

An evaluation of the Family Drug and Alcohol Court in Wales pilot

Executive Summary

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CASCADE Infrastructure Partnership



Our expertise brings together an exceptional partnership. CASCADE is the leading centre for evaluative research in children's social care in the UK and sits within the School of Social Sciences (SOCSI), a leading centre of excellence in social sciences and education research with expertise in quantitative methods. The Centre for Trials Research (CTR) is an acknowledged national leader for trials and related methods, the School of Psychology was ranked 2nd for research quality in the most recent Research Excellence Framework and SAIL provides world-class data linkage. Together we believe we can create a step-change in the quality and use of children's social care research that is unparalleled in the UK. Specifically, we can deliver high quality trials and evaluations; link data to understand long-term outcomes and involve service users (our public) in all elements of our research. Our intention is that these three strands will interact to generate an unrivalled quality of research.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) is an alternative form of care proceedings and a promising, problem-solving approach to helping parents overcome problems related to substance misuse. In recent years, the potential of FDAC has been recognised in Wales, where concerns about rising numbers of children in care are particularly acute. In 2021, the Welsh Government commissioned a two-year pilot of FDAC in the Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan areas to be operated from the Cardiff Family Court. The Centre for Justice Innovation (CJI) are providing operational support to the pilot and commissioned this evaluation as a way of understanding whether and how it is successful in its aims. The evaluation began in January 2022 and will end in January 2024.

This interim report is the first output from the evaluation. It focuses on the early stages of the pilot, exploring the set-up period, and briefly charting the throughput of families during its inception phase. An overview of current practice is presented in the form of a policy review and the report also reviews recent research in this field: highlighting key findings that are pertinent to the Welsh pilot.

Section 1: Research and literature review

The profile of FDAC has grown in recent years and researchers around the UK continue to explore its potential and effectiveness. Four main research projects currently being conducted on FDAC in the UK were identified in a research review. All projects are funded by the Department for Education's *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme, via What Works for Children's Social Care. Across the projects, a range of methodologies are being used to measure the impact of FDAC, capture how it is implemented and experienced, and test new iterations of the model. The findings from these projects will have important implications.

Literature searches identified twenty-four recent, relevant publications. Several key themes were identified from these, four of which are discussed more in depth in the main body of this report. Briefly, the four identified themes were:

Effectiveness - Evaluations demonstrated that families undergoing FDAC were significantly more likely to both retain care of their children and cease substance misuse compared to those in standard proceedings. These results were also observed to have better longevity than standard proceedings. Successful outcomes were frequently attributed to FDAC's collaborative way of working, and parents valuing their agency in co-produced goals and plans, as well as honesty and respect from professionals, particularly judges.

Cost - Projection models of FDAC's costs and savings estimated that by implementing FDAC, local authorities (LAs) and legal services can yield significant cost-savings through avoiding recurrent care proceedings and care placements, reduced callouts of emergency and police services for issues related to substance misuse and reduced legal costs.

Covid-19 - The literature review demonstrated there is still much to learn about any positive and negative implications for FDAC as a result of the pandemic. Where Covid-19 was discussed, it was noted that the restrictions of Covid-19 initially impacted FDAC sites' ability to operate as normal, particularly regarding the way in which hearings were held and the lack of staff and community service resources. However, some changes have been brought forward to the post-Covid-19 operation of FDAC as they were thought to be positive.

Recommendations - Consistent recommendations were made throughout the literature: particularly for increased housing support, post-proceedings support, and the utilisation of peer support.

Section 2: Policy review

At present, 16 FDAC teams operate in 24 courts and serve 36 LAs. All current FDAC sites conform to the established, core FDAC model developed in during the London pilot. However, there have been many iterations of the model over the years. A consultation exercise was undertaken as part of this evaluation to explore how and why FDAC has evolved and been adapted for different contexts since the implementation and evaluation of the London FDAC model. All 16 current FDAC sites took part, engaging with the evaluation team by email or via video conference. Three FDACs reported no changes to the core FDAC model. The remaining 13 FDACs reported adaptations that largely fell into three broad themes discussed more in depth in the main body of this report:

Expanded support offer - Some FDACs had expanded their team or service with additional specialisms: particularly around domestic abuse support and mental health support. Following the recommendations of previous evaluations, several FDACs offered post-proceedings support, though the nature and extent of this varied. Peer mentoring schemes were considered to be successful by the FDAC teams, with many offering this service or aiming to in the future.

Funding - Funding has a key role to play in how (and whether) FDACs have progressed or expanded. Some FDACs have increasingly expanded due to additional funding. Others have faced management re-structures and service closures, or were only able to continue supporting one LA when funding ceased (when they had previously supported multiple during their pilot phase). Several FDACs voiced concerns about future funding and explained how instability in funding has caused recruitment problems, created instability in the team, and constrained the service they are able to provide.

Relationship with local authorities - All FDACs are independent of the LA, though in practice they vary in how closely they work with LAs, and how independent they feel. For example, some FDACs have more separation (no shared funding, data, or working sites with their LA(s)), while other FDACs have closer ties (shared resources and data), and some sit within the LA or are an expansion of an existing service within the LA.

Section 3: Implementation of FDAC in Wales

To explore if FDAC implementation in Wales occurs at the same levels and is enabled and inhibited by similar factors previously identified, a combination of interviews and focus groups with 10 professional stakeholders were conducted between March-June 2022. This included members of the FDAC team, LA social workers, legal practitioners, practitioners from partner agencies, and practitioners involved in supporting the implementation of the C&V FDAC site.

The four main levels of FDAC implementation identified in Wales are:

- 1. National/policy level** - Key enablers of FDAC implementation in Wales at this level were the buy in and funding provided by the Welsh Government.
- 2. Local authority level** - The availability of services was identified as both a key enabler and barrier at the LA level.
- 3. FDAC level** - The training and opportunities for the FDAC team and partner agencies to observe existing FDAC sites during implementation was echoed across all interviews and focus groups as a key enabler. Implementation barriers relating to training were also identified.
- 4. Individual level** - This level had not been previously identified in other studies. It refers to implementation at the individual level (service user and practitioner), and was highlighted as an important enabler in the Welsh pilot. The suitability of individual practitioners was considered a key enabler at this level.

Consultation with key stakeholders who were involved in the implementation of the C&V FDAC or in the early stages of the pilot generated some new insights into implementation. Based on these, the following interim recommendations aim to support the implementation of FDAC more broadly in Wales:

Recommendation 1: Widen availability of training. Make the same intensive, three-day training (provided to the FDAC team by CJI), available to all key partner agencies/services, and emphasise the importance of attending training on the FDAC model. This would help to ensure all key stakeholders are aware of FDAC processes and principles, and increases buy-in at the LA and individual levels, when practitioners feedback their knowledge of how FDAC works and what it can achieve to colleagues and families.

Recommendation 2: Provide follow up training. Provide a second training or ‘refresher session’ after the FDAC team begin working with families in FDAC. This would provide an additional opportunity for practitioners to attend training on FDAC if they were unable to attend in the first instance. Moreover, it allows the FDAC team to further reinforce their knowledge of the model in the context of having applied the processes and principles, and having identified areas that require further guidance or support.

Recommendation 3: Enhance supporting documentation. Update available supporting documents for FDAC, to further emphasise how children are involved in the model, and how their safety is prioritised.

Recommendation 4: Secure funding and standardise support. Continue to make funding available for all new FDAC sites to receive the same level of intensive implementation and post set up support received by C&V.

Section 4: Progression of Cardiff and Vale FDAC

The Cardiff and Vale FDAC (C&V FDAC) launched its two-year pilot programme in December 2021. The core C&V FDAC team was established in November/December 2021, and is based in Cardiff City Hall. The C&V FDAC operates out of the Cardiff Family Court, and has three specially trained judges. The court is overseen by one lead judge hearing FDAC cases, and another two judges currently available to cover for holiday and sick leave.

The site began hearing FDAC cases in late December 2021, with the first parent signing up to FDAC in January 2022. As of August 2022, C&V FDAC have had eight cases involving 11 parents and nine children. One case has concluded proceedings and there are currently six cases in the ‘Trial for Change’. One case was deemed ‘not suitable’ and is not included in the following data.

Based on their number of cases in early August 2022, approximately eight months since the pilot commenced, C&V are slightly behind their target of 15 cases per year during their pilot.

The severity of parents’ clinically judged alcohol misuse at the start of proceedings was most commonly ‘medium’ (60% of parents), and the severity of parents’ clinically judged drug misuse at the start of proceedings was most commonly medium to high (50% and 40% respectively).

Other notable characteristics of families involved in the pilot were mental ill health, domestic abuse and unstable living arrangements. Thirty percent of parents had an existing mental health diagnosis, and 70% of parents had either past or current experience of domestic abuse. At the start of proceedings, 50% of parents were living in either supported housing, a hostel, or a refuge, and most children were either in foster care (50%), or with a non-parental family member (37.5%).

Section 5: Next steps

As of August 2022, there are 11 months remaining in Phase Two of the evaluation of the FDAC in Wales pilot. The focus of the remainder of this phase will involve conducting interviews and observations with 15 families in FDAC and professional stakeholders to explore their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. Data will be collected and analysed in iterative cycles and used to further test, develop, and refine the previous programme theory on how, for whom and under which circumstances FDAC works, with a focus on the Welsh context.

Phase three commences in August 2023 and will involve follow-up interviews with case study families and key stakeholders, and quantitative data analysis obtained from the C&V FDAC site. The data from the pilot site will be compared with one or more FDAC sites in England in three main areas: (1) profile, (2) needs, and (3) outcomes.

Conclusion

This report has focussed on the early stages of the C&V FDAC pilot, which, as of August 2022, has been running for approximately eight months. The inception period for the C&V FDAC pilot appears to have been largely successful, despite being undertaken in a period of considerable disruption due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19. Furthermore, the team are providing a service to a growing number of families in Wales, and their experiences are contributing to the knowledge base on FDAC more widely.



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