

April 2024: Briefing Report: How Are We Using Data to Better Support our Work for Children and Families

The Scottish Government Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, The Promise Scotland, and What Matters to You (WM2U) co-hosted a half-day event in Stirling on 22 April 2024.

This brought together over sixty people with interests in how to develop earlier and more effective support for children and families by making better use of data.

Participants were drawn from the Scottish Government, local government, the third sector, funders, and others with interests in improvement and innovation for children and families.

The event focused on two presentations that shared data-related current work by The Promise Scotland and WM2U. Using these contributions, the focus was on learning from each other and identifying further scope for collaboration locally and nationally.

The Promise

Stephanie Crisp talked about The Promise Scotland's approach to 'doing data differently' rooted in what children and young people told the Independent Care Review about what mattered to them. This approach shifts the emphasis towards using data to improve, rather than prove impact, recognising the difficulties of demonstrating impact in complex environments, and the need to shift towards more holistic approaches that can be more useful, localised, and reflective of the experience of children.

Isla's story



"She thinks the hardest bit is having to change schools – she's left a lot of friends behind and no one seems to remember to keep in touch."



She shared current work to develop a Data Map, an improvement tool containing descriptive information on what data is currently collected that directly and indirectly impacts children, young people, and their families. Based on what children have said, The Promise Scotland has also developed a series of 'What Matters' questions, a set of principles directed at the workforce and the wider 'system' that provide a guiding scaffolding for improvement. These questions help the review of existing data and develop understanding of the extent to changes to data collection and analysis could help answer those questions.

The Promise Data Map



An improvement tool that holds descriptive information on what data is currently collected that directly and indirectly impacts children, young people and their families.

This database will be linked to an online tool which will allow organisations to:

- Visualise these datasets in different ways
- Find out about attributes of the data
- Find out about what systems are being used
- (Eventually) see what data flows and linkages are in place (or not)

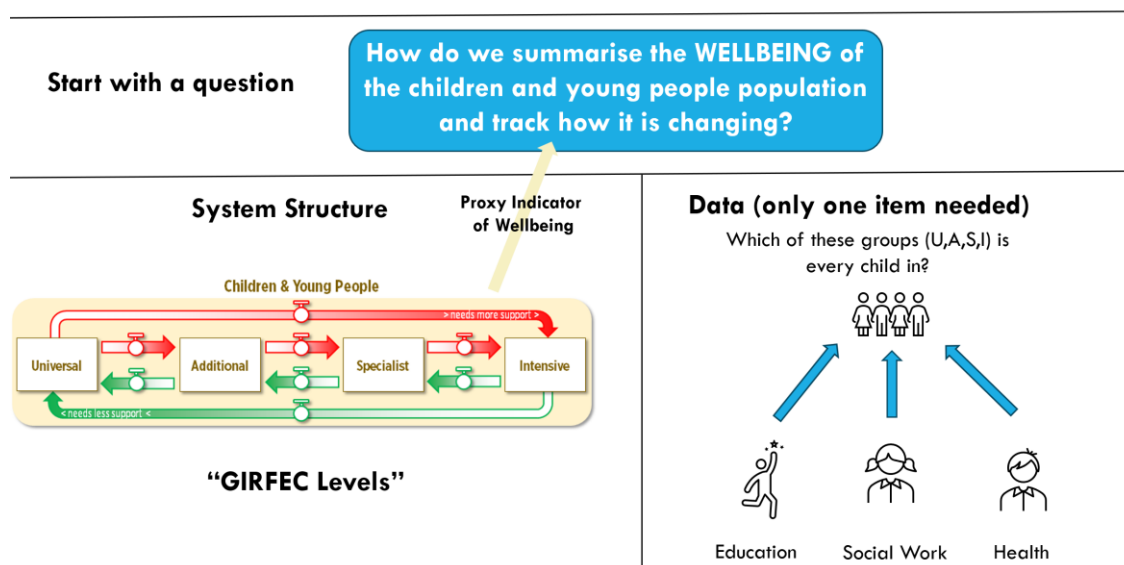


What Matters to You

A second presentation from WM2U started with a brief outline of 'System Dynamics' stock and flow methodology as a basis for a presentation from Dundee. Douglas McKelvie from the WM2U learning partner team shared that WM2U had sought local authority held data on the distribution of children across the four GIRFEC levels of intervention, as part of the search for a way to assess the impact of any intervention on the wellbeing of children and young people at a population level.

Neither local authority with which WM2U is engaged could provide this data; additionally, they hold the data in different data sets operated by education, social work, and health. This gap could be addressed by the provision of a single item of data collected on a regular basis for every child, through linkage of these separate databases and agreement on clear criteria across agencies. From this it would be possible to derive the flow or movement of children, rather than simply presenting snapshot data.

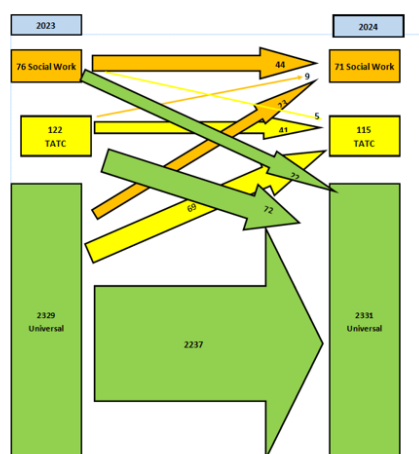
System Dynamics Approach (Stock and Flow Methodology)



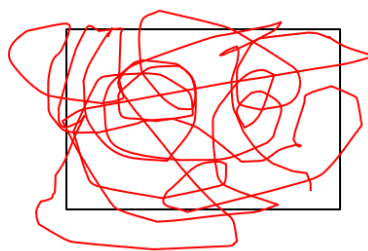
Kerstin Jorna from Dundee City Council (on secondment to WM2U) went on to illustrate the benefits of being able to analyse 'stocks and flows', drawing on a subset of Dundee school-aged children as a pilot. This illustrated the limitations of snapshot data: an apparently small change in overall numbers, for example in foster care placements, can mask considerable movement, both in and out, of placements over a short time. Without considering this flow, graphs of snapshot data can falsely suggest there is stability, even though children, families or staff experience a considerable amount of

change. Kerstin's analysis illustrated the real 'messiness of life' and the value of working with existing data, even though it has limitations. Her sample of over 2500 pupils showed that a minimal change in snapshot data between 2023 to 2024 hid 200 movements between GIRFEC levels.

MOVEMENT OF 200 PUPILS BETWEEN GIRFEC LEVELS



Messiness of life



Closer examination of these changes illustrated the sometimes-surprising volumes involved in the flows between different GIRFEC levels. This analysis raised useful questions for policy and practice; it challenged the common understanding of prevention and early intervention as an entirely upstream (or prior to crisis) intervention, by reminding people of 'de-escalation' of levels of intervention, for example, if children once in the specialist category with social work intervention, return to the universal category. By raising questions, this approach illustrated the possibilities for deeper dives into specific areas of interest and linkage with qualitative insights.

Insights

Both presentations were very well received, demonstrating the common ground and ambition of The Promise and WM2U, and supporting the commonality of purpose amongst those present to make better use of data to support children and families. Whilst distinct, each offered a challenge to prevailing practices and suggested practical and positive ways forward.

Participants were interested in and excited about many aspects of The Promise presentation. There was strong sense of the importance of the emphasis on using data to improve, using data to 'tell us what we need to know' rather than 'what is being asked for' by funders.

- The focus on the importance of the experiences of children and families and their relationships was welcomed. The child and family-centred approach of The Promise and the way in which a 'child-lens' can be used to reframe how we capture and make sense of data was valued.
- The ambition to share, avoid duplication and make existing data more accessible was endorsed. The Data Map was felt to be a positive development as an improvement tool with potential to enhance collaborative working.
- Recognition of complexity and the difficulties of attribution were also noted as important acknowledgements.

The WM2U presentation was also very 'relatable and accessible' for participants. Again, focusing on the potential use of data for improvement, valuable elements included:

- The chance to use 'stock and flow methodology' to demonstrate the journeys that children and families experience that are masked or simply not captured by prevailing forms of snapshot or trends analysis.
- The types of insights for practice and questions that the analysis generated were valuable in themselves, with a strong expectation that 'different kinds of conversations and actions' would follow on.
- The complementarity of methods of analysis was felt to have great potential: for example, analysis of flows could identify sub-samples of families where focused small-scale qualitative methods could then help understand crucial decision points in their journeys.
- Other notable elements were the scope to make better use of existing data rather than collect new data, and the chance to improve data quality by enhancing the appetite for data amongst practitioners with responsibilities for recording.

The table discussions also addressed questions about costs, including the prevailing costs of continuing to 'feed the beast' which makes significant demands on staff time and resource. There was also discussion of the value of looking more closely at costs and where they fall, such that 'savings' in one area of a local authority budget may produce higher unfunded costs elsewhere.

Possibilities for 'doing data differently'

There is clear scope at national and local levels to continue to support change in many elements of data collection and use, including data linkage, quality, and analysis, allied with scope to enhance understanding and use of qualitative approaches.

Many participants were enthusiastic about how they may be able to apply these insights and practices in their own work, to use data to support learning across a range of local and national roles. Some were inspired in a general way by the shared ambition and energy for 'doing data differently' and others found priorities and very specific actions that they felt able to take forward, without feeling impeded by the noted systemic challenges and barriers to change.

"Stop overthinking and start doing. There is no perfect data set that will evidence our learning. Keep in mind 'why' we are doing each activity."

"I will look for opportunities to support organisations to identify 'wiggle room', the space and capacity to try new things, what could we stop to make space for new approaches?"

There were felt to be real possibilities for collective experimentation and learning and an interest in retaining connection and further sharing of learning in this area of work.

- The Promise 'what matters' questions were widely seen to be of immediate value in working with other colleagues.
- Making greater use of stories as both support and challenge was also seen as a valuable strategy; this would help to 'keep the human element', root the analytical work in what matters to children and families, foreground lived experience and demonstrate progress and good practice.

Next steps

The work presented at this event is still very much 'in progress' and we anticipate there will be much more to share later in 2024 and beyond. It has relevance for those interested in making better use of data to establish the impact of initiatives to support prevention and early intervention for children and families as well as those focused on improvement.

This is a timely moment to change the policy and practice narrative around the how we use data.

The Scottish Government representatives welcomed the opportunity to work with partners to identify how this narrative should change and what it would take to achieve this. Fraser McKinlay agreed to raise the key themes from the event at the May meeting of the National Children and Young People Leadership Group.

Participants offered ideas on making better use of existing data, connecting data sources and implementing the approach to analysis in Dundee in other areas. Several mentioned a specific opportunity to demonstrate how this approach could support different decisions about investment at a local level, with a particular emphasis on early and holistic family support, in line with the principles of WFWF and #KeepThePromise.

In summary the implications of all the discussions at the event include:

- National and local discussions on changing/adapting the current uses of data for improvement are required with relevant governance groups and commissioners.
- The Whole Family Wellbeing Fund is providing the platform for national and local conversations to understand what data already exists, challenge how it is currently used, and explore alternatives. Can more be done to deepen and accelerate these conversations and achieve change?
- A leadership role is required by Scottish Government, national agencies, local authorities, health and social care providers, independent funders and others to reduce the reporting burden and free resources to look at data differently.
- #KeepThePromise, WFWF and other policy drivers can support local authorities and others to be more confident about the validity and use of stories.
- These drivers and others, such as Child Poverty/Social Justice strategies require the capability to develop and use data linkage creatively and work with partners to improve data quality.
- There is considerable value in bringing analysts together to share learning. Providing peer support to each other is also a necessity if good practice and learning for improvement is to be achieved.
- Sharing accessible and visually compelling information on using data differently facilitates effective good practice discussions with senior leaders and elected

members.

There was considerable appetite to retain the connections with and amongst those attending this event – and to reconvene in the Autumn 2024.