families.

'AssetPlus isn't looking at wider resources. It's not looking at who else can help you. It's not looking about wider structural changes we can make in your life [...] The way it leads your thinking is to address

¹⁵ The Signs of Safety was developed in Australia in the 1990s. It is a strengths-based, safety-orientated approach to casework designed for use throughout the safeguarding process.

deficit, which has its value, but is no use to anyone unless you also try and build strengths and capacity.’ (YOT practitioner)

As such, the alternative assessment pilots intended to focus more on a systemic¹⁶ and strengths-based approach to include assessment of strengths and protective factors, as well as the particular needs of children and their families.¹⁷ This was intended to support a more rounded and holistic understanding and enhance engagement and ownership of the assessment and plans by young people and their families. Additionally, this broader focus on the whole family context could support earlier identification or prevention of offending by siblings.

Administrative burden

The extensive AssetPlus documentation required substantial desk-based work to complete and maintain. In the interviews, participants noted that the assessment was typically 100-160 pages in length but could extend to 250. Participants suggested it could take more than a day to complete the assessment form after information had been gathered (Picken et al, 2019) which limited practitioners’ capacity for direct contact with young people and their families.¹⁸ In pilots’ proposals and the interviews, staff and stakeholders described frustration at the perceived mismatch between this administrative burden and the usefulness of the document following its preparation. AssetPlus was perceived to be time-consuming to prepare and for managers to review, difficult for partners to contribute to, and unsuitable for sharing with children and families for reasons of length, language and complexity.

‘I particularly found Asset[Plus] very, very frustrating, and quite distressing at times, because I just thought [...] this is absolutely ridiculous. I'm literally doing this for the sake of having it on the system, because it's part of my job role. I don't see any meaning to it. I would prefer to be out there speaking to the young person right now!’ (YOT practitioner)¹⁹

¹⁶ Systemic practice focuses on practitioners working with families to understand problems in their social and relational context.

¹⁷ AssetPlus, as opposed to its predecessor Asset, is founded on a systemic and strengths-based approach. The pilots intended to implement this model further.

¹⁸ Further information about AssetPlus, including template documents, can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assetplus-assessment-and-planning-in-the-youth-justice-system>

¹⁹ In the qualitative data, practitioners sometimes did not distinguish between the previous Asset assessment system and AssetPlus which was introduced nationally in 2014. It is clear from detail included in the rest of this interview that the participant quoted here was referring to AssetPlus.

Introducing streamlined, integrated assessment and intervention planning documentation through the pilots was intended to significantly reduce practitioner time spent on maintenance and quality assurance of assessment paperwork and enable increased direct contact with young people and their families. Additional time for engagement was intended to facilitate more effective, trusted relationships between practitioners and service users, considered key to build resilience, self-esteem and attainment for the young people.

Implementation plans

Pilot models and tools were developed with input from strategic partners, senior management teams and practitioner staff across all 3 pilots. Pilot proposals and the qualitative data described iterative development processes in which these groups reviewed and contributed to the refinement of the assessment models and tools.

Governance

Accountability for the pilots sat with senior staff such as Directors of Children's Services, to ensure the right level of senior oversight of decisions and performance to support effective delivery. Key staff such as operational managers, systems analysts and clinical support leads also fed into project groups established to lead delivery of the pilot programmes.

Oversight of pilot development, implementation and delivery rested with strategic groups including, for example, the YJS Management Board and PiP Programme Boards, involving key partners in agencies such as local health, police, probation, and court services and the YJB.²⁰ Pilot sites took 2 approaches to governance structures feeding into this, which included:

- establishing new governance structures to ensure robust oversight and challenge to the project. For example, 1 established a multi-agency Pilot Steering Group, with a Practitioner Forum and Young People's Focus Groups feeding in and reporting to the YJS Management Board; and

²⁰ Management Boards are part of YOTs' mandatory statutory governance arrangements. Statutory partners (the local authority, police, probation and health) must be represented on the board, which provides strategic direction with the aim of preventing offending by children and young people (for more, see:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319291/youth-offending-partnerships-guidance.pdf.

Local authorities that are Partners in Practice receive funding from DfE to support the children's social care sector to develop excellence in social work practice.

- drawing on existing governance structures that were considered to ‘provide a solid foundation of support for the assessment pilot’, with the Programme Manager providing reports directly to groups such as the PiP Programme Board, Children’s Services Transformation Board, and YJS Management Board.

To facilitate outcome measurement, pilots’ implementation plans also included baseline data capture prior to pilots commencing, as well as at key review points during delivery, to enable before-and-after comparisons of data on performance to be made to understand pilots’ effects.

Design and development

The interviews highlighted that practitioners welcomed early communication of plans to develop alternative assessments. This was felt to support effective staff engagement, and practitioners welcomed opportunities to help refine prototype versions of the assessment tool prior to launch, where this was offered.

‘The people who are actually going to be writing the document, working with the families, sat and looked at the document and imagined how [...] it would work for us and the young people, and [...] made] some contributions to potentially different wording or different layout.’ (YOT practitioner)

Service user input had either already been sought or planned across the 3 areas from the start of pilot development. In Lincolnshire, a version of the assessment had been piloted for use by their Joint Diversionary Panel and feedback had been sought as part of this work (positive responses were reported in the pilot application, including in relation to the length, level of clarity, and focus on strengths and positive ‘next steps’).²¹ North Yorkshire and Tri-borough planned to gather baseline feedback on the existing approach and draft assessment tools at the start of their pilots. Mechanisms included through a new Young People’s Focus Group, as well as adapting their feedback survey to capture data on the new assessment tool from service users and families more broadly. Related to this, the research team planned to collect information from young people and families on their experiences of assessment and planning as part of this evaluation and recommend this as an important feature of any future evaluation of the pilots.

²¹ The Joint Diversionary Panel determines the outcome of non-indictable or lower-level youth cases where an admission of guilt is offered by the young person. It aims to ensure an informed and proportionate response to young people’s offending behaviour and seeks, wherever possible, to offer a restorative alternative to divert them away from the formal criminal justice system. Potential disposal outcomes from the panel include Youth Caution/Youth Conditional Caution, Youth Restorative Intervention, and decisions to charge the matter to the Youth Court (https://lincolnshirescb.proceduresonline.com/pdfs/reducing_criminalisation.pdf)

Training and development

All 3 pilots' implementation plans included preparatory training for staff, with ongoing support thereafter. Two sites provided more detailed information on the training approach as part of this evaluation, discussed below.

Formal training was delivered to practitioners and managers, to support direct delivery and supervision. Pilots' main training programmes differed in length and content:

- One approach was to discuss the new assessment as part of a broader training programme on the underlying systemic model used within wider children's services, focused on working with families to understand issues in a social context. This training lasted several days, covering areas such as self-reflexivity, the 'social graces' framework, tools such as genograms, and interviewing approaches.^{22,23}
- Another was to deliver a shorter training programme focused on using the new assessment rather than learning about the systemic model in detail. This was because it was assumed that practitioners already had baseline knowledge of applying the systemic model. In this instance, training on the assessment covered the rationale, context and practical application of the assessment tool. Participants compared this favourably to the extensive training required to familiarise with AssetPlus's complexity. This view may in part be due to the shorter and more streamlined nature of the pilot assessment frameworks.

The qualitative data suggested that practitioners welcomed opportunities to practice with the assessment tool using case study exercises. One reason for this was because moving to a shorter, more concise assessment required a 'cultural shift' in terms of synthesising and presenting information succinctly. Where this was not included in training, staff fed back that it would have been a welcome and beneficial addition to support a shared understanding of the assessment process in practice.

Tri-borough differed from the other sites in that support to embed systemic practice was provided by clinical practitioners (specialists in family therapy) embedded within social

²² The 'social graces' systemic framework, developed by John Burnham, sets out areas of difference and diversity including gender, gender identity, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, caste, education, ethnicity, economics, spirituality, sexuality, and sexual orientation. The framework supports practitioners to identify and take into consideration of aspects of identity that might shape children's, families' and their own experiences.

²³ Genograms are visual tools used as part of the 'Signs of Safety' assessment to map service users' social and personal relationships and understand how the child is being supported. They include information about both physical and emotional connections of family members with children.

work teams. Elsewhere, staff were offered shadowing opportunities and one-to-one managerial support to develop their practice.

Experiences of implementation

Views on the implementation process appeared mixed among participants, and 2 key challenges in early stages were identified. One was that practitioners did not always have a clear shared understanding of how to use early or prototype versions (including paper-based versions) of their new assessment tool. This might suggest that draft assessment tools could have been further developed before they were provided to staff to use, or that more detailed training would have been beneficial earlier on.

A second challenge related to a need to support staff through a 'cultural shift' in adapting to the new approach. This could be through, for example, building in additional time, guidance and support. While the alternative assessments were broadly welcomed, staff noted initial trepidation around the changes to recording of risk, including concern that the assessment might not capture everything needed. One view was that adapting to the more streamlined process would inevitably take time, which may be 1 reason why staged or iterative training models were well-received.

'You've had a particular way of dealing with a problem [...] 'This is how we expressed a problem in the assessment model; this is the terminology we use; these are the solutions that we ordinarily go to.' [...] We are dealing with risk [...] and people will understandably feel perhaps unsafe or wary when they have to let go of their familiar way of dealing with that.' (YOT practitioner)

Pilot models

Across the 3 local authorities, the pilot models were broadly similar. Eligibility criteria, key features and notable differences are highlighted below.

Eligibility

The 3 pilot models differed slightly in terms of which young people the alternative assessment would be used with, as outlined in the table below:

Local Authority area	Overview of model
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Tri-borough	Model limited to assessment of children sentenced directly to a Referral Order or subject to a Youth Conditional Caution. ²⁴
Lincolnshire	Assessment introduced alongside an ongoing Joint Diversionary Panel in place to manage all low-level offending via Youth Restorative Interventions. ²⁵ Assessment used in all out of court and statutory disposals in line with the memorandum of understanding (excluding those at risk of custody or transferring to another area). ²⁶
North Yorkshire	Assessment used for all children, regardless of length of engagement or offence type, except those in or entering custody, transferring to another local authority, or transferring to probation. Pragmatic exceptions made by managers where a young person was considered at high risk of reoffending and causing serious harm, in which instance they would be likely to be remanded into custody and require an AssetPlus assessment.

²⁴ Referral orders are statutory community-based orders in which the court refers the child to a youth offender panel, convened by volunteer members of the community and held at an informal venue, to agree a contract of work. There is a distinct focus on restorative justice. Compliance is regularly reviewed by the panel. Referral Orders are the community-based order most often used by the courts when dealing with 10 to 17-year olds, particularly those who are first time offenders and plead guilty.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/746365/referral-order-guidance-9-october-2018.pdf

A youth conditional caution is a caution with 1 or more conditions attached. When a young person is given a conditional caution for an offence, criminal proceedings for that offence are halted while the young person is given an opportunity to comply with the conditions. Where there is non-compliance without a reasonable justification, criminal proceedings may be commenced for the original offence.
(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/243443/9780108512179.pdf)

²⁵ Youth Restorative Interventions (YRIs) are an alternative to formal disposals such as cautions and prosecution and deal with crime committed by young people restoratively, without giving them a criminal record. Drawing on the principles of restorative justice, YRIs bring together victims and those young people responsible for a crime to discuss what has happened and agree a positive way forward. Their use is dependent upon the young person's acceptance of responsibility for any wrongdoing and their willingness to make amends (see <https://www.yjlc.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Youth-Out-of-Court-Disposals-Guide-for-Police-and-Youth-Offending-Services.pdf>)

²⁶ Lincolnshire reported that members of the senior management team had oversight of all assessments used when a young person presented a high risk of serious harm.

Views on eligibility varied across the pilots. One view was that risks could be managed as well as or more effectively through the new assessment than through AssetPlus. Others, however, felt that the pilot assessment would not be sufficiently robust to manage cases that were 'higher risk' than those involving referral orders and youth conditional cautions. Further investigation would be needed to understand reasons for this variation in views.

Overview of pilot models' key features

Several key features of the pilots were intended to improve the assessment system and are described below.

Systemic model: The pilot models took a holistic, systemic approach to assessment, in line with assessments carried out more widely in children's services. All sought to understand children's offending and risk to others alongside contextual factors. This included understanding underlying issues or needs and responding in a way that felt tailored, realistic, and meaningful for young people themselves. Tri-borough's proposal documentation also emphasised an explicit focus on working to reduce disproportionality in the criminal justice system²⁷, which the assessment sought to achieve using the 'social graces' framework to identify and respond to diversity more effectively.

Strengths and outcomes focus: All 3 pilot models were strengths-based and outcomes-focused, balancing management of risk with supporting development of self-esteem, resilience and capability. This model supported co-production of meaningful outcomes and actions which could be owned by the young person and their family to encourage investment and commitment.

Relational basis: Delivery relied on intensive work by YOT practitioners with young people and their families to support the development of trust and understanding. The models also utilised accessible tools and techniques (such as visual mapping through genograms) to support transparency and collaboration with children and their families. This was expected to enhance understanding, build relationships, and support investment and engagement in the planning process.

'You can literally sit in someone's house with three columns [...] pinned up on a piece of paper, and you can sit in front of the family and look at what's working, what isn't working, what needs to happen. They can invest in that and they can see you writing it. They can come up with solutions, so I think they're a lot more invested in it

²⁷ The Lammy Review, published in September 2017, identified racial disparities within the Criminal Justice System (CJS), arising from the point of arrest through to rehabilitation within custody and the community Lammy (2017).

[...]. It's a lot more open and transparent [...] they're being listened to and their voices are being heard.' (YOT practitioner)

Alignment with the 'Signs of Safety' approach: Utilising tools and language used by other services and partner agencies was intended to enhance consistency and coordination. It was hoped that this would increase efficiency across teams and reduce over-assessment of families engaging with multiple teams (including, for example, local authority colleagues in Early Help and Children's Social Care, and other statutory partners such as police, health, and probation services).

Assessing movement towards intended outcomes

As it was not possible to collect data from across the pilots and participant groups as originally intended, the study was not able to gather sufficient evidence to draw firm conclusions on the degree to which the pilot assessments met their intended early outcomes. Instead, this section provides a brief, exploratory overview of ways in which the emerging qualitative findings relate to some of the key stated aims of the pilot programmes.

Feedback from pilot staff suggested that streamlined assessment documentation had enabled some practitioners to spend more time directly engaging with young people and their families and enhanced the efficiency of casework and management. One view was that this also improved quality of delivery by reducing practitioners' stress and fatigue during the assessment process.

'I can do all the info gathering with a family in a couple of hours. We fill it in together, and then just all it is, in the office, is an hour's typing and it's in the bag. So I've sliced the admin time more than half, and [...] have more time to do what I came to work to do.' (YOS practitioner)

Practitioners highlighted 2 additional ways in which streamlining of the assessment was perceived to enhance delivery quality. First, it gave them time to devote to planning, including collating information from colleagues and ensuring intervention approaches could be tailored more specifically to individual children. Second, plans could be provided to children and families more quickly.

Practitioners felt that young people and families could be involved to a greater degree in the completion of their assessments and plans as a result of the more user-friendly model that sought to include their views and voices. While some described a longer process to ensure families understood and agreed with the assessment of risk factors in particular, they nonetheless welcomed this more transparent approach to engaging children and parents. Others reported that they felt the assessment was more accessible

to young people and families because of the clear, strengths-based and solutions-focused framework, and shorter, simple layout.

‘They tend to understand the layout really, really clearly, they understand the scoring tools really clearly [...] we're using language that they can understand, and [...] you can have better conversations about the concerns in the young person's life, because [...] we don't sound like we're over-judging or patronising any more. We sound like we're just building [a picture].’ (YOT practitioner)

However, the pilot assessments did not universally result in engaged and enthusiastic contact with children and families. For example, 1 view from staff was that some children did not read their assessment, and parents were not always willing or available to be involved in the assessment process.

Collaboration and consistency between teams and agencies was also discussed in the interviews. Participants noted that greater consistency across services, including for example social work and health, made collaborative work and information-sharing more manageable and efficient and had been well received, including by partners who did not themselves use the Signs of Safety approach but would recognise it from work with other teams.

‘we can share things with social work colleagues. So [...] if you've got a young person [...] who's open to the Youth Justice Service and has a social worker [...] everybody can work to the same Danger Statement. [...] We have a shared definition of our problem and a shared set of agreed goals [and] actions.’ (YOT practitioner)

Limitations and recommendations for pilot programmes

Some limitations and challenges were also identified by interviews with staff participants in relation to the pilots.

One view was that integration and collaboration with other local authority teams and statutory partners could only go so far, and that the social care system continued at times to feel fragmented for children and families. One reason was that youth justice, Early Help, Youth Services, and Social Care services retained different areas of focus, and would continue to produce separate plans for children and families. Moving towards a fully integrated model of assessment, in which services collaborate to form a single plan for a child and/or their family, was viewed as an ideal but distant outcome. Further, participants identified that key external partner agencies such as education, courts, and secure estate partners, also had different approaches, and felt it was unlikely that these

agencies would all adopt a similar strengths-based approach to assessment and intervention.

Practitioners suggested some potential improvements to their pilot tools and models:

- For the assessment proforma, 1 suggestion was that a chronology or timeline could be included to give an accessible overview of any adverse life experiences that might factor into children's offending.
- There were several suggestions around training (which appeared to have differed across the pilots). Practical exercises using real case studies as examples for practitioners to practice using their assessment tool were recommended where training had not incorporated these. Additionally, refresher training would be welcomed 3 to 4 months into use of the new tool.
- Finally, practitioners noted a need for ongoing support throughout implementation of the pilot programmes to embed learning and continually enhance the quality of decision-making. One example was support provided in Tri-borough by clinical practitioners with expertise in systemic ways of working.

Feasibility study

The feasibility study describes and assesses the different approaches that can be used to evaluate the impact of the alternative assessment pilots on young people in the 3 participating local authorities. An impact evaluation is designed to assess the difference that a programme has made – that is, the difference between outcomes for those who receive the intervention in comparison to those who do not. To do this, the evaluation must draw on a reliable counterfactual. In this case, the main challenge will be to estimate the outcomes that would be observed for pilot participants if they were assessed with AssetPlus (the current assessment system in place across all other local authorities). Drawing together findings from the literature review, scoping interviews and a review of relevant data sets, this feasibility section shows how various quasi-experimental evaluation approaches could be used to approximate the counterfactual, outlines the most feasible impact evaluation design and discusses the main limitations.

Literature review

This section outlines findings from the light-touch literature review. The first stage of the review looked at evaluations of interventions within the YJS, focusing on the features of any quasi-experimental designs (QED) used, and the limitations of and barriers to using these. The second stage reviewed literature on reoffending and EET attendance, aiming to identify factors that predict each (such as demographic and socio-economic characteristics, and features of the individual's offending history) to feed into the

suggested evaluation design. Appendix 3 includes a table with more details on the reviewed studies.

Evaluation designs in the Youth Justice System

The first stage of the literature review searched for evaluations of interventions within the YJS, with reoffending and/or EET attendance as their outcome of interest. We found ten studies of interventions with reoffending as the main outcome, while EET attendance was a secondary outcome in 3 of these. The studies included for consideration in the review evaluated interventions like mentoring programmes, mental health support and resettlement support. The review did not find impact evaluations of assessment systems, since previous research on assessment tools, (such as Asset²⁸) mainly concern their accuracy in predicting reoffending rather than the ability of the assessment process to reduce reoffending.²⁹

Two studies employed a quasi-experimental approach, namely matching³⁰, to construct a counterfactual, and are described below:

- Haines et al. (2012) evaluated the Youth Justice Liaison and Diversion Pilot Scheme. The pilots, running across 5 YOT sites, provided support for mental health, speech and developmental problems at an early stage of entry into the YJS. The impact evaluation used a matching design to assess the pilot scheme's impact on the frequency and severity of proven reoffending, with data drawn from Police National Computer (PNC) records. Intervention and comparison groups were matched at the YOT and individual level. Each intervention YOT site was first paired with a comparison YOT site, with a similar crime profile, socio-demographic and economic factors. Individuals in the treatment group were matched on static characteristics related to the likelihood of reoffending (age, gender, ethnicity and type of current offence) with individuals in the comparison group. The accuracy of the matching was limited by a lack of data on intervention and comparison group participants, in particular relating to offending history, type of current offence and arrest or caution/conviction dates.
- Phillips et al. (2012) evaluated the impact of resettlement support panels in 6 YOTs in Wales that aimed to facilitate a multi-agency approach to resettlement on reoffending (number and severity of offences). The evaluation compared outcomes of the treatment group separately in 6 areas with 'core' and 'extended'

²⁸ Asset is an assessment and intervention planning framework that existed prior to the introduction of AssetPlus.

²⁹ An impact evaluation of AssetPlus was underway, but unpublished at the time of writing.

³⁰ Matching is a quasi-experimental evaluation technique, where treated individuals are paired with similar untreated individuals, and their outcomes are compared to estimate the impact of the treatment.

comparison groups. The comparison groups were drawn from a cohort who received a custodial sentence a year before the intervention: a dummy intervention start date was defined 1 year prior to the actual intervention start date in each area. The core comparison group consisted of people with similar offence histories and characteristics as the intervention group, while an extended comparison group, included to boost the sample size, comprised of people similar in terms of gender, ethnicity and age but not offence histories (further detail on creating the comparison groups is absent from the report). Data on characteristics, offence histories and outcomes were drawn from YOT extracts. The findings are limited by low numbers of intervention participants and missing data.

These studies show that a matching approach has been used to carry out impact evaluations of interventions in the YJS. In these cases, the number and severity of proven reoffence were the main outcomes of interest, with outcome data drawn from YOT extracts or the Police National Computer (PNC) database. Cases were matched on demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) and offending history. A comparison group was drawn either from a previous cohort within the same YOT area or from other YOT areas, similar in characteristics linked with crime.

The matching studies were, however, limited in their ability to account for selection bias due to a lack of data on the characteristics of intervention and comparison group participants, which meant that differences in outcomes could not be confidently attributed to the interventions studied. The studies were also unable to provide sufficient power due to a small treatment group size. This meant that the studies could only pick up impacts of a large magnitude, and neither study found statistically significant impacts.

The remaining 7 studies either employed a non-experimental comparison³¹ or reported not being able to carry out an impact evaluation at all. The main barriers to using a QED were similar to those that affected the matching study designs described above. They included lack of good quality data and small sample sizes (due to a small treatment group). Additional barriers included other interventions taking place in the same area, which meant that the evaluation was not able to attribute effects to the intervention under consideration; inability to find a comparison group sufficiently similar to the intervention group; and lack of funds or incentive to compensate for cooperation of potential comparison areas that were not involved in the intervention (where such cooperation would have required time and resources in these areas). More information on these studies is included in appendix 3.

³¹ These included for example before-and-after comparisons of reoffending rates, or comparisons of the reoffending rates of the intervention group to national-level rates, to give indication of programme impact.

Determinants of reoffending and EET attendance

This stage of the review found 8 studies that identified factors that have previously been found to be associated with reoffending, and EET participation among young offenders. Three studies were quantitative, 4 employed mixed-method approaches, and 1 was an evidence review. Below we have detailed the determinants of EET and reoffending that emerged from the studies. Appendix 3 provides further detail on the reviewed studies.

Reoffending

Six studies focused on factors associated with reoffending among young offenders. The studies noted that demographic characteristics were important; 4 of these studies were UK-based and found several key factors. In relation to ethnicity, black young people were most likely to reoffend, followed by white young people, and finally young people from other ethnic minority groups (see Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2020). Regarding gender, the studies found that male youths were more likely to reoffend than female youths; 1 study identified a reoffending rate of 40.5% for males aged 10 to 17, compared to 27.4% for females aged 10 to 17 (MoJ, 2020).

Age was also found to be an important factor in 3 studies (see MoJ, 2020; Farrington et al., 2006; Cuervo & Villanueva, 2015), with 15 to 17-year olds most likely to reoffend compared to 10 to 14-year olds. Two longitudinal studies identified that those who offended from an early age tended to commit more offences over their lifetime (Farrington et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 2016).

One study provided evidence on criminal history factors, finding that features of the individual's criminal history were also found to be associated with reoffending (MoJ, 2020). If the index offence was classified as a public order offence, (for example, riot, violent disorder, and affray) this was associated with higher rates of reoffending (48.7%) compared to fraud (47.7%) and theft, (44.2%) for example. Finally, looking at reoffending by index disposal (the caution or type of sentence received for the index offence), offenders who received a custodial sentence for their first crime were more likely to reoffend than those who received cautions or other out of court disposals (MoJ, 2020).

A range of characteristics related to family composition and socio-economic status were also identified to be associated with reoffending among young people, as described below:

- Identified characteristics relating to **family background** included: poor family relationships, a convicted family member, being a young mother, poor child-rearing,

poor supervision, and disrupted family³² (MoJ, 2014; Farrington et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 2016; Mulder et al., 2010).

- Identified characteristics relating to **socio-economic factors** included: low social class, low family income, poor housing, large family size, financial problems, lack of employment, and unsuitable accommodation (MoJ, 2014; Farrington et al., 2006).

Finally, a range of factors related to attainment, behaviours and experiences were found to be associated with higher rates of reoffending. Attainment factors included low non-verbal IQ, low verbal IQ, and low junior school attainment (Farrington et al., 2006). Several behaviour traits and experiences were identified as being associated with higher rates of reoffending, this included: 'high daring'³³ of young people, lacking concentration, high impulsiveness, low popularity, high nervousness, 'troublesomeness'³⁴, antisocial personality, vulnerability³⁵, mental health problems, pro-criminal attitudes, substance misuse problems, low self-control, and experience of childhood abuse or time spent in care (Farrington et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 2016; Mulder et al., 2010; MoJ, 2014).

The review also identified 2 studies which were carried out in Europe; 1 with a sample of offenders in Spain, and another with a sample of offenders in the Netherlands (Cuervo and Villanueva, 2015; Mulder et al., 2010). Largely, the factors associated with reoffending identified in these studies were similar to those found in the UK-based papers. However, a number of additional factors were also identified. For example, Cuervo and Villanueva (2015) found that a failure in planning or managing leisure and recreation activities was associated with increased recidivism. In another study, Mulder et al. (2010) identified that axis-1 psychopathology³⁶ in young offenders was associated with reoffending.

EET attendance

Two UK-based studies identified factors associated with EET participation among young offenders (McMahon et al., 2006; O'Carroll, 2016). McMahon et al. (2006) measured EET participation using data from YOTs (including Asset data about young people's EET

³² In the Farrington et al. (2006) study, a disrupted family was defined as a family where parents were separated due to reasons other than death or hospitalisation, and where the children were age 10 or younger.

³³ High daring was defined as taking many risks (e.g. in traffic, climbing, exploring) (Farrington et al. (2006).

³⁴ 'Troublesomeness' was included within a category of disrupted child behaviour. This included dishonesty, and hyperactivity. (Farrington et al. (2006).

³⁵ Vulnerability was based on a low family income, large family size (5 children or more), a convicted parent, poor child rearing and low non-verbal IQ (90 or less). (Farrington et al. (2006).

³⁶ Axis-1 Psychopathology includes psychotic symptoms, offence following psychosis, depression, poor self-care, and anxiety.

backgrounds). O'Carroll (2016) measured EET by analysing Asset data on young offenders within 1 YOS in London.

Factors predicting low attendance in EET among young offenders included a detachment from education for reasons such as, limited or part-time alternative provision being available, and exclusion; low attainment in education, especially literacy and numeracy skills; the influence of the school, including poor school discipline and bullying, and a poor relationship with teachers; young offenders' experience of custody and local authority care (McMahon et al., 2006).

Other factors included parents' own lack of engagement with education, and gang involvement which can make it harder for young offenders to access education (O'Carroll, 2016). For example, it was suggested that the financial gain from gang involvement reduced young people's incentive to prioritise education. Additionally, O'Carroll noted that individual factors, such as special education needs (SEN) were sometimes unidentified which could cause challenges for the young offenders gaining qualifications due to them not getting the correct support for their needs.

Summary of literature review findings

The research team has reflected on findings from the review in formulating a suggested evaluation design (discussed below). The prior use of matching for YJS intervention evaluations supported our conclusion to propose a matching model. Results of the 2 matching studies also helped us contextualise power calculations (see section on 'power calculations' below). Finally, the second stage of the review on determinants of reoffending and EET attendance helped to identify the limitations of our suggested matching approach. A number of studies stressed the importance of family factors such as poor parenting as predictors of reoffending, alongside demographic characteristics and features of the individuals' offending history. Prior exclusions from EET emerged as the most important predictor of EET attendance. Some of these characteristics would not be included in the suggested matching design due to data availability issues which could make the impact estimates less reliable.

Considered impact evaluation designs

When sample sizes are sufficiently large, the most robust evaluation approach for establishing a causal effect of the programme is randomised controlled trial (RCT). In an RCT, individuals or units are randomly allocated to receive an intervention or to receive no intervention. Since random assignment is assumed to generate statistically equivalent groups, observed differences in outcomes can be attributed to the intervention. However, an RCT needs to be planned prior to the start of the intervention and therefore cannot be used for the impact evaluation of the AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots. Instead, this section assesses the feasibility of conducting a quasi-experiment – an empirical

study used to estimate the causal impact of an intervention without random assignment. Specifically, we consider 3 quasi-experimental approaches – regression discontinuity design, difference-in-differences and matching, described in more detail below.

Regression discontinuity design

According to The Maryland Scientific Methods Scale, the strongest quasi-experimental method is regression discontinuity design (RDD). RDD is usually used when selection into the programme is based on a continuous measure. Individuals with scores that are just below the quantitative threshold are assumed to be very similar to those that are just above the cut-off point. Therefore, individuals that have just narrowly missed out on the programme are considered a good comparison group for treated individuals. However, since the main criterion for selecting young offenders into the pilots is non-continuous (type of sentence), RDD is not considered a viable option for evaluating the impact of AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots.

Difference-in-differences

The difference-in-differences (DD) approach can be used to assess the impact of an intervention by comparing outcomes of 2 groups at 2 points in time – just prior to the intervention and after it has finished. The change in the difference in outcomes between the 2 groups is the estimate of the impact of the intervention. The positive impact would be observed if the post-intervention difference in outcomes is significantly more favourable to the treatment group than prior to the intervention. For the impact estimate to be robust, changes in the outcome over time must follow the same trend in both the intervention group and the control group (the common trends assumption).

The main difficulty of using DD for the evaluation of AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots lies in the type of treatment group and the key outcomes. Since a significant proportion of pilot participants come into the youth justice system for the first time, measuring pre-intervention reoffending for these young people would not be feasible. The main outcome – binary reoffending rate – can only be measured after the primary offence, sentence and assessment take place. For this reason, DD is not a suitable impact evaluation design for the purposes of this evaluation.

Matching young offenders across years

Another evaluation design would entail drawing a comparison group from earlier cohorts of young offenders in the 3 pilot sites. Pilot participants would need to be matched with similar offenders in earlier years (e.g. 2017-2018) according to the pilot eligibility criteria (type of sentence, whether at risk of going to custody or not) and other factors that may be related to reoffending (gender, age, offence type, offence history etc.). The goal would be to identify a group of young offenders who would have been eligible for the pilot support had it been available at the time. This group would serve as a counterfactual,

and the impact would be estimated by comparing the average outcomes for the treatment and comparison groups.

While this matching design could be carried out for the impact evaluation of AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots, it has some important drawbacks. The main weakness of this approach is that it does not control for time-varying factors which might have a significant effect on the outcomes of interest. For example, various local authority or national level developments or changes over time may affect reoffending figures. Furthermore, it is very likely that earlier cohorts of offenders would include some young people who would later become pilot participants. Unique offenders could not be matched across years, resulting in reduced sample sizes. Due to these reasons, we do not recommend using this evaluation design for the impact evaluation of AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots.

Recommended design

In consideration of the data collected for the feasibility study, we recommend that the most appropriate way of evaluating the impact of alternative assessment pilots is to match young people across local authorities. According to the proposed impact evaluation design, the young people assessed with alternative assessment systems in the 3 pilot authorities would be matched with similar young people in comparable non-pilot authorities. The latter group of young people would form a comparison group, with their outcomes serving as a counterfactual. This section provides a detailed description of the recommended impact evaluation design and discusses its main strengths and limitations.

Outcomes and matching design

One of the key steps in developing an impact evaluation design is selecting a set of clearly measurable outcomes. The main criterion for choosing the outcome measures in this instance was their ability to reflect the aims and intended outcomes of the 3 pilots. To identify the most suitable outcome measures, we were guided by findings from the literature review alongside key pilot documentation, including the pilot bids and data from interviews with the pilot leads. Reoffending rate emerged as the key outcome measure in the interviews with the pilot local authorities and it was hoped that that there would also be a decrease in the frequency and seriousness of reoffending. The other outcome measure that was raised both in pilot application documents and the interviews was participation in EET. Therefore, we suggest using the following outcome measures for the impact evaluation of alternative assessment pilots:

- The binary reoffending rate (proportion of young offenders who reoffend);

- The frequency rate of reoffending (the average number of reoffences per young person who reoffended);
- The severity of reoffending (a measure based on the type of offences)³⁷; and,
- Participation in EET (proportion of young offenders engaging in at least 25 hours of EET per week).

To ensure consistency with previous evaluations, we suggest using the accepted definition of proven reoffending for outcome measurement. According to MoJ, a proven reoffence is defined as any offence committed in a 1-year follow-up period that resulted in a court conviction, caution, reprimand or warning in the 1-year follow-up or a further 6-month waiting period (to allow time for cases to progress through the courts) (MoJ, 2016). The start point from when proven reoffences are measured is defined as date of prison release (not relevant for the purposes of this evaluation), the date of court conviction for non-custodial sentences, or the date of receipt for a caution, reprimand or final warning. The impact evaluation would therefore seek to collect reoffending data on young people within 18 months from the date of the sentence that led to the assessment.³⁸ In line with most impact evaluations in the criminal justice field, we suggest using PNC data for reoffending measurement.

Data on young offenders' participation in EET are held by YJB. All YOTs have an obligation to report young people's education status at the end of the intervention programme. The key indicator reported by YOTs to YJB is the number of EET hours per week. This data could be used to explore whether alternative assessment models resulted in higher participation in EET for pilot participants, compared to the counterfactual scenario. However, the review of 2019 YJB case-level data revealed a significant amount of missing data on young people's participation in EET. The gaps in available data present a considerable risk to its potential use as an outcome measure. The final decision on whether YJB's EET data can be used as an outcome measure should be taken after a careful inspection of the missing data among the pilot participants and the matched comparison group.

Our recommended evaluation design would involve matching the young people assessed with alternative assessment systems in the 3 pilot local authorities (the treatment group)

³⁷ To obtain a measure of reoffending, the PNC data on types of offences will need to be converted to 1 of the existing offending severity scales. One option could be Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Youth Gravity Matrix which provides offences with a score of 1, 2, 3 or 4 depending on their seriousness.

³⁸ The use of conventional 18-month re-offending period would enable a comparison of the impact estimates of AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots with those identified in earlier studies. A longer tracking period does not seem necessary given that a significant proportion of young offenders re-offend within 18 months. From April 2017 to March 2018, 38.4% of young offenders reoffended within the conventional 18-month period (YJB/MoJ, 2020).

with similar young people in non-pilot local authorities (the comparison group). According to this evaluation design, the treatment group would be formed of all those young people who were assessed with alternative assessment models at any point during the pilot. This would therefore exclude young offenders who were at risk of going to custody as they continued to be assessed with AssetPlus. The different duration of the pilots across the 3 participating local authorities will need to be taken into account. Pilot activities started considerably earlier in North Yorkshire (April 2019) than in Tri-borough or Lincolnshire (September 2019), potentially resulting in a higher number of pilot participants in North Yorkshire than in the other 2 local authorities.

A comparison group will be identified using a matching procedure. Matching is carried out to correct for selection bias – the error made when impacts are estimated as simple differences in outcomes of the treated and non-treated, when there are relevant pre-existing differences between the 2 groups. Matching aims to eliminate these relevant differences by constructing a comparison group that is similar to the treated group in characteristics associated with selection into the alternative assessment and with the outcomes we intend to measure.

The scoping interviews revealed that the most suitable data source of matching characteristics would be YJB mandatory case-level data. The dataset contains demographic, offending history and other data on all young people who entered the youth justice system in a given period of time across all YOTs. Having reviewed the anonymised YJB dataset covering the period from January to December 2019, we identified the following variables that could be used for matching:

- Age at sentence
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Offence type and seriousness
- Previous cautions and orders
- Sentence type
- Sentence date.

Additionally, matching procedure would greatly benefit from the baseline data on EET status. While this variable is included in the YJB dataset, we have identified a high proportion of implausible values (indicating more than 40 hours of EET hours per week). The research team is therefore not confident that the data quality is high enough for this characteristic to be included in the matching model.

As all these variables are expected to affect the main outcomes of interest (reoffending and participation in EET), matching on them would eliminate some of the key pre-existing

differences between the treatment and comparison groups. In addition, matching on the sentence type would ensure that young people in the matched comparison group would have been eligible for alternative assessment pilots. This is because alternative assessment systems were not used for young people who were at risk of going to custody. Meanwhile, young offenders who were at risk of going to custody were assessed with AssetPlus.

YOT-level features may also influence reoffending and EET attendance. For instance, the higher the YOT's reoffending rate, the more likely it is that a young offender from that YOT will reoffend. This is because a high YOT-level reoffending rate indicates the presence of local contextual factors, (for example, less effective support systems, higher youth unemployment rates etc.) that make reoffending more likely in certain areas. To take into account the YOT-level differences, we suggest including aggregate measures of reoffending rate, frequency and average reoffending seriousness (also available through YJB data) into the matching model. In practice, this would mean that young people who come from similar YOTs will have a much larger probability of being selected into the matched comparison group. In addition, Local authority-level socioeconomic factors could be included in the matching design.

Power calculations

Statistical power determines the effect size that the evaluation is able to detect. The parameters that feed into the calculation of the minimum detectable effect size include sample size, incidence of the outcome in the control group and significance level. The following paragraphs review each of these parameters, explaining the key assumptions informing the power calculations.

Sample size is determined by the number of cases that go through the alternative assessment in the 3 pilot sites. Initial estimates suggested that approximately 300 young people would go through the alternative assessment in the course of the pilot.³⁹ However, as Covid-19 is likely to affect the number of cases going through the alternative assessment across the sites (for example, the number of completed assessments could be smaller than anticipated due to social distancing measures), we have additionally produced power calculations for 3 other scenarios (200, 250 and 350 pilot participants).

³⁹ This estimation was based on interviews with the pilot leads. In November 2019, there were 70 young people assessed with an alternative system in North Yorkshire, and 32 in Lincolnshire. Tri-borough were planning to have 100 young people assessed with an alternative system in the course of the pilot period. On the basis of these preliminary figures, we assumed that by the expected pilot end date of September 2020 North Yorkshire would have 140 pilot participants; Lincolnshire, 60; and Tri-borough, 100. However, the Covid-19 contingency introduced further uncertainties to these estimates. While pilot end dates were moved to March 2021, potentially increasing the number of pilot participants across the 3 pilot LAs, social distancing rules may have reduced the number of completed assessments. In the absence of more specific information on which the revised assumptions could be built, the decision was made to use the original estimation.

In all scenarios, numbers of young people going through the alternative assessment in individual sites are too low to carry out site-specific evaluations and the treatment group would therefore pool the alternative assessment participants across the 3 sites⁴⁰. In our power calculation we assume a sufficiently large pool of comparison group participants to be able to find close matches for each treatment group participant. The treatment and comparison groups are therefore assumed to be of equal size.⁴¹

Previous research on the young offender population has been used as the basis for estimates of incidence of these outcomes in the comparison group. According to the most recent youth justice statistics data bulletin, 38% of young offenders reoffend, with an average number of reoffences of 4.05 per young person (YJB/MoJ 2020). YJB (2006) estimates that only 45% of young offenders received at least 25 hours of EET per week in 2005. It should be noted that these are estimates for all young offenders, including also those at risk of going to custody, who would be excluded from the comparison group in the evaluation. The power calculations for crime severity score were not undertaken due to the absence of reliable data on the likely average outcome in comparison group.

Power calculations were performed in Stata 16 SE using the 'power' command, and assuming a significance level of 0.05 and a power of 0.80. The table below shows the sizes of effects of each outcome that the evaluation could be powered to detect if the assumptions hold true. For instance, with 300 young people going through the pilot assessment, we would be able to detect a difference in the reoffending rate of 10.71 or more percentage points between the pilot and comparison groups. With 250 pilot participants, we would be able to detect a difference in reoffending of 11.68 percentage points or more.

Table 1. Minimum detectable effects in percentage points

Outcome (measure)	Minimum detectable effect size			
	200 pilot participants	250 pilot participants	300 pilot participants	350 pilot participants
Reoffending rate	12.98 percentage points	11.68 percentage points	10.71 percentage points	9.94 percentage points

⁴⁰ We see this as a limitation of the impact evaluation because each pilot applies a different assessment system, potentially leading to different effect sizes.

⁴¹ The sample size for the frequency of reoffending outcome is lower, as it only includes those individuals who reoffend.

(Proportion of young offenders who reoffend)				
Frequency of reoffending (Average number of reoffences per reoffender)	0.46 reoffences	0.41 reoffences	0.37 reoffences	0.34 reoffences
EET attendance (Proportion receiving at least 25 hrs/week)	13.96 percentage points	12.50 percentage points	11.41 percentage points	10.57 percentage points

The alternative assessment would therefore have to have a relatively large impact on reoffending and EET attendance compared to the AssetPlus assessment for the evaluation to confidently be able to report an impact and attribute it to alternative assessment systems. This should be considered in the context of previous quasi-experimental impact evaluations included in the literature review, which did not find statistically significant differences in reoffending outcomes between treatment and comparison groups (Haines et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2012). Therefore, the power calculations suggest that the findings of the impact evaluation of alternative assessment pilots would most likely be of indicative character.

Evaluation timeline

The preliminary impact evaluation timeline presented here is based on a set of assumptions and is subject to review. First, it assumes that the pilot was launched in April 2019 (based on scoping interviews with pilot leads). Both Tri-borough and Lincolnshire launched their pilot activities in September 2019. Second, it is presumed that the pilots will end in March 2021 and any assessments taking place after that date will not be included in the impact evaluation. Therefore, the timeline assumes that the last young person will be assessed as part of AssetPlus alternative assessment pilots in March 2021 – much later than originally planned. The pilots were extended until March 2021 in response to the disruption caused by Covid-19.

Another assumption used while preparing the evaluation timeline concerns PNC data sharing. PNC data are never shared prior to being published as part of national statistics. This results in reoffending data being released with a lag of approximately 6 months. The

release timelines are expected to be even longer given that PNC data will need to be merged with YJB data on pre-treatment characteristics and participation in EET. Considering the 18-month period for tracking reoffending as well as the 6-month PNC reporting lag, it is unlikely that the outcome data could be made available to the evaluators before the end of 2022. The impact evaluation would then take place in the first part of 2023, with the final report submitted in the summer. The full evaluation timeline is provided below.

Data sharing and protection considerations

Effective data sharing will be the key condition for delivering the impact evaluation under the agreed timelines. The data sharing process should be built on close cooperation between the evaluators, the pilot YOTs, YJB and PNC data owners. To avoid significant delays, it will be important to sign data sharing agreements with YJB and PNC as early as possible. While the detailed data sharing procedure would be agreed with all concerned parties before the evaluation begins, the following phases could be considered as a possible option.

- 1) The 3 pilot YOTs send the identifiers of all young people who were assessed with an alternative assessment system during the pilot period to YJB. The pilot sites also indicate the date of the sentence leading to that assessment, as well as the actual assessment date. For those pilot participants who had more than 1 sentence during the pilot period and were assessed with an alternative assessment system more than once, only the dates of the first sentence and the first assessment would need to be provided to YJB;
- 2) YJB provides the case-level data to be used for matching (as identified in section 1.4.1) as well as the data on EET status after the intervention for: a) all pilot participants identified by the 3 pilot YOTs (at the initial sentence/assessment date); b) all young people in non-pilot local authorities who came into the youth justice system and were assessed with AssetPlus during the pilot period (potentially excluding those who were at risk of going to custody);
- 3) The YJB dataset would then need to be linked with PNC reoffending data. For each young person in YJB's dataset, the PNC data owner would add reoffending data covering the 12-month follow-up period and a 6-month waiting period after the initial sentence date.

An important aspect of the impact evaluation will be processing the quantitative data securely and ensuring that appropriate levels of data protection are in place to comply with the EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act 2018. Drawing on our experience of impact evaluations, we would recommend using public task as the legal basis for data processing, with the commissioner acting as data controller and the evaluators as data processors. To maximise the protection of research participants' personal data, only fully anonymised data should be shared with the evaluators.

Strengths, limitations and risks

The proposed evaluation design has some clear benefits that make it superior to the approaches described in section 1.3. First, if data on all young offenders in non-pilot local authorities are used, the population from which a comparison group would be drawn is

expected to be large. This, along with the availability of rich pre-treatment data offered by the YJB case-level data extracts, increases the chances of a successful matching procedure. If a highly similar untreated young person (both in terms of individual and YOT-level characteristics) can be identified for each pilot participant, the evaluation would be well-placed to produce reliable impact estimates. Moreover, matching treatment and control individuals that were assessed at around the same time will ensure that the impact estimates are not confounded by historical trends and developments (such as changes in policies etc).

The key limitation of any matching design is that individuals or units are always matched on observable characteristics only. While there might be important unobservable characteristics that have a significant effect on the outcomes of interest (for example, motivation), these are not accounted for in the matching procedure. The failure to ensure the similarity between treatment and control groups according to unobservable characteristics might introduce bias to the impact estimates. Our suggested evaluation design is liable to this limitation as certain important characteristics are likely to be missed (for example family situation, which was highlighted as an important factor in the literature review). However, we believe that the available YJB data will be sufficient for constructing a solid counterfactual.

Another limitation of the proposed evaluation design is related to the low sample size. As shown in the section on power calculations, a relatively low expected number of pilot participants means that the impact evaluation will not have enough statistical power to detect small effects. In other words, with the available sample size the evaluators will only be able to reject the null hypothesis (the hypothesis that says that there was no impact) if the observed effects are relatively large. Furthermore, it is likely that the number of pilot participants will be even smaller than expected if individual assessments do not take place as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. The low sample size will also make it unfeasible to evaluate the impact of each 3 pilots separately – something that would be highly desirable given the different assessment systems used across the 3 pilot local authorities.

The main risk of the proposed impact evaluation approach is that the research activities may be conducted later than planned due to the possible delays in data sharing. In particular, negotiating PNC data sharing can be a difficult and lengthy process. The need to link PNC data with YJB datasets is likely to increase the amount of time needed to obtain the data even further. To avoid significant delays, it would be important to submit the application for PNC data extraction as soon as possible and start the discussions on the technical aspects of data transfer and information security without delay. The discussions between YJB, PNC and the evaluators around the process of data linkage should begin as soon as is feasible.

This feasibility study suggests that an impact evaluation of the alternative assessment pilots would not have enough statistical power to detect small effects. Therefore, the findings of an impact evaluation would most likely be of tentative character if. However, if the alternative assessment systems continued to be used after the planned end of the pilots, (March 2021) a more robust impact evaluation could be carried out later, after a larger number of young people had been assessed with alternative assessment systems. An overview of our recommended evaluation design, strengths and limitations is included in the box below.

Recommended evaluation design: matching young people assessed with alternative assessment systems in the 3 pilot local authorities (the treatment group) with similar young people in non-pilot local authorities (the comparison group).

Key strengths: 1) large pool of comparison young people; 2) the availability of rich pre-treatment data offered by the YJB case-level data extracts.

Key limitations: 1) certain important characteristics are likely to be missed in the matching model; 2) a relatively low expected number of pilot participants means that the impact evaluation will not have enough statistical power to detect small effects; 3) low sample size will also make it unfeasible to evaluate the impact of each 3 pilots separately.

Recommendation: the suggested impact evaluation design could be used for: 1) generating early evidence on the effectiveness of the pilots in improving outcomes for young people (with the impact estimates unlikely to be statistically significant due to small sample sizes); 2) running a robust impact analysis to explore the effects of alternative assessment models at a later date if the pilot assessment systems were used beyond the pilot period. This would increase the number of pilot participants to include in the study.

4. Summary of key findings on 7 practice features and 7 outcomes

The Children's Social Care Innovation Programme Round 1 Final Evaluation Report (2017), presents evidence from the first round of the Innovation Programme and led DfE to identify 7 features of practice and 7 outcomes to explore further in subsequent rounds.⁴²

As outlined in the methods section in chapter 2, it was not possible to complete data collection with the 3 pilot sites. It is therefore not clear whether the practice features identified above are inherent in the models that pilots are operating and what, if any, impact this has had on young people, their families, the YJS and wider communities. Though it is not possible to definitively assess the extent to which these features and outcomes have been achieved, we can draw some speculative conclusions about the intentions of the pilots, outlined below. Further work will be needed to unpack these in any future evaluations of the alternatives to AssetPlus pilots.

Features of good practice

Strengths-based practice frameworks and systemic theoretical models

All 3 pilot areas aim to deliver strengths-based assessments drawing on the 'Signs of Safety' model which is a systemic approach. The models focus not only on the young person's issues, but on their goals and strengths to build capacity and resilience and all seek to look beyond children's offending to understand context and underlying factors.

Multi-disciplinary skill sets and group case discussion

A key stated aim of all the pilots is to facilitate collaboration with wider Children's Services and partners, (including Early Help, Children's Social Care, and other partners such as police, health and probation) and broker appropriate support around the young person and the family with other agencies where necessary. The pilot assessment approaches should facilitate greater integration through embedding a common practice model and language. When services collaborate using this shared model information can be more effectively shared to the benefit of the young person and their family.

Family focus

⁴² Sebba, J., Luke, N., McNeish, D., and Rees, A. (2017) *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: Final evaluation report*, Department for Education, available [here](#).

The pilot models in all 3 areas have a strong emphasis on working with the family to engage them in the process of the assessment and subsequent support, encouraging young people to take responsibility for and ownership of their plans. This is facilitated by: a shorter assessment document which uses clearer, more accessible language and can be completed as a collaborative exercise; alignment of the model with other services which reduces burden on families in terms of not having to repeat themselves; and, the strengths-based approach which pilots hoped would be viewed by young people and their families as more supportive and engaging.

High intensity and consistency of practitioner

There is an emphasis on increasing positive social interaction between YOT workers and young people and their families. This is intended to be facilitated through reducing desk-based work to complete assessments, freeing practitioners up to work directly with young people. The focus is on relational work, building trusting relationships and understanding to support engagement and positive activity.

Skilled direct work

Key outcomes in the logic model are that YOT workers should have the necessary understanding, training and skills to deliver the assessment process which is expected to guide effective onward support pathways for young people. By delivering the pilot assessments, practitioners should have a better understanding of a young persons' needs and be able to either provide direct support in line with those needs or broker appropriate support from other local services.

Outcomes

We cannot with any certainty assess whether the alternative pilots to AssetPlus have impacted on the outcomes of interest with the data collected for this study. However, as summarised in chapter 3 and presented in the logic model at appendix 1, it was hoped that delivering the pilots would result in a range of short, medium and long-term outcomes, for children, their families and the services more broadly, as summarised below:

- The main intended impact of delivering the alternative pilots is to 'improve outcomes for children, young people and their families', which touches on a number of common outcomes identified in the first round of innovation programme funded evaluations. When articulating this, stakeholders spoke of reducing risks and creating positive opportunities.
- A number of the system and practitioner pathway outcomes also align. For example, it is hoped that practitioners will feel more confident, empowered and

supported to deliver the assessment process, which is likely to have an impact on the wellbeing and resilience of the workforce.

- Finally, the aim for local authorities to achieve better value for money by delivering their pilot assessment systems (in comparison to AssetPlus) was reported across the 3 areas in their specification documents. As outlined in the methods section of chapter 2, we attempted to collect data that would enable us to assess the cost of delivering the pilots but were unable to obtain sufficiently comprehensive information from all 3 sites. The hypothesis articulated in documents however, and reflected in the qualitative findings, was that the pilots were expected to deliver better value for money by reducing the amount of unnecessary time and bureaucracy spent on traditional AssetPlus assessments, allowing for more time and resource to be spent on understanding the young persons' needs and facilitating appropriate support.

5. Lessons and implications

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on this evaluation, including the ability to collect data to comprehensively address all research questions for the process evaluation. Unfortunately, because of this, it is not possible to highlight lessons relating to improving outcomes, practice and systems as intended. In this section, we have instead summarised promising features and aspects of the pilots which were intended to positively impact on outcomes of interest.

We have also summarised key findings from the feasibility study. This includes an overview of the proposed approach, and thoughts on how an impact evaluation could be carried out in the future, considering important limitations.

Process evaluation indicative findings and lessons

All 3 pilots were established with the intention of improving the experiences of and outcomes for young people and families engaging with the YOS to help reduce the frequency and severity of reoffending among this group. The pilots aimed to achieve this through:

- **Adopting a systemic focus** which assesses the young person in context, aligning actions and intended outcomes with what is meaningful to them and their families;
- **Assessment and consideration of strengths**, rather than only focusing on the young persons' offending behaviour and factors that contributed to this; an approach which is intended to support positive growth among those the Youth Offending Services work with;
- **Enhanced collaboration with the sector and locally**. The pilots planned to align their assessment processes more closely with other local services to facilitate more joined-up and accessible services for young people and families; and
- **A relational approach** which allows time for youth services to build trust with the young people and families they work with. Including family members should support young people to actively engage in the assessment and support and to take advantage of work, learning and other social activities and opportunities that might follow.

It is not possible to comment with any certainty on the extent to which the local authorities had achieved success in delivering the pilot assessment frameworks and associated changes to service quality and practices. However, the primary data indicated that there were some positive signs in key areas. For example:

- Pilot staff suggested that the streamlined assessment documentation had enabled practitioners to spend more time directly engaging with young people and their families to develop support plans that they could benefit from (liaising with other local services where appropriate).
- Indications that the pilots had helped improve collaboration and consistency across local services. As a result, information sharing had become more manageable and efficient, which had been well received by local partners.
- Staff felt that young people and families had been involved to a greater degree in completing their assessments (in comparison to the previous AssetPlus assessment). Overall, the pilot assessments were felt to be more accessible to young people and families because of the clear, strengths- and solutions-based framework, and shorter, simple layout.

A number of limitations were also highlighted, giving early indications of where pilots and the sector more widely may wish to focus in the future. These included:

- Participants acknowledged systemic and significant challenges in moving towards a fully integrated model of assessment, in which services collaborate to form a single plan for a child and/or their family. Bringing on board partners with very different ways of working, (for example, Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS)) was thought to be beyond the remit of the pilot.
- There were several suggestions around improving training (which appeared to have differed across the pilots). Practical exercises using real case studies as examples were recommended and refresher training would be welcomed 3-4 months into use of the new tool to ensure staff have the skills and confidence to use it effectively.

Feasibility study key findings and lessons

The literature review conducted as part of the feasibility study showed that robust QED designs were rarely used in the evaluations of youth justice interventions. The main barriers to using these impact evaluation methods include lack of good quality data and small sample sizes. The 2 QED studies identified in the literature review were also inhibited by data availability issues and small treatment groups – limitations that weakened the reliability of the reported findings. Both QED studies used matching approaches to identify a comparison group of similar offenders.

Interviews with the pilot leads helped to identify the key intended outcomes of the alternative assessment pilots for young people – re-offending (binary and frequency rates), severity of offending and participation in EET. The most feasible approach to assessing the effectiveness of the pilots in improving these outcomes would involve

matching the young people assessed with alternative assessment systems in the 3 pilot local authorities (the treatment group) with similar young people in non-pilot local authorities (the comparison group). The review of available datasets revealed that the YJB data on young people in the youth justice system can remove some of the data limitations faced by earlier studies. The YJB case-level data extracts offer good-quality data on the key determinants of re-offending and participation in EET, including age at sentence, gender, ethnicity, offence seriousness, previous cautions and orders, sentence type and date.

The suggested evaluation approach has a few important limitations and would most likely be of indicative character if carried out as indicated. One of the main reasons for this relates to the relatively low expected number of pilot participants which means that the impact evaluation would only be able to detect large effects. Specifically, the difference in binary reoffending rates between the treatment and comparison groups would need to be more than 10 percentage points for the impact evaluation to detect a statistically significant effect.⁴³

In addition, the low sample size will also make it unfeasible to evaluate the impact of each 3 pilots separately – something that would be highly desirable given the different assessment systems used across the 3 pilot local authorities.

Future evaluation

In summary, findings presented in this chapter indicate that it would be beneficial to carry out a full process evaluation with pilot sites to address key research questions concerning implementation and delivery of the alternative assessment systems. This is important to:

- understand people's views and experiences of the pilot and how they perceive these contribute to outcomes in the logic model; for example, feelings of confidence among staff and improved wellbeing among young people; and
- ensure learning on all aspects of implementation, and delivery, including facilitators, barriers and perceived impact can be properly captured.

A full process evaluation could review and utilise resources developed for this study, including for example topic guides, proformas and recruitment materials (included in appendix 4). Data collection could be planned to take place at a suitable point when youth justice services have resumed more 'normal' patterns of work post Covid-19, if

⁴³ Previous studies and the workshop with DfE and YJB indicate that alternative assessment systems are unlikely to have such a large effect on reoffending.

possible, before the pilots come to an end. This would ensure that the views of key groups and beneficiaries (including young people themselves) can feed into the ongoing development of assessment processes in the YJS.

The findings from the feasibility study suggest that while a QED-design which matches similar young people in other local authorities would be suitable, there are several important limitations, (for example, a lower than expected number of pilot participants) which would mean that the findings of an impact evaluation would most likely be of tentative character. It might however be possible to carry out a robust impact evaluation at a later date if the assessment systems were used beyond the pilot period as this would increase the number of participants that could be included in the study. These factors should be fully considered before a full impact study is commissioned in the future.

Appendix 1: Programme theory and logic model development

This appendix provides more detail on the logic model that was developed with stakeholders during the scoping stage of the evaluation (included at the end of this appendix). The aim of this work was to understand how the pilots expected to improve outcomes for children and wider communities by using the assessment systems.

A logic model is a graphical representation of the programme theory that sets out the logical sequence of short- and medium-term outcomes that are required to produce the desired long-term outcome/s of a programme. The NatCen research team worked with stakeholders across the 3 pilot sites to develop a combined logic model of the intended outcomes for the alternative pilots to AssetPlus.⁴⁴

Whilst we acknowledge that there are differences between the sites regarding the format of the new assessments, the workshops held with stakeholders identified very similar outcomes. The logic model therefore reflects a comprehensive depiction of the intended outcomes of the pilots across the 3 areas. Any future evaluation work that is carried out would benefit from further logic model development in each area, which would allow for the nuances of each new pilot assessment to be captured.

The process of developing the combined logic model was comprised of 3 stages:

- **A document review** to allow the research team to acquire provisional knowledge of the rationale for developing the alternatives to AssetPlus and the intended outcomes of each pilot. The NatCen research team reviewed the applications that were submitted by each site to YJB. The applications provided a wealth of background information, including the rationale for the model, plans for implementation and delivery, and anticipated benefits and challenges.
- **Half day workshops with stakeholders** from each of the pilot sites carried out in November and December 2020, prior to starting fieldwork for the process evaluation. In the workshops, stakeholders, (including for example, practitioners and members of senior management teams) provided an overview of their delivery model and pilot progress to date. NatCen researchers then facilitated a series of detailed discussions with the group to understand the desired outcomes of the new assessment processes and how they fitted together.

⁴⁴ The research team used an approach to logic model development based on the W.K Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide. W. K. Kellogg Foundation (2004). Using logic models to bring together planning, evaluation, and action: Logic model development guide. *Purdue University*. Retrieved from <https://ag.purdue.edu/extension/pdehs/Documents/Pub3669.pdf>

- **Consolidation of the workshop findings.** NatCen researchers consolidated the findings from each of the workshops to produce a logic model that captured a sequence of intended outcomes that was appropriate for use across all 3 pilot sites. The combined logic model was sent to each of the pilot sites, and stakeholders were given the opportunity to review and comment on the document.

Logic model findings

The combined logic model specifies the desired long-term outcome of implementing the alternative pilots to AssetPlus as **‘improved outcomes for children/young people and communities’**. The long-term outcome of the pilots represents a series of more specific aims, which include for example, reducing the seriousness and frequency of offending, protecting children from harm and reducing spending across the sector.

To support the long-term aim of improved outcomes for children/young people and communities, the logic model developed for the pilots sets out a sequence of short- and medium-term outcomes, identifying a process of change among key groups and systems. The outcomes are organised into 2 pathways; outcomes at the practitioner and system level and outcomes at the child, young person, and family level, discussed in more detail below.

Practitioner and system level

This section describes the outcomes pathway at the practitioner and system level. Practitioners are individuals working within the YJS at each of the pilot sites who carry out risk assessment and intervention work with children and young people and their families. In so doing, practitioners are integral to the delivery of the alternative assessment pilots. The system level pathway refers to the YJS at a broader institutional level.

Understanding, knowledge, and skill

Early intended outcomes for the practitioner and system pathway are focused on increased understanding, knowledge, and skills among staff. This begins with YOT staff acquiring an understanding of the purpose of implementing the new assessment tool. Alongside this, it is expected that improvements to the provision of training for YOT workers will support them in delivering the new assessment tool.

Stakeholders also described increased staff knowledge of the range of local agencies and services that carry out work with or alongside the YJS, (for example, children and young people’s services, drug and alcohol services, and mental health services) as a desired early outcome. This increased awareness is anticipated to facilitate more effective partnership working for the benefit of young people and their families.

Service quality

Increased staff understanding of the rationale for the pilot and improved knowledge of, and skill in using, the alternative assessment framework is expected to translate into a series of improved *service quality* outcomes, as described below.

Following earlier outcomes, it is expected that YOT workers will feel an increased sense of empowerment and confidence as they begin to use the alternative assessment with young people. The new assessment process is designed to encourage collaborative working between YOT workers and young people and their families, whereby they are able to contribute to, and actively engage in, the development of assessment plans. The new assessments are designed to allow YOT workers to focus more of their time on direct engagement with young people rather than completing lengthy assessment documents that are often thought to be unclear and inaccessible.

To improve the accessibility of the assessments for young people and their families, the new assessments have been designed to be more streamlined. By delivering a simpler service it is hoped that a more efficient quality assurance process will allow line managers to have a better understanding of the casework of their staff, which in turn will cultivate a more supportive environment for YOT workers.

As staff are afforded more time to engage with young people and their families, and as they become competent at implementing the new assessment framework, it is expected that the quality and accuracy of assessments should improve. Service quality outcomes align with an improved assessment process, which is expected to facilitate the production of more appropriate and targeted intervention plans for young people.

System change

As noted above, a key rationale for designing and implementing an alternative to AssetPlus was to create a system that is more efficient and that allows YOT workers to spend more time engaging with young people, helping to develop a more streamlined service. In the longer term it is hoped that more effective partnership working between the YJS and other local services will translate into a more collaborative and whole-system approach to working with and supporting young people and their families within local areas.

Young person and family level

This section describes the outcome pathway for young people and their families who come into contact with the YJS and experience the alternative assessment pilot. It is hoped that young people and their families will experience and benefit from a range of outcomes in their engagement with the YJS, as described below.

Buy-in, understanding and engagement

The logic model indicates that improved service quality at the practitioner and system level should feed directly into improvements for young people and their families who need to actively participate in the assessment and planning process. The first intended outcome concerns young people and their families having an increased role in the co-production of the assessment plan. For young people, the assumption is that their involvement in this part of the process will ensure their voice is clearly heard which should increase their sense of ownership and commitment to the plan. From this, it is hoped that families will have a better understanding of the process of developing assessment plans and that young people will have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them. This should enable them to better engage with the process and related activities.

Well-being and skills

When young people more positively engage with the assessment process and intervention plans, it is assumed that they will experience a range of benefits related to skill-development, including for example increased engagement with EET opportunities. It is further assumed that this will promote increased self-esteem, self-belief, and critical thinking skills in young people. The culmination of the preceding outcomes should help to improve the emotional and physical well-being of young people who work with the YJS.

At the family level, the more collaborative relationship between YOT workers and families is expected to result in families feeling more supported. It is assumed that when families feel supported, they will be better equipped to cope positively with adversity and support the young person with challenges they might face.

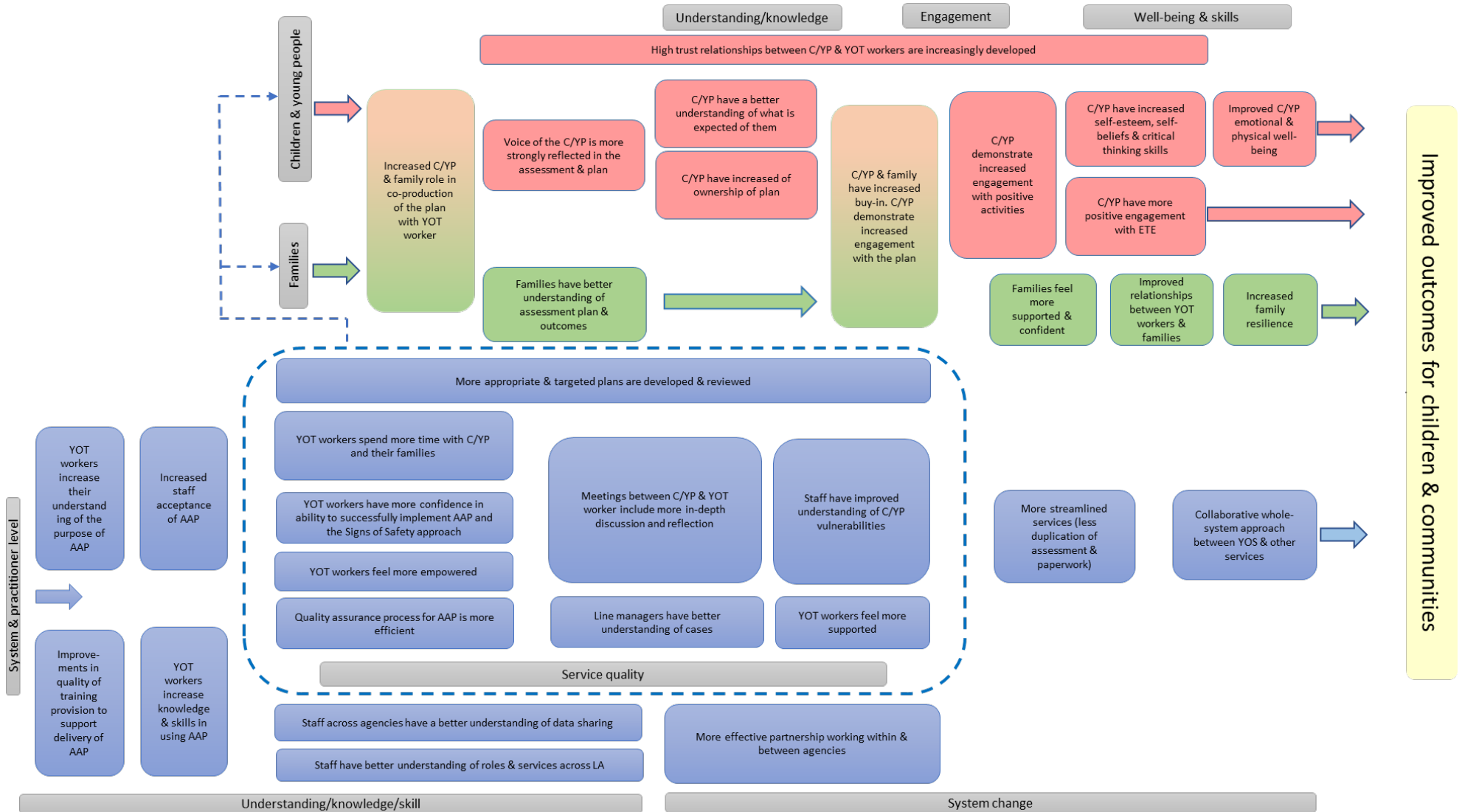
Trust

An intended outcome for young people that cuts across the sequence of increased *understanding and knowledge, engagement, and well-being and skills*, is the development of trusting relationships between young people and their YOT workers. It is anticipated that the range of outcomes in this pathway will serve to facilitate this, and that it is strengthened over time.

On the following page, we have included a copy of the full combined logic model developed with the 3 sites.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Acronyms used in the logic model diagram on the next page include: 'Alternatives to AssetPlus Pilots' (AAP), 'children and young people' (C/YP) and 'local authority' (LA).

Full combined logic model developed with the 3 sites



Appendix 2. Methodological appendix

This appendix provides more detailed information on the research activities that were either planned or carried out for the process evaluation and feasibility study

Process evaluation

Sampling, recruitment, data collection and ethical issues relevant to the process evaluation are outlined below.

Sampling

When planning the process evaluation, we expected to use a sampling approach that would enable us include range and diversity across the study population. Unfortunately, due to challenges related to the Covid-19 outbreak, it was not possible to carry out as many interviews as originally envisaged and we were therefore unable to use the planned sampling strategy.

However, for the interviews we carried out in 1 area, we included staff with different levels of experience, length of time in role (and previous experience of delivering AssetPlus), types of caseload, and geographic location. We discussed the selection of senior stakeholders with each site separately to ensure a range and diversity in this participant group.

Recruitment

We coordinated recruitment with the assistance of a main point of contact in each site (called a 'gatekeeper'). These gatekeepers helped with the recruitment of interviews that were conducted, as well as speaking to other senior stakeholders, and practitioners/support workers, children/young people, and their parents before recruitment was stopped due to Covid-19. All gatekeepers were given a detailed briefing from a member of the NatCen research team about the recruitment and fieldwork process prior to contacting any potential participants.

The aims of the research and what taking part would involve were explained to all potential participants. This included an overview of:

- why they had been contacted,
- the interview content,
- duration of the encounter,
- how their information would be used, and
- the level of anonymity offered.

Relevant materials, including information sheets were provided to each participant in advance of the interview/focus group. Key information about the study was reiterated before the start of interviews and focus groups. All participants had the opportunity to ask the research team questions about their involvement. Permission to audio record the discussion was also sought.

Data collection and analysis

The research team scheduled interviews over the phone and at a time convenient for participants to minimise any burden to their schedules.

Data were managed and analysed systematically, using a thematic framework. Key topics, commonalities, and differences emerging from the interviews were identified through familiarisation with the transcripts to explain emergent patterns and findings. Insights gained from the interviews and feedback forms were included in this report.

Research ethics

The key issues that were considered in designing and conducting the research were:

Ethical approvals

All stages of the research were reviewed in detail and approved by the NatCen's internal Research Ethics Committee which is comprised of senior staff. The committee considered all aspects of the research design in detail and approval was given prior to fieldwork taking place.

Key issues that were considered by NatCen in designing the study and in planning and conducting fieldwork are detailed below.

Participation based on informed consent

- Participants were made aware of what the research involved and that they could consent (or refuse to consent) to participate. We prepared and provided tailored, accessible materials and informed participants across the groups that taking part was voluntary, confidential and anonymous.
- Researchers facilitated participants to make an informed decision about taking part, ensuring that they understood what confidentiality and anonymity meant and being clear about the limits of confidentiality. The ongoing nature of consent was explained, including that withdrawal was possible up until the point of data analysis.

Participants' wellbeing

- Careful consideration was given to protecting the welfare of research participants, which is particularly important when exploring sensitive topics around youth offending or engaging people who may be in vulnerable circumstances.
- Throughout all stages of the research – from recruitment to participation in interviews– we provided participants with clear information about the topics being covered and agreed clear ground rules for participants ahead of each interview.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and disclosure

- The standard NatCen disclosure policy was put in place to deal with any instances where a participant disclosed past, current or potential significant harm to themselves or identifiable other. This would involve raising the issue with the NatCen disclosure board to ensure swift safeguarding action could be taken if necessary.
- The circumstances in which participant confidentiality may have to be breached were carefully explained to participants in the information sheets, consent forms, and by researchers at the time of the interview. No incidents of disclosure took place during fieldwork.
- Rigorous data security and protection against direct or indirect disclosure of identity was built into all stages of the research, in line with the Data Protection Act and GDPR obligations.

Data sharing agreements

We also completed data sharing agreements with each local authority. These agreements were required in order for us to conduct fieldwork in each site, and for sites to provide us with participant information, and anonymised datasets (for the feasibility study). It was also important for them to be confident that we would conduct the study safely and ensure participant wellbeing throughout the research process.

Feasibility study

Summary of feasibility study methods:

- Two literature reviews: 1 looking at previous evaluations of interventions in the Youth Justice System (10 studies reviewed), the other focusing on the determinants of reoffending and participation in Education, Training and Employment (EET) among young offenders (8 studies reviewed);
- Five scoping interviews with the pilot leads (2 with North Yorkshire, 2 with Tri-borough and 1 with Lincolnshire) and 1 with the Youth Justice Board (YJB), focusing on the key outcomes of interest and data availability;

- Review of 2 anonymised datasets – case-level management data from Tri-borough (covering the second and third quarters of 2019) and mandatory case-level data collected by the YJB from all Youth Offending Teams (for the whole of 2019);
- Online workshop with DfE and YJB, providing valuable insights on the recommended impact evaluation design.
- The feasibility study included 3 activities: a literature review with a methodological and a substantive strand, scoping interviews with pilot site leads and the YJB, and a review of Tri-borough and YJB datasets on young people in the youth justice system.

Literature review

A light-touch literature review was carried out for the feasibility study, focussing on methods used in previous similar evaluations. The first stage of the review gathered information on previous evaluations of interventions in the Youth Justice System (YJS), with reoffending and participation in EET as the main outcomes of interest. The focus was on barriers and facilitators to using quasi-experimental approaches. The search was carried out through the Gov.uk and Google search engines, with ‘youth justice evaluation’ as the key search term.

The second stage of the review identified previous research on the determinants of the 2 main outcomes of the study; reoffending and EET attendance among young offenders. This helped us identify characteristics such as demographic information or offending history that we would need to capture in a quasi-experimental model. The search was carried out through the Google and Google Scholar search engines, using variations of the 2 outcomes as the key search terms.

Both aspects of the review limited the search to the UK and Europe, with academic articles and research reports by government departments, universities and commercial research organisations as document types. See appendix 3 for a summary table of the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to guide the review.

Scoping interviews

Six scoping interviews were carried out with key stakeholders, including the YJB and the 3 pilot local authorities. The purpose of these interviews was to finalise the key outcomes and a list of possible outcome measures for a future impact evaluation, as well as identify potential comparison groups and consider appropriate sample sizes. The interviews also helped assess the availability of good quality data on young people undergoing the pilot assessment and a potential comparison group, as well as potential avenues of data access.

Review of the data

The research team reviewed anonymised case-level management data from 1 participating local authority, Tri-borough, as well as mandatory case-level data collected by the YJB from all local authorities.⁴⁶ The data was assessed for the availability and quality of the variables that would be required in order to conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation. This involved examining the level of detail, missingness and implausible values in the variables of interest.

⁴⁶ Local authorities collect individual-level data on the young people they come into contact with. The specific information covered may vary between local authorities. It is also mandatory for local authorities to send individual-level data to the YJB. In local authorities where Asset Plus is carried out, information recorded as part of the assessment should be submitted, while in the pilot local authorities the requirement is narrower. From the YJB, we only requested the data fields mandatory for all local authorities.

Both the Tri-borough case-level data extract and the YJB data extract included variables on the individual's gender, age and ethnicity; details of the offence and legal outcome; offending history; EET and accommodation status; and information on any interventions carried out. The Tri-borough dataset contained a higher level of detail on offending history, EET and health status.

Appendix 3. Literature review inclusion criteria and summary of findings

Table 2. Literature review inclusion criteria

Criteria for inclusion	Methodological: evaluation designs	Substantive: determinants of reoffending and EET
Types of study designs	Evaluation designs	Quantitative; qualitative
Types of participants	Young offenders	Young offenders prioritised
Types of outcome measures	Reoffending	Reoffending; EET attendance
Settings	UK	UK; Europe
Language	English	English
Date	No cut-off	No cut-off
Document type	Academic articles; reports	Academic articles; reports

Table 3. literature review findings

Reference	Intervention	Relevant outcomes	Data sources	Methods	Limitations and barriers to QED
Haines et al. (2012)	Health provision at an early stage of entry into the YJS	Reoffending frequency Reoffending severity (type of offence) EET attendance	PNC	Matching across areas: outcomes of treatment group compared to matched comparison group drawn from YOT family	Limited data on characteristics of treatment group constrained ability to correct for selection bias.
ICF GHK (2013)	Resettlement support for young people	Reoffending rate Reoffending frequency EET attendance	PNC Intervention data management tool London Data Authority	Measured outcomes before and after the intervention for the same group	Lack of funds and short timescale of evaluation prevented engaging comparison areas.
Institute for Criminal Policy Research (2012)	Triage schemes to identify the needs of young people upon entry to YJS	Reoffending	Not applicable	Not applicable	Local monitoring data on reoffending of people going through intervention was limited. Therefore, it was not possible to create a comparison/matched group. Other interventions operating in the same areas, so effects could not be attributed solely to intervention.

Ipsos MORI (2012)	Resettlement programme for those released from custody	Reoffending rate EET attendance	PNC Local case management data from YOTs	Comparisons made to national level reoffending statistics	Number of people going through intervention is too small to conduct robust evaluation. Finding an adequate comparison group challenging as young people were selected to intervention based on motivation. Short time-frame restricted follow-up period to 9 months.
Mackie et al. (2011)	Offer of support for young people in contact with YJS	Reprimands, warnings and convictions (RWC)	Local data on RWC	Measured outcomes before and after the intervention in intervention areas	Not discussed.
Phillips et al. (2012)	Resettlement panels	Reoffending rate Reoffending severity	YOT data extracts	Matching across time within area: outcomes of treated group compared with comparison group made up of people who received a custodial sentence in pilot areas a year before intervention	Low numbers of participants in scheme limited confidence in conclusions. Substantial missing data.
St James-Roberts et al. (2005)	Community mentor programmes	Reoffending rate Reoffending frequency Reoffending	PNC	Comparison group: outcomes of treated group compared before and after intervention with referred but non-mentored young people	Limited comparability between groups due to possible motivation bias.

		severity (YJB method)			
Tarling et al. (2004)	Mentoring schemes	Reoffending rate Reoffending frequency	PNC Local data collection instrument Local questionnaires	Compared aggregate rates of outcome variables to sample from Home Office follow-up study of national cohort Also compared rates of offence of the same individuals before and after intervention	No group of comparable offenders could be identified.
Tyrrell et al. (2017)	Referral system for minor delinquencies	Reoffending rate	Suffolk Youth Offending Service	Measured aggregate trends in outcomes across time in intervention area	Not discussed.
Wilcox and Hoyle (2004)	Various restorative justice interventions across local authorities	Reoffending rate Reoffence severity (type of offence)	PNC	Compared aggregate rates of outcome variables to sample from Home Office follow-up study of national cohort	No group of comparable offenders could be identified.
Reference	Outcome/construct	Sample	Design	Findings	Limitations
McMahon et al. (2006)	Proven reoffending	England and Wales YP up to 18 Size: 50 young people (interviews), 54	Mixed methods	Key determinants: Detachment from education, low attainment, influence of the school, experience of custody and local authority care	Missing quantitative data Low response rate (30% of YOTs nationally responded) Reliability of data sources questioned due to missing data

		members of staff from YOTs, Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and Local authority secure children's homes (LASCHs). (interviews), 41 YOT managers (questionnaires)		Older females who have been in care system, have literacy or numeracy difficulties, previous convictions, more serious disposals, or a higher likelihood of reoffending, were significantly less likely to have full-time EET provision.	
O'Carroll, J (2016)	Full-time educational inclusion and engagement	One inner London local authority Young offenders aged 15 to 17 Size: 283	Mixed methods	Key determinants: Parental lack of education, gang involvement School related factors: exclusions and disrupted education, stigma from professionals when working with youth offenders Individual factors: unidentified SEN	Missing quantitative data Questionable validity of the quantitative data Data open to falsification: depends on the young person's own knowledge and willingness to share data themselves. Unrepresentative findings: inner London borough. Small young population size

Ministry of Justice (2014)	Proven reoffending	N/A	Evidence summary	Key determinants: Substance misuse problems (including alcohol), impulsivity and low self-control, pro-criminal attitudes, social networks, poor family relationships, lack of employment, suitable accommodation, difficult family backgrounds, financial problems, mental health problems	Not an exhaustive summary of the literature
Ministry of Justice (2020)	Official statistics; proven reoffending	England and Wales Young offenders aged 10-18 years Size: N/D	Quantitative	Key determinants: Gender, age, ethnicity, criminal history	The report only presents longitudinal descriptive trends. Does not look at causes.
Farrington et al. (2006)	Proven reoffending; self-reported reoffending	South London Age 8 - 50 Size: 411	Longitudinal mixed methods	Key determinants: Age, socio-economic factors, family factors, school attainment, individual factors.	Testing effects (the effects on the males of repeated interviews) are not clear. Small sample. Infrequent interviews due to intermittent funding.

					Participants had difficulties recalling events over a 5-year period.
Farrington, Ttofi, & Piquero (2016)	Proven offending; self-reported offending	South London Age 8 to 48 Size: 411	Longitudinal mixed methods	Key determinants: High 'troublesomeness', a convicted parent, high daring.	Small sample size and few significant results. Time effects.
Mulder, Brand, Bullens, & Van Marle (2010)	Proven reoffending; self-reported offending	Netherlands Male adolescent offenders aged 12–22 years Size: 1154	Quantitative	Key determinants: Antisocial behaviour during treatment, family problems, axis-1 psychopathology	Risk factors measured only once by service staff and then rated from records. Regression model explained very little of the variance.
Cuervo, & Villanueva (2015)	Proven reoffending	Spain Adolescent offenders aged between 14 and 18 Size: 210	Quantitative; Survey	Key determinants: Education, employment, gender, ethnicity, individual factors.	Underestimation of juvenile recidivism who were 18 at the time of their offence. Small sample

Appendix 4. Fieldwork documents

In this appendix we have provided research tools developed for the evaluation, including topic guides, final feedback proforma questions, observation proforma and cost analysis proforma.

Topic guides

Tailored topic guides were used to ensure a consistent approach across all the interviews and between members of the research team. The guides were used flexibly to allow researchers to respond to the nature and content of each discussion. Researchers used open, non-leading questions, and answers were fully probed to elicit greater depth and detail where necessary.

Below we have provided the main headings and subheadings from the topic guides with young people, parents, staff and stakeholders which could be used to inform future evaluation work.

Young people and children topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen (including NatCen's independence)
- Introduce research, aims of study and interview
- Length (about 60 minutes)
- Voluntary participation
- Brief overview of topics to be covered in interview
- Confidentiality, anonymity and potential caveats
- Data use and security (including audio recording, encryption, data storage and destruction)
- Questions
- Verbal consent recorded on tape

2. Background

- Name and living arrangements
- Where family live

- Normal day/ routine
- Hobbies, interests and free time
- Explore how young person is feeling lately
- Explore whether the participant is currently (or has recently been) involved with any other support services

3. Offending history

- Reason for current community order / involvement with the YOS
- How they feel about their current community order
- Previous experience with YOS and police
- Overview of previous offending behaviour

4. Experience of pilot assessment

- Participant's expectations of YOT
- Description of initial meeting with YOT worker
- Explore relationship with YOT worker
- Understanding of purpose of assessment
- Views on / experience of the assessment and planning process
- Explore participant's experience of the post-assessment phase and how plan is actioned in practice.
- Summary of views and experience of YOS in general

5. Outcomes

- Views/ experiences of engaging with conditions of the community order post assessment
- Changes that have occurred as a result of working with the YOS
- Expectations for future outcomes
- Features of the assessment and planning process that have contributed to any positive or negative outcomes experienced by participant

6. Overall experience, comparisons, & recommendations

- Overall experience of working with the YOS
- Any recommendations for the YOS based on the participant's experience
- Brief overview of plans/ hopes for the future and how participant feels about taking these forward

7. Close

- Final closing comments

Thank and close

Parent/caregiver topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen (including NatCen's independence)
- Introduce research, aims of study and interview
- Length (about 60 minutes)
- Voluntary participation
- Brief overview of topics to be covered in interview
- Confidentiality, anonymity and potential caveats
- Data use and security (including audio recording, encryption, data storage and destruction)
- Questions
- Verbal consent recorded on tape

2. Background

- Name and living arrangements
- Typical day
- Where family live
- Explore extent of support network

3. Background on young person

- General overview of young person involved with YOS
- Explore parent / caregiver views on the young person's engagement with education, employment and training
- Explore parent / caregiver knowledge and opinion of the young person's friends
- Parent / caregiver description of young person's behaviour in general
- Explore whether child/young person is currently (or has recently been) involved with other services.

4. Young person's involvement with YOS

- Reason for young person's current community order / involvement with the YOS
- Overview of child/young person's previous offending behaviour
- Is this the parent's first experience of a child being involved with the YOS
- Perspective on the main reason/s for child/young person getting into trouble.

5. Experience of pilot assessment

- Participant's understanding of assessment framework
- Participant's expectations of the YOS
- Description of initial meeting with YOT worker
- Explore extent and nature of contact between caregiver and YOT worker/s
- Explore relationship with young person's YOT worker
- Views on / experience of the assessment and planning process
- Explore parent / caregiver experience of the post-assessment and post-planning phase
- Summary views and experience of YOS in general

6. Outcomes

- Views/ experiences of young person's engagement with conditions of the community order post assessment
- Caregiver's relationship with YOT worker
- Changes that have occurred as a result of participant's child working with the YOS

- Changes that have occurred as a result of participant's child working with YOS for home and family life
- Parent / caregiver expectations for future outcomes for young person
- Features of the assessment and planning process that have contributed to any positive or negative outcomes experienced by young person or family

7. Overall experience, comparisons, & recommendations

- Overall experience of the YOS
- Any recommendations for the YOS based on the participant's experience?
- Brief overview of plans/ hopes for the future (for their child and themselves) and how participant feels about taking these forward

8. Close

- Final closing comments

Thank and close

Stakeholder and practitioner topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen (including NatCen's independence)
- Introduce research, aims of study and interview
- Length (about 60 minutes)
- Voluntary participation
- Brief overview of topics to be covered in interview
- Confidentiality, anonymity and potential caveats
- Data use and security (including audio recording, encryption, data storage and destruction)
- Questions
- Verbal consent recorded on tape

2. Background and context

- Overview of organisation/ role

- Typical types of offending behaviour that lead to young people working with/coming into contact with the YOS
- Needs/challenges of the young people who work with the YOS
- Experience/knowledge of how the YOS in North Yorks/Lincoln/Tri-borough works with the families/carers of the young people that are under their supervision
- Needs/challenges that the families experience locally
- Efficacy of the previous AP framework to assess the risk and need of the young people and their families

3. Understanding of and rationale for pilot

- Overview of assessment system in North Yorkshire/ Lincs/ Tri-borough
- Purpose and aims of the pilot assessment
- Overview of what participant thought about pilot initially

4. Governance and implementation

- Participant's role in the design and implementation of the new assessment process PROBE: development of assessment process, allocation and recruitment of staff, establishing partnerships, etc.
- The processes of setting up/ implementing AP alternative to date
- Governance and management
- Funding and resources available for the pilot set-up and implementation

5. Staff information and training

- Overview of information and communication about pilot to staff, early on in pilot delivery and ongoing.
- Overview of guidance and training provided to staff/received
- Views on the efficacy of guidance/training provision

6. Delivery of alternative assessment system

- Selection/ identification of eligible young people

- Explore in detail relevant aspects of pilot and discuss how assessment is delivered in terms of format, length and duration, how people are engaged etc., and how this differs to what was available previously
- Extent to which the new assessment is addressing the deficits of the AssetPlus assessment and planning framework

7. Partnership working

- Overview of partnerships involved in the pilot of the new assessment framework
- Purpose of each partnership in relation to new assessment system and support offered
- Explore how well the new assessment system aligns with the approaches to assessment and planning used in partner organisations?
- Future plans for working with partners

8. Outcomes and impacts

- Key outcomes the pilot aims to achieve. What constitutes a successful / unsuccessful outcome for: Young people and their families, the service/ YOT, wider society including victims.
- Perceived impact/s of the new assessment framework so far for: young people and their families, the service/ YOT, wider society including victims.
- The longer-term impact/s
- Comparison of impact: new assessment vs. AssetPlus

9. Reflections and next steps

- Reflections on progress / success of pilot so far
- Any changes expected that may influence the delivery and impact of the pilot?
- Hopes for pilot going forward
- Lessons learned and recommendations

10. Close

- Final closing comments

Thank participant and close

Feedback proforma questions

The questions below were provided to YOT managers when fieldwork was stopped due to Covid-19 so that they could share any final views, thoughts and experiences of the pilot if they wished.

1. Views and experiences of the implementation and delivery

Please provide details on why the new assessment framework was needed and any early views on implementation / set-up; your views and experiences of pilot implementation and delivery to date; any key barriers and challenges faced so far throughout the setup and delivery of the alternative pilots.

2. Perceived impact & outcomes

Please provide any details on perceived impact/s of the new assessment framework so far. These can be short- or long-term impacts for: young people and their families, the service/YOT, wider society including victims, and partnerships.

3. Key learning and final thoughts

Please provide details on any other key learning and final reflections on the pilot so far.

Observation proforma

This proforma was created to record details during the planned observations of the delivery of the alternative assessment pilots with young people and their YOT worker/practitioner. The document could be further developed to record evidence of systemic and strengths-based approaches if it were to be used as part of a process evaluation in the future.

Alternative to AssetPlus assessment observation

Date of observation	
Time and duration of session	
Location	
Observer	

1. Setting and attendance

Describe the setting of the session (set up of room (can sketch this if helpful!), any technology used).

Record who is present.

2. General structure and materials of session (brief observations, for context)

Note how the session is structured, including type and length of any different sections (e.g. introduction/explanation by YOT worker, 1:1 discussion, family involvement, etc.)

Record any materials used (e.g. handouts)

Note any thoughts on how well organised / structured the session was (running as intended, to time, materials ready), whether the session was structured logically/sequentially.

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3. Children's involvement

--

4. Family involvement

--

5. Children's experiences

--

6. Researchers' informal contact with children/parents

Note any informal conversations had with children/parents before/after the assessment for future reference (e.g. positive and negative remarks, reflection on what was discussed).

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Cost analysis proforma

The cost analysis proforma was designed to capture data to enable a comparison of costs between the alternative assessment pilot and AssetPlus. However, due to limitations identified in chapter 2, we were unable to gather the level of detail that we required for the cost analysis and information on this was therefore not included in this report.

Material one-off costs	
<p><i>These are material costs related to switching from AssetPlus to the alternative assessment system.</i></p> <p><i>Please list items below. If not applicable, write 0 in the cost column. Add rows where necessary.</i></p>	
Item	Cost per item (paid by the LA)
<p>One-off costs of development and consultation meetings (for example venue hire, transport, printing of materials)</p>	
<p>Material costs of training devoted to introduction of the new tool (for example venue hire, transport and printing of training materials)</p>	
<p>Other one-off costs (for example practical and logistical costs, like graphic design and printing of the assessment tool)</p>	

One-off staff time costs

These are staff time costs **not** related to the everyday running of the assessment system. They relate mainly to the development phase of the assessment tool and pertain only to staff employed by the LA.

List below the tasks and staff members carrying out these tasks, as well as the approximate number of hours spent on each task. Add also the overall weekly hours worked by the staff member and the pay band for their job role in £. If the salary for the job role is set, please put a 5k range around the salary both ways, as we do not want to disclose an individual's exact salary.

Add rows where necessary.

Task (please specify task below)	Staff member	Hours spent working on task (if this is spread out over several months, please note each month's hours on a separate line)	Overall weekly hours worked by the staff member (for context)	Pay band (£XX,XXX - £XX,XXX)
Initial development by project lead (discussions with YJB, preparing documentation, etc.)				
Committee/steering group/board discussions around development of the tool				
Planning/consultation meetings with practitioners				
Revision and comments to the assessment tool				

Work, revisions and comments on the YJB application			
Attendance in training on the new assessment tool			
Other one-off staff-time costs			
Running staff time costs			
<p><i>List below all staff members using/working with the alternative assessment system, their main responsibilities and the average time per month they spend on administering the assessment system (in % of their total working time). Add rows if necessary.</i></p> <p><i>Add also the pay band for their job role in £. If the salary for the job role is set, please put a 5k range around the salary both ways, as we do not want to disclose an individual's exact salary.</i></p>			
Staff member	Main responsibilities relating to the new assessment system	Time/month spent on administering alternative assessment system (% of total working time)	Pay band (£XX,XXX - £XX,XXX)
Alternative assessment system project lead within the LA			
Youth Justice practitioners			

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