The Dartington Social Research Unit is an independent charity that brings science and evidence to bear on policy and practice in children's services to improve the health and development of children and young people.
Theory of Change

At the Dartington Social Research Unit (DSRU) we strive to make a demonstrable positive impact on the health and well-being of all children by working closely with funders, commissioners and providers of children’s services. We actively seek out organisations ready to embrace and test innovations and to be the early adopters of new ideas. Working intensively with them, we seek to alter the way money is spent in children’s services and change the interventions, policies and processes that are used to improve children’s lives. Through the positive example of these organisations and active advocacy, we seek to influence the decisions of others, including national and local government.

We provide intelligence in the form of primary research (high quality epidemiological data and robust impact evaluation) and secondary research (synthesis and economic analysis of what works) and combine this with facilitation, training and thought leadership to advocate for change.

Our Values

Our staff and trustees exude our values for:

• intellectual curiosity
• clear, simple communication of complex ideas
• innovation based in science, high quality evidence and logic
• using local innovation to influence central governments
• a cosmopolitan outlook, taking ideas from around the world
• a product focus, turning ideas into things that policy makers, practitioners, children and families can use
• engaging with users of children’s services, and communities in which children live
• charity, being as generous with our ideas and products as others have been to us.

We have a reputation for being represented by intelligent, provocative, nice people who are passionate about improving the well-being of all children.
"As Trustees we like to know the charity is improving children’s lives. It is satisfying to see our impressive staff team increasing the impact as demand for their work increases."

JOYCE MOSELEY OBE, CHAIR OF TRUSTEES

Directors’ Report

In 1999 we published Prevention and Early Intervention with Children in Need. This book encouraged policy makers and commissioners to learn from the US and to invest in what works, and made the case for higher quality evaluation, particularly more randomised controlled trials (RCTs). This was not a popular position to take. We were thought to be maverick and very much on the periphery of children’s services research and policy. It was hard to imagine that by 2015 our views would have become mainstream, that there would be six ‘What Works’ centres in England, and that RCTs would have their proper place in the evaluator’s toolkit. It would be arrogant to assume that we have single-handedly brought about this change but we like to take some credit.

Our current portfolio (outlined on the following pages) reflects the interest we retain in this area: six ‘real world’ RCTs; two robust rapid reviews of the evidence; and an online portal (Prevention Action) making available the latest findings in prevention and implementation science. More than that, we continue to advocate for economic evaluation and make Investing in Children (an online portal comparing the costs and economic benefits of 100 programmes and practices) freely available. While we value the huge contribution of the US prevention scientists, we are increasingly looking ‘East and not West’. Thanks to support from the European Commission, we are collaborating with centres across Europe to recognise smart, robustly tested European innovations.

It has been through our place-based work in Scotland and England that we have edged closer to our ambition to demonstrably improve outcomes for children at scale. Working across 19 sites we have collected data on over 12,000 children aged 0-8, and from over 30,000 children aged 9-16, putting data about the needs of those children into the hands of local decision-makers. Combining this with good data on investments across children’s services, training, guidance and strong facilitation we have influenced over £215 million worth of expenditure.
Our passion for innovation is undiminished and we welcomed the opportunity this year to test out a new approach to social investing - a Public Social Partnership. Furthermore, we have been privileged to lead an inquiry into severe and multiple disadvantage for the LankellyChase Foundation. This has re-invigorated our interest in qualitative methodologies and sparked an examination of the role of the relationship between the helped and the helper in improving the life chances of children and young people.

This work has been made possible by the support of trusts, charities, and national and local government, who between them gave grants and contracts totalling £2.4 million. Over this period we have invested in our organisational capacity, attracting three more outstanding research fellows and supporting two researchers to embark on PhD study, and have re-vamped our operations function.

Thanks to the support of philanthropy we have extended our reach, with our team of 25 working across offices in Dartington, Glasgow and London (Somerset House). They are complemented by a further 15 Associates and the on-going, generous support of colleagues in the Centre for Social Policy.

As more children and families suffer the effects of austerity and deeper cuts to public services, it becomes ever more important to bring good quality science and evidence to bear on policy and practice. Through our relationships with forward-looking foundations, local authorities and charities we will continue to prosecute our privileged position as an independent charity to the benefit of all children in need.

Co-Directors

MICHAEL LITTLE

LOUISE MORPETH
What Works

The ‘what works’ stream has three elements. First, we undertake reviews of the evidence about intervention effectiveness in a given subject area. Systematic methods are used to identify suitable studies, which are then critically appraised before the results about what works and related implementation issues are synthesised. Second, we review discrete programmes against our Standards of Evidence (SoE). The programmes we examine typically originate in the US but also increasingly in the UK and Europe more widely. Reviews are completed using the Blueprints for Healthy Development template. Third, we undertake meta-analyses of evaluations of interventions, the results of which are used alongside data on intervention cost to inform cost-benefit analyses using the Investing in Children economic model.

“The work was complex and demanding and the team delivered a high quality report that will be of great use to stakeholders.”

DR ANN HOSKINS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING, PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND

RAPID REVIEW FOR PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND

Collaborating with the Universities of Warwick, Coventry and Plymouth, we completed a review of evidence to update the Healthy Child Programme 0-5 years, the key universal public health service for improving children’s health and well-being through health promotion and parenting support. The study reviewed 160 systematic reviews and 50 RCTs covering parent mental health, alcohol/drug misuse, domestic violence, attachment, parenting, nutrition, and speech and language. It also identified key messages regarding effective implementation and workforce training.
Place-based Reform

We work with local authorities to help leaders of public systems and communities to work together to design and implement bold strategies designed to demonstrably improve child outcomes. Our framework creates a joint accountability between leaders of public systems and communities to make evidence-informed investment decisions focused on improving child outcomes. We interrogate the allocation of existing resources and seek to identify 2% of total expenditure for re-investment. We draw on local evidence of need, ‘what works’ and science-based service design approaches. The approach is forged out of a collaboration between the DSRU, The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Washington State University. We have applied the methodology in numerous progressive local authorities and major philanthropic investments in the UK and US.

“DSRU are fantastic. They have helped our Realising Ambition programme to thrive, and they have opened my eyes to new ways of thinking about evidence and evaluation.”

PETER BAILEY, HEAD OF KNOWLEDGE, THE BIG LOTTERY FUND

BETTER EVIDENCE FOR A BETTER START

Through their A Better Start programme, the Big Lottery Fund aspires to improve the well-being of 0-3 year olds in five disadvantaged communities in England and to reform children’s services systems to be more focused on evidence-based prevention and early intervention. We were engaged by the fund to work with 15 sites competing for these funds. We provided robust epidemiological data, methods to analyse expenditure on children, in-depth reviews of the latest research, training, guidance on governance and community engagement, and the facilitation of a commonly owned strategy in each site. The successful sites are now in the early stages of implementation.
Data and Analytics

We put the best data on child well-being and the implementation of strategies and services into the hands of decision-makers. First, we undertake epidemiological surveys of child well-being across local authorities, covering the antenatal period through to early adulthood. Surveys are representative of all children in a given area. They create a holistic picture of need, assess the degree to which existing services meet the needs of the population and help prioritise areas for focused investment. Second, we design and produce data systems and dashboards to monitor in real-time the implementation of services and strategies. These support accountability, course correction and create a foundation for rapid-cycle testing and refinement of services. All our work is powerfully visualised to foster meaningful contributions to decision-making.

“The Dartington team, working with us on our survey of young people’s mental health in Camden, have brought methodological expertise, subject knowledge and genuine rigour.”

JASON STRELITZ, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR/CONSULTANT IN PUBLIC HEALTH, LONDON BOROUGHS OF CAMDEN & ISLINGTON

IMPROVING CHILDREN’S OUTCOMES (ICO)

We recently worked concurrently across three local authorities in Scotland to gather robust and representative data on the well-being of children in order to inform local strategic investments in children’s services. We created an innovative web-based data visualisation portal allowing decision-makers in each area to interact with these data. Surveys were administered to almost 2,000 parents of children 0-8 years and over 21,000 children aged 9-16. Response rates in school-based surveys exceeded 85% in each area. The work was supported by the Scottish Government.
Service Design

We help charities, social enterprises and children’s services agencies to design, test and refine services. Our approach to service design is unique - it draws heavily upon the science of child development and high-quality evidence of need and ‘what works’. We support organisations to develop logic models and activities that are supported by the best available evidence. We also encourage the involvement of practitioners and intended beneficiaries in the design process to ensure that services are not only what people need, but also what they want to engage with. Design with impact at scale in mind is also core to the approach. This requires knowing what is ‘core’ and adaptable, and what structures and supports are required to ensure that the service is sustainable and scalable.

“We have welcomed the thoughtful and intelligent contribution the DSRU has brought - the programme is stronger for their involvement and commitment to evidence and impact.”

CHRIS WRIGHT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, CATCH 22

REALISING AMBITION PROGRAMME

As part of the Realising Ambition programme - a £25 million investment by the Big Lottery Fund in replicating promising and evidence-based interventions - we have been working with 22 different service delivery charities across the UK – large and small – to help refine and replicate a diverse collection of services for children. Our work has included logic model and manual development, the creation of outcome and fidelity monitoring tools and full unit costing. We have been collaborating with our partners - Catch22, Substance and the Young Foundation - to support other organisational aspects of the approach.
Emerging Ideas

We have recently turned our gaze to four areas where we believe we can do much better for children. First, we feel it is time to look afresh at the role relationships play in the interaction between the helper, be that a volunteer or paid practitioner, and the helped. Second, we are drawing on our in-depth understanding of public systems and knowledge of children’s needs to find new ways of holding systems to account for the impact they make on vulnerable children drawn into the heavy end of services. Third, we see a need to develop and test new ways of evaluating services where the traditional outcome paradigm is not suitable. Fourth, we see potential in applying public health principles to the child protection system.

“A Public Social Partnership (PSP)

Safe Families for Children (SFFC) connects volunteers and families in crisis to offer practical help, friendship and brief respite. Funded by the Department for Education, the programme is being offered to children’s services departments across England as an alternative to local authority care. Through the PSP they will receive the service at no cost for an agreed period and on evidence of positive results will enter into a conventional contract for services. We have partnered with SFFC to develop and test the PSP and will provide independent, robust evidence of the impact of their programme through a randomised controlled trial.

“Safe Families could not have made so much progress without the support of the Co-directors and their excellent team. They are best breed, cutting edge and an inspiration to work alongside.”

KEITH DANBY, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SAFE FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN
How we Work

Most of our engagements are long-term (often over a year) and intensive. We are most effective when we are working in partnership with a Foundation, Local Authority or a charity, as illustrated below.

WITH FOUNDATIONS

We are fortunate to benefit from grants from an array of Foundations, such as Big Lottery Fund and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Over the years, however, we have also helped several Foundations to use evidence to shape their investment strategies. We are delighted to be collaborating with the LankellyChase Foundation as thought partners, helping them to nurture new ideas about the way services should respond to the needs of young people experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage.

WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

We tend to collaborate with a handful of Local Authorities at any one time. Current partners include Torbay, North Ayrshire and Dundee. We have worked most intensively with Perth & Kinross Council, using our place-based reform approach, Evidence2Success. After collecting data on the well-being of a large representative sample of children and mapping current expenditure across children’s services, we facilitated the crafting of a strategy for children which included a commitment to make an investment of £1 million in evidence-based early intervention and prevention activity.

WITH CHARITIES

This year we have collaborated with over 30 charities to refine the interventions they deliver to children and families to demonstrate and improve their impact. We worked closely with Action for Children, evaluating the implementation of their Family Partners home visiting programme, having previously helped to prepare a service manual. As part of the Big Lottery Fund’s A Better Start programme, we used our service design method with four sites to shape scalable innovations informed by the best evidence.
Nurturing Talent

For nearly 20 years DSRU has trained PhD students, equipping them not only with the scholarly skills to undertake good research, but also exposing them to the real world of children’s services to ensure that their studies benefit policy and practice.

This year we are delighted to be supporting Rebeca Sandu and Kate Tobin.

REBECA SANDU
Rebeca is registered with Professor Michael Lamb at the University of Cambridge and is investigating the role of relationships between the helped and the helper.

KATE TOBIN
Kate is registered with Professor David Smith at the University of Edinburgh and is investigating the commissioning and use of evaluation in children’s services.

As part of the Unit’s strategy to grow, we recruited three research fellows to join the Unit. All were recently awarded their doctorates and they work out of our London office.

SARAH HEILMANN
Completed her PhD examining the link between parental resources and child outcomes at the LSE in 2014.

GEORGINA WARNER
Completed her PhD examining the prevalence and effect of Down’s Syndrome and comorbid autism spectrum disorder on families at King’s College London in 2014.

KEIRA LOWTHER
Completed her PhD in palliative care in HIV at King’s College London in 2014.
The Centre for Social Policy

The centre was established as a complement to DSRU in 1995 to provide a context for academics, policy makers and practitioners who were retired or working independently to continue their work. It has over 70 fellows representing 11 disciplines and holds seminars three times a year in Dartington as well as holding early evening seminars in London. The centre manages the Ethics Committee for the Unit, provides advice to researchers and makes regular contributions to Prevention Action and the Journal of Children’s Services. Seminars this year addressed the topics of Unaccompanied Migrant Children and Child Mental Health.

Governance

We benefit from a small but involved board of trustees comprising individuals from academia, policy and business. Our Chair, Chris Robinson, stepped down in September 2014 after nearly five years, during which time he helped to attract a high-calibre group of people who provide a valuable mix of support and challenge.

TRUSTEES

Joyce Moseley OBE (Chair)  
Naomi Eisenstadt CB  
Sir Trevor Chinn  
Vagn Hansen  
Professor Roger Bullock  
Professor Ann Phoenix  
Professor John Drew CBE

“The team at DSRU combine high standards of scholarship with an in-depth understanding of children’s services to ensure that their work makes a positive difference.”

PROFESSOR ANN PHOENIX, TRUSTEE AND CO-DIRECTOR, THOMAS CORAM RESEARCH UNIT, INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
Strategy

Our commitment over the next four years is to draw on our long history and traditional strengths, such as our understanding of the way public systems work, and bring them to bear on contemporary challenges at a time of reduced state investment in children’s services.

We will remain focused on securing better outcomes for children but will also be more intentional about achieving this at scale, becoming better at prosecuting our innovations. First and foremost we want to influence the people who control public expenditure - the leaders and decision-makers of local government - to change how they spend their money.

We have consolidated our existing work into four broad streams - ‘what works’, ‘place-based reform’, ‘data & analytics’ and ‘service design’. We are also incubating new ideas for future streams.

In order to achieve greater impact, we are exploring the potential of a delivery arm capable of making our methods and tools more widely available. Linked to this is a shift from being ‘a well-kept secret’ to making DSRU’s work more widely known across leaders of children’s services, researchers and leaders of public policy in Europe.

“Many charities are having to close despite doing good and necessary work. I’m impressed how the DSRU has maintained a robust balance sheet and healthy reserves. This will provide a buffer for possible tough times ahead.”

VAGN HANSEN, TRUSTEE AND HONORARY TREASURER, DSRU
Success by 2018 will be indicated by

- an expansion from four to seven work streams and an increase in turnover to £2.8 million
- a stronger, broader leadership team, a more robust middle band of researchers and a continued commitment to nurturing talent through our PhD programme
- a delivery function turning over £2m, with profits invested into the charity
- more examples of achieving impact at scale

Financial Information

This year DSRU has benefitted from the support of Foundations, Local Authorities, charities, individual donors and National Government. Income totalling £2.256m was received over the course of the year, with associated expenditure of £2.255m, generating a small surplus of £0.2k.

The purpose of this financial information is to summarise resources and performance. The information has been extracted from the full audited accounts for the year. The full accounts can be obtained from the Charities Commission website.
OUR SUPPORTERS INCLUDE:

- Action for Children
- Angus Council
- Big Lottery Fund
- Cabinet Office
- Camden Council
- Catch 22
- Department for Education
- Dundee City Council
- Early Intervention Foundation
- European Commission
- Frontline
- Impetus
- Includem
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Lancashire County Council
- LankellyChase Foundation
- National Health Service
- North Ayrshire and Arran Councils
- Perth and Kinross Council
- Public Health England
- Safe Families for Children
- Scottish Government
- The Annie E Casey Foundation
- The Atlantic Philanthropies

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