

## Articles

# ASSESSING ASSESSMENT

CHRISTINE PIPER *Reader, Brunel University*

Assessment is not only a major practice tool for social workers and medical professionals but also a gatekeeper. It operates to open or close the way for intervention or treatment for a child or his family in the same way that the Crown Prosecutor controls entry to the courts when applying prosecution guidance. Furthermore, the scope and results of the assessment influence or determine the nature and extent of the intervention. Consequently, assessment, comprising of the investigation and the professional conclusions drawn from it, can categorise children – in relation to ss 17, 37 or 47 of the Children Act 1989 – as in need of services or make them the focus of compulsory measures to address significant harm. Compliance with detailed guidance about assessment and the completion of the requisite questionnaires, scales and pro forma also constitute a type of insurance for those who work in a field where certainty of outcome is impossible. It is difficult, then, to over-estimate the importance of assessment.

### EVERY CHILD MATTERS

The gate-keeping role of assessment means, as the Green Paper about children at risk, *Every Child Matters*, Cm 5860 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) points out, that children may be assessed many times during their childhood (at para 4.13). The Green Paper refers both to the universally conducted assessments by health visiting teams in early childhood and the baseline assessments in the first year at primary school, as well as more targeted assessments. The latter would include the referral of children to other services and professionals, such as educational psychologists, social services and those staffing Connexions (the coordinating service for 13–19 year olds), as well as

specialist medical services. The result is, as the Green Paper notes (at para 4.14), that:

‘children with multiple needs may be subject to multiple assessments by different people, each collecting similar information but using different professional terms and categories.’

Clearly this is both alienating and inefficient.

The proposal in *Every Child Matters* for a common assessment framework is part of a response to the failure to protect Victoria Climbié and is set in the context of a group of objectives designed to provide earlier intervention and more effective protection for children with problems (at p 51). Drawing on the example of the North Lincolnshire Common Assessment, it proposed a government-led initiative to develop a ‘common assessment framework’ for use by all professionals ‘in the frontline’ (at para 4.15). This would draw on the *Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (the *Framework*, implemented April 2001), ASSET (the tool used in the Youth Justice System), the special educational needs and health visitor codes of practice, and also the tool used by Connexions. Presumably the aim would be, as for the Lincolnshire scheme (at p 58):

‘for all services to take responsibility for identifying children’s needs before referring vague concerns or value based judgements to other services.’

With a common assessment tool, ‘core information’ should ‘follow the child between services to reduce duplication’ (at p 51). A similar message is given in *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* (DfES, 2004), at para 3.14:

'A common assessment framework should help identify their needs earlier and avoid duplication between agencies.'

Where the child is known to more than one specialist service, there should be a 'lead professional' to act as gatekeeper for information sharing (*Every Child Matters*, at paras 4.20 and 4.22), who, it is envisaged for most children, will be one with whom there is day-to-day contact, such as school-based staff or a Connexions advisor (at para 4.21). The government is also concerned to reduce the number of (expensive) referrals to social services for initial assessments, citing, for example, the greater use of pastoral staff in school for dealing with concerns about children (at para 4.14).

### FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT

This appears to be a change in policy: *Every Child Matters* suggests something other than Social Services led assessment. The *Assessment Framework* (Department of Health (DoH) et al, 2000) encouraged the involvement of other agencies but emphasised that Social Services departments would carry a lead role in the assessment of need. This was despite the fact that, in the consultation exercise prior to the issue of the *Assessment Framework*, the DoH had been urged to issue a common assessment for the use of the inter-agency network (for a criticism of its failure to do so, see Chapter 2 of M. Calder and S. Hackett (eds), *Assessment in Child Care: Using and Developing Frameworks for Practice* (Russell House Publishing, 2003), at p 14).

The DoH produced *The Family Assessment Pack of Questionnaires and Scales* to accompany the *Assessment Framework*. The guidance has been assimilated in different ways in different areas (see Chapter 8 of Calder and Hackett, above). It is argued that some of the differences arise because of the lack of 'fit' between the *Framework* and DoH, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (TSO, 1999), designed to re-focus attention on need and services (see Calder and Hackett, at p 28).

Since then, to improve assessment practices in social services, the DoH (now the DfES) and the Welsh Assembly Government have developed the Integrated

Children's System (ICS), an information-sharing project which aims to bring together the *Assessment Framework* and the Looking After Children System (the LAC Project) in a single model for assessment, intervention and review of children in need. The ICS aims to benefit children and families by enabling them to understand what information agencies are seeking and why, and will help them to judge whether they are getting the help they need (see [www.dfes.gov.uk/integratedchildrenssystem/about/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/integratedchildrenssystem/about/)).

### PRACTICE ADVANTAGES

The DfES is leading the development work on a common assessment framework (CAF), with a consultation period August-November 2004, and with phased implementation planned from April 2005. It has already drawn together the Children's National Services Framework and other projects into the Information Sharing and Assessment Programme.

The development of a common assessment framework is welcome if two of its objectives are fulfilled: that responsibility for initial assessments should be 'more firmly embedded in universal services' and that children should take an active part in the process (at para 4.16). Implementation of these aims would make it more likely that the concerns of and about children will be taken more seriously at an early stage. It would also reduce the frustration felt by children and their families when referred around the system and, importantly, it should reduce the stigma still experienced by those asking for help or being referred to family or social services (see, for example, the recent report by the Scottish Executive on young carers and their families: Banks et al, *Health and Community Care Research Findings No 23* (University of Glasgow, 2002). A concern is that, without substantial extra resources, the initial common assessment could not adequately be located in universal services without reducing expenditure on specialist services.

Another potential practice advantage is to encourage those developments which seek to question and break down the 'insularity' of the youth justice system where assessment is also important.

According to the Audit Commission, assessment 'allows a degree of flexibility in both sentencing and constructing the intervention plan on a [proposed] final warning' and could lead to intensive intervention to deal with family and school problems at an earlier stage (*Misspent Youth* (Audit Commission, 1996), at p 69). The Youth Justice Board has produced an assessment tool and accompanying guidance called ASSET, for use specifically with young offenders, (see [www.youth-justice-board.gov.uk/PractitionersPortal/Assessments/Asset.htm](http://www.youth-justice-board.gov.uk/PractitionersPortal/Assessments/Asset.htm)). This has been a development running parallel to the initiatives of the DoH and DfES, and helps to explain the fact that books about assessment aimed at social workers, including the text referenced above, rarely mention young offenders. It is worth looking at the operation of ASSET more closely because it highlights the difficulties of designing and implementing assessment tools.

#### ASSET

The focus of ASSET is the assessment of risk of offending, not the risk of significant harm. It builds on what is known about statistical correlations between life history factors and the onset and persistence of offending. Using ASSET, the focus on such risk factors, taken together with the assumption of accountability of young offenders, can mean that life history factors increase an offender's risk score while the youth offending team (YOT) programme or the sentencing outcome might ignore that context.

An obvious example would be the risk assessment of a child from an abusive home. Section 2 of ASSET focuses on 'family and personal relationships' and they include not only factors about the criminality or the health problems of the young offender's family, but there are also tick boxes for 'experience of abuse' and 'witnessing other violence' in the family context. The professional youth worker conducting the assessment has to rate on a scale of one to four the extent to which the family relationships 'are associated with the likelihood of further offending'. This is one of 12 ratings that have to be totalled at the

end, with a maximum 'high risk' score of 48. A high score normally leads to an intensive programme of intervention, but that intervention might be solely focused on reducing the risk of re-offending and might be a response that ignores or downgrades the factors that led to the risk score.

A further example can be given from the guidance to the police and youth offending teams on the *Final Warning Scheme* (Home Office/Youth Justice Board, 2002). Step 6 of the decision-making stages, crucial in deciding whether to reprimand, warn or prosecute, is 'how serious is the offence?'. To answer this question, the assessor should use the Gravity Factor System developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers to 'reflect the public interest principles in the Code for Crown Prosecutors' (at paras 4.21-4.23). The resulting score is on a scale of one to four, with four always resulting in a charge, whether or not it is the young offender's first offence (see Annex D). If the police refer the young person for a 'prior assessment' by the YOT (at paras 8.1-8.3) the shorter Final Warning ASSET will normally be used and that score will determine the intensity and duration of the offence-based preventative programme (at para 10.13). The matrix provided suggests 1-4 hours for a low risk score (0-9) and 10 or more hours for a 'risk concern' score of 20+ (at para 10.14).

If the ASSET assessment reveals behaviour attributable to harm within the family, there can be referral to and the involvement of Social Services. However, the young person may then be the subject of two different assessments and sets of timescales (Calder and Hackett, above, at p 28) and it is not clear that the recording of risk of harm factors will lead to similar outcomes in both systems. Nacro has argued that the different emphases of ASSET and the *Assessment Framework* are problematic: 'It is accepted that much information is transferable but it is not apparent that basic information is routinely being shared between services' (Youth Crime Briefing, *Looked after children who offend, The Quality Protects Programme and YOTs* (Nacro, 2003) at p 5). It has also been noted that few members of YOTs attend Assessment Framework training, perhaps 'seeing it as nothing to do with them'

(Calder and Hackett, above, at p 29). Nacro argues, however, that, if looked-after children who offend are to receive the services and care which could reduce their offending, training for members of YOTs about child development and welfare 'is vital for sharing the corporate parenting culture and associated aims and objectives'. Indeed, their research suggests that access to shared training across agencies is associated with lower rates of offending by looked-after children (at p 5).

### CHILDREN WHO OFFEND

What a common assessment framework might help to bridge, then, is not only the current separate assessment tools and bureaucracies, but also the different professional cultures in the child protection and youth justice systems in England and Wales. There are several initiatives currently aiming to encourage such a change. A National Children's Bureau project is developing an integrated planning system for all agencies working with 'looked after' children in young offender institutions. Prompting this project was the concern, discussed above, that such children are 'at the interface of the DfES/YJB [Youth Justice Board] planning systems' which are based on very different welfare and criminogenic conceptual frameworks ([www.ncb.org.uk/projects/](http://www.ncb.org.uk/projects/)).

This is in line with government thinking. The Quality Protects programme to provide additional children's services has, as a specific objective, the bringing down of offending rates among looked-after children to the level of the general population in the area. The Public Service Agreements for 2001–2004 also include this convergence as a target (see Nacro, *Youth Crime Briefing* (2003)). More importantly, government proposals in *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* are also (at para 4.22):

'designed to support further progress by Youth Offending Teams ... by helping them work with other services to address some of the wider factors linked to tackling re-offending.'

Clearly, respondents' views had been divided on where exactly YOTs should be

positioned in relation to the proposed children's trusts (at paras 30–32) although, arguably, the important issue is less the structure than the professional ethos. The mandatory assessment tool is a contributory factor in this ethos, especially amongst new staff.

Recent judgments have also shed a critical light on the different approaches to safeguarding children in the family justice and youth justice systems, notably in relation to Prison Service establishments. In particular, the case brought by the Howard League (*R (Howard League for Penal Reform) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2002] EWHC 2497 (Admin), [2003] 1 FLR 484) and the more recent mother and baby case (*CF v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2004] EWHC 111 (Fam), [2004] 2 FLR 517) make it clear that the local authority does have a responsibility for all children within a prison in its area. See Munby J, 'Making Sure the Child is Heard: Part 2' [2004] Fam Law 427, at pp 431–433). The means of remedying the practical difficulties of carrying out this duty – which will include assessment – are currently under discussion.

The above set of initiatives might also encourage the youth justice system to develop more assessment expertise in areas such as disability, discrimination and mental health, which are important in child and family work but have so far had less impact within the youth justice system. Walker and Beckett point out that young offenders are three times more likely to have mental health problems than other young people, yet are often neglected 'because there are no proper methods of assessing mental health in the youth justice system' (S. Walker and C. Beckett, *Social Work Assessment and Intervention* (Russell House Publishing, 2003), at p 98).

Development work is now in hand and is vital: in 2000, of all 15–20 year olds in prison service establishments, 90% had a diagnosable mental health problem (J. Lyon, C. Dennison and A. Wilson, *Tell Them so They Listen: Messages from young people in custody* (HMSO, 2000)). The recent concern at the high number of suicides by young offenders in custody is another indicator of this problem.

## ASSESSING IMPACT

Nevertheless, three possible outcomes of a common assessment framework are of concern. First, a common assessment that could be undertaken by a range of professionals, including those with the minimum level of training, might lack depth and lead to unsound initial conclusions, whatever framework is used, with significant gate-keeping implications. It might, for instance, preclude the possibility of a more comprehensive assessment by a more experienced professional. A training need has been acknowledged. The DoH is currently funding a 2-year project (*Putting Analysis into Assessment 2003–2005*), based in two local authorities, to 'focus particularly on analysis and on exercising professional judgement, the aspects of assessment practice which continue to cause concern'. It aims to assist practitioners in using and critically assessing the questionnaires and scales devised to aid analysis (see [www.ncb.org.uk/projects/](http://www.ncb.org.uk/projects/)).

Secondly, a common initial assessment might not make clear the significance and breadth of the 'ecological' approach to a child's life and the assessment of his needs which the three sides of the illustrative triangle in the *Assessment Framework* seek to convey.

This triangle focuses assessment on relevant environmental, social and economic factors, as well as the more traditional issues around the child's developmental needs and parenting capacity (see, for example, S. Walker and C. Beckett, *Social Work Assessment and Intervention* (Russell House Publishing, 2003), at pp 14–16). The use of the triangle image arguably distorts the earlier version of the ecological approach which represented the child within a set of concentric circles and emphasised the ever-widening context for assessment and protection (see T. Duncan, C. Piper and

C. Warren-Adamson, 'Running rings round law? An ecological approach to teaching law for child-centred practice' (2003) 22(5) *Social Work Education* 493). Nevertheless, the triangle is a valuable aid in widening assessment issues and understanding, and, therefore, the range of 'solutions'.

Thirdly, there is a danger that the focus on a common assessment may focus attention on the choice of factors and checklists to be included or excluded, or on arithmetical summaries, at the expense of a full discussion of the nature and purpose of assessment. Assessment questionnaires and scales which produce a numerical score to determine outcome are a visible indicator of the 'actuarial justice' that is colonising penal systems and also of the preoccupation in our 'risk society' with the calculation and diminution of risk. In relation to children in need who also offend, the end product – even with the inclusion in the assessment checklists of new 'dynamic' factors such as empathy with victims and acceptance of responsibility – can be an inappropriate or disproportionate intervention (B. Hudson, *Justice in the Risk Society* (Sage, 2003), at pp 49–50).

Assessment is vitally important and needs a wider public debate. Not only can it have a very significant practical effect on those being assessed but it can also have a damaging psychological impact: it can (Walker and Beckett, at p 6):

'set the tone for further contact, it is your first opportunity to engage with new or existing clients, and it can be perceived as a judgement on their character and behaviour.'

For all children, assessment frameworks must be designed and used with extreme care so that they are, and remain, a tool to guide professional judgement, not to determine what that judgement should be.