EXTERN
Multi Systemic Therapy

About the project

Funding awarded: £1,170,685
Duration of funding: 3 years 5 months
Number of beneficiaries: 156 children aged 8-14
Areas of delivery: Belfast, Northern and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts, Northern Ireland

EXTERN has almost 30 years of experience of working with the most vulnerable young people in Northern Ireland. In Realising Ambition the organisation delivered Multi Systemic Therapy, an intensive family and community based model that focuses on the whole ecology of the child. MST has been effective in reducing out of home placements, retaining young people in school, decreasing drug and alcohol misuse, and improving family relationships.

Lessons learnt

EXTERN’s experience illustrates the importance of understanding the local context in which you are intending to deliver prior to replicating in a new area.

EXTERN previously delivered MST across several regions in Northern Ireland, receiving referrals from Health and Social Care Trusts. The organisation used Realising Ambition funding to open new referral streams through other agencies including education, police and youth justice. Extern experienced initial challenges in needing to commence delivery as soon as funding was awarded to meet delivery targets, which it states was in part due to it being unable to make the awarding of its grant public until shortly before delivery. This impacted on its opportunities to engage with relevant stakeholders. In its initial delivery period the organisation received a number of inappropriate referrals as it took time for an understanding of the specific eligibility criteria for MST to be embedded in social services. The organisation also experienced a higher than average attrition rate as a result.

Recognising this, Extern undertook a period of stakeholder engagement. The organisation worked to understand the needs of the population it was delivering to and ensure referral agencies were clear about the types of families MST could best support. Extern also built partnerships with other delivery organisations to ensure MST complemented existing service provision. Through this work Extern was able to ensure MST reached the right people and maximised its opportunities for achieving positive outcomes. Extern’s experience highlights that replication is as much about the context in which the service is being replicated as it is about the service. It is vital to understand this context in order for replication to be successful.

Five key ingredients of successful replication

The Realising Ambition consortium has mapped each project’s journey against our five key ingredients of successful replication. The key points from this follow below. Find out more about these ingredients.

A tightly defined and replicable service: MST is an evidence-based service developed in the US and as such already has a strong logic model. The licence holders have recently supported Extern’s slight adaptions to fit local context in Northern Ireland including protocols for responding to paramilitary activity.

That is effectively and faithfully delivered to those that need it: Extern has embraced the fidelity and quality assurance support offered by the MST licence holders. The organisation was recognised with three Quality Assurance Awards at the MST International Conference during its Realising Ambition delivery.

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Awarding funds from The National Lottery
Evidence is used to learn and adapt, as required: The MST data system provides routine data on delivery, outcomes and fidelity. The accompanying quarterly reports on outcomes and fidelity are highly valued by both Extern as well as local commissioners.

There is confidence that outcomes have improved: Extern assessed all young people and families against the MST Instrumental Outcomes which found an improvement in parent’s parenting skills, family relations and pro-social activities.

The service is cost-beneficial and sustainable: Extern is committed to sustaining MST as part of its core business and has an assessment of the service's unit costs. MST is written into its Corporate Plan and it has a strategy for replicating and scaling MST further.

Outcomes for beneficiaries

Each organisation has sought to monitor the outcomes of children and young people prior to and after service delivery. Find out more about outcome measurement in Realising Ambition.

Extern delivered MST to 156 young people in Northern Ireland. Along with their families each young person was assessed against the MST Instrumental Outcomes at the end of their service provision. Questionnaires from the Realising Ambition Outcomes Framework were administered to 75% of young people at the beginning of MST, and to 27% at the end.

Against the MST Instrumental Outcome assessments: 84% of recipients' parents had the parenting skills necessary to handle future problems and 85% had improved family relations. In addition 78% of young people had success in an educational or vocational setting and 84% were involved with pro-social peers and activities. The vast majority of cases - 81% - demonstrated sustained change in these areas. Conclusions drawn from the administration of questionnaires from the Realising Ambition Outcome Framework are limited given the low follow-up rates. Nonetheless, these limited data indicate a reduction in average scores of aggression and misbehaviour with 80% of young people's behaviour remained stable or improved. Prior to the service, 54% of young people met either a borderline or high-need threshold: this fell to 27% after MST.

The changes in outcomes are generally positive in relation to young people's behaviour and family relationships, although the lack of a comparison group means that these changes cannot directly be attributable to MST. Changes in behavioural outcomes are generally greater than the changes observed with other more universal services within Realising Ambition, which is not surprising given the intensive nature of MST.

What next

Extern has successfully been commissioned to continue delivery of MST in Belfast; its delivery in Realising Ambition contributed to this achievement. The organisation is also currently developing a plan to engage stakeholders in the public health and substance misuse fields, which it expects will lead to future opportunities to replicate MST in Northern Ireland.

The wider commissioning environment remains challenging, especially in the context of austerity. Extern recognises that its strategy for scaling MST is longer rather than short term. The organisation remains committed to the service and its further replication and scale.

Find out more

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