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Evaluation of objects in social work project

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Acronyms

LACYP	Looked after children and young people
LSW	Life story work

1. Summary

This report analyses feedback from social workers and practitioners involved in Coram's 'objects in social work' experimental groups, run by emeritus professor Mark Doel, between March 2021 and October 2021.

It is hypothesised that the use of objects in conversations in social work enables social workers and children and young people themselves to better understand their life stories and therefore their needs. As a result, social workers become more skilled in supporting children and young people and giving them stability in their lives. It is also hypothesised that the use of objects in social work will be relevant for use by adoptive, foster and kinship carers, and for families and children to use together, too.

To help develop the project and its evidence base Mark Doel set up three virtual experimental groups of 6 to 10 social workers and practitioners ('staff') in London, Sheffield and New York to explore the use and impact of objects. The groups met once a month from March 2021 to October 2021 for 1-2 hours each time. Each session was guided by an object theme from a Resource Pack (Table 1), for example 'lost and found' objects, 'newest and oldest' objects. Additional themes also emerged from the groups themselves, such as most recent significant object, and these suggestions were used with and by the group.

As group facilitator, Mark Doel started each session with his own object story and members were then encouraged to share their own object story and reflect on any examples of the use of objects from their practice.

Overall, staff feedback about the use of objects in social work and the objects group sessions was positive. The following key themes emerged:

- ***Surfacing life stories***
  - Attendees that we interviewed felt that they had gained a better understanding of their service user's life stories through asking them to open up about their objects. In turn, staff felt service users were also better able to understand their own life story.

- ***Improving non-verbal communication***
  - For those who were shy or too young to articulate complex emotions spontaneously, staff reported that talking around an object uncovered beneath-the-surface emotions and needs. Many felt that had they not have used objects, they would not have extracted much meaningful conversation or established a closer relationship with service users.

- ***Improving social work practice***
  - Staff felt they came away from the group sessions with another technique and skill in their repertoire, and started to feel confident using it.
  - At times, they felt challenged in their practice, especially when first introducing objects into conversations given it was a new technique for some. The main challenges were making the conversation feel natural, asking about objects in an unobtrusive way and being prepared for objects to open up trauma.
  - Handling trauma made a few particularly nervous, therefore the objects work had identified areas staff themselves needed to develop outside of the objects work.

- ***Improving support***
  - Only a few social workers and practitioners were able to comment on the impact on service users as the use of objects in social work was still quite new for them.
  - One social worker did recall that when service users are moving between placements, they now pack service users' items that are of significance to them personally e.g.

teddy bears, photos etc., rather than purely practical items considered important by the social worker.

- ***The group sessions***
  - The group sessions worked well in that they were collaborative and offered an open space to share and reflect on practice. Mark Doel was praised for his facilitation skills, encouraging attendees to open up and providing insightful comments and questions.
  - The content and the discussions that took place were engaging, although some felt that more structure and guided tasks would be beneficial.
  - Engagement did drop off for all of the group sessions over the summer months. We did not speak to those who dropped off the project completely, but we did speak to those who did not attend all sessions and their reasons were down to time and other commitments especially in the summer months.
  - While some felt that the group sessions should be more frequent, longer and with more communication in between sessions to maintain momentum, others felt the frequency and length was appropriate. Therefore, flexibility in adapting how often to meet and how long for depending on staff needs is important.
  - The resource pack, developed by Mark Doel, was a good in-depth resource for staff to read in their own time. Some, however, felt a shorter summary pack with key practical advice and tasks would be more useful, especially for those who are short on time.

This report describes early feedback of the objects group sessions, and contains recommendations for further development and wider-scale implementation, reaching different audiences such as foster carers, adoptive parents and kinship carers.

2. Introduction

Many of us have questions about our own life history, but have access to a family member or friend who might know the answers. For children who grow up away from their birth parents, this is not always the case. The difficult experiences that many looked after children and young people (LACYP) encounter can damage their sense of self and belonging. They can find themselves blaming themselves for their situations or unable to disentangle the complexities of it.

Narrative identity theorists claim that those who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Parent/carer-child conversations about events and ensuing emotional responses are crucial in building children's narrative skills and capabilities, yet these are the relationships that LACYP often lack (McAdams and Janis, 2004).

In the UK, life story work (LSW) is an established element of social work practice for looked-after children and a statutory requirement since 2005 in England for children who have been adopted (DfE, 2013). It helps LACYP develop a sense of identity, and both the care planning guidance and NICE guidance highlight the importance of LSW as a therapeutic process allowing LACYP to explore their experiences and feelings to understand what happened in the past and think about their aspirations for the future. Where these life story conversations do happen, there are clear benefits. Selwyn et al (2014) reported that some adoptive parents felt excellent LSW had supported placement stability; whilst other parents believed that poor LSW had contributed to their children's difficulties, particularly as they became older and asked more searching questions about their origins that the LSW they received as young children did not help them to understand.

It could be argued that objects are considered a particularly valuable way of sharing life stories – a key hypothesis of this research. Things around you in your personal space have stories, meanings and connections, and provide a window into feelings and emotions. One literal piece of evidence of the value of objects in storytelling comes from the US-based Significant Objects project that launched in 2009. The literary and anthropological experiment devised by Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn demonstrated that the effect of narrative on any given object's subjective value can be costed. The project auctioned off seemingly low value thrift-store objects via eBay which included item descriptions in the form of short stories purpose-written by over 200 contributing writers. The objects, purchased for $1.25 apiece on average, sold for nearly $8,000 in total. Walker and Glenn's idea was that the emotional value that comes from attaching a story to an everyday object is so strong that it can be measured in terms of objective, actual value. In other words, you can put a price tag on the value that a story creates by appealing to potential buyers on an emotional level.

In social work settings, objects are valued by some for what they can reveal about a LACYP's sense of identity and mental state, for example a social worker may pick up on photos a child or young person has around them, their toys, trinkets and even furniture and bedding. These objects can be a starting point for conversations. For many children, it is not the object per se that is important, but the memories, emotions and meanings attached to that object, such that children will reject an identical object, such as a toy, because it is not 'their' toy (Hood and Bloom, 2008). The object's value lies in the meaning attributed to it by the child, which makes it irreplaceable.

On the whole, however, the use of objects in social work is limited and LSW can easily be overlooked - the Talking and Listening project (2018) found that less than 20% of practitioners in the UK used any form of materials to communicate with children. The NSPCC's Achieving Emotional Wellbeing for Looked After Children project found that, although life story work was viewed positively by professionals, carers and children, there were too few people with the skills needed to carry out the work (Bazalgette, Rahilly and Trevelyan, 2015). Senior social work managers explained that life story work is not always prioritised because "there are no drivers within the system" to ensure it is completed and there is little support in carrying out LSW. The pressures have been exacerbated globally by

austerity, which leads to budgetary restrictions, higher caseloads and in turn, more stress and less time. Less money spent on training and bringing in other professionals contributes to concerns about the quality of LSW and potentially negative implications of this not being done well.

2.1. Introduction to this objects in social work project

Professor Mark Doel, emeritus professor at Sheffield Hallam University, has had a long-standing interest in the use of objects in social work and LSW. In 2016, he started the Social Work in 40 Objects project, which aimed to provide an alternative approach to understanding social work—through display rather than definition and description. The project initially started out as a website, acting as a virtual exhibition of social work, and then later, a book which Mark called 'a Catalogue' (Doel, 2017). Anybody could join in as a donor and/or witness. Donors were asked to provide: a black-and-white squared image of the object, some text, starting 'I chose [this object] because ...'; a black-and-white squared head shot of themselves and some text describing themselves and their relationship to social work.

An open, online 'donation' process elicited 127 objects and their backstories from people across twenty-five countries and five continents. For example, below is an extract from Liz Allam, who submitted an A-Z street finder:

'*In a metaphorical sense the A-Z represents how as a social worker, we were expected to do a bit of everything, to cover it all, from A-Z. In my time I have made sandwiches, helped people cook meals, clean their houses and write letters, I have accompanied people to court, hospital, police stations, cinemas, hospitals, taught English, attended funerals….. I have advocated, advised, supported, mediated, challenged, facilitated and trained. It is something that I love about social work, that you are a jack of all trades and can offer the support that an individual actually needs, whatever that may be (though I accept that is getting more difficult).'*

With Coram's support and the help of Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funding, Mark Doel created a Resource Pack. The Resource Pack explored how objects do, and can, play a part in the search for meanings and memories in the lives of children and young people. This Resource Pack was written for social work practitioners to use in their practice. The full theory of change for the objects project can be found in the appendix. To summarise, the use of objects in conversations in social work should enable social workers and children and young people themselves to better understand their life stories and therefore their needs. In turn, social workers become more skilled in supporting children and young people and giving them stability in their lives. While the theory of change was designed with social workers, who, it is intended, will use objects in their practice, the hypothesis is that this will also be relevant for use by adoptive, foster and kinship carers, and for families and children to use together.

To help develop the project and its evidence base Mark Doel set up three experimental groups of practitioners in London, Sheffield and New York to further explore the use and impact of objects. The groups met once a month from March to October 2021 for 1-2 hours per session. Each session was guided by an object theme from the Resource Pack, and additional themes also emerged from the groups themselves. Mark Doel, as group facilitator, started each session with his own object story. Members were then encouraged to share their own object story and reflect on any examples from their practice.

It is through these experimental groups that Coram-i, funded by the Hadley Trust, is developing this work further into a training programme for practitioners and those interacting with vulnerable children and young people.

3. Background to the project

3.1. Background

Between March and September 2021, Professor Mark Doel ran small group sessions with social workers and therapists exploring different object-related themes. There were three groups:

- One in North East London, in partnership with the North East London Social Work Teaching Partnership
- One in New York, in partnership with Adelphi University
- One in Sheffield, in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University.

Each group met once a month between March and October 2021, apart from Sheffield where the group did not have a session in March, April or July 2021. Each session was guided by an overall theme as per the Resource Pack (Table 1), additional themes also emerged from the groups themselves.

Table 1: Group discussion themes and meeting dates

Group	Month of 2021	Theme
North-East London	March (26th)	Introductory webinar
	April (9th)	Individual plans, introduce self via an object
	May (7th)	'Important objects'
	June (4th)	'Rescued objects': what 3 objects would you rescue from a fire?
	July (2nd)	'Aspirational objects' – what object(s) would you like to have?
	Aug (6th)	'Lost (and found) objects'
	Sep (3rd)	'Collections of objects'
	October (1st)	Final reflections
New York Adelphi	March (31st)	Introductory webinar
	April (15th)	Resource Pack introduction, introduce self via an object
	May (6th)	Use of objects in your work, ideas for object themes for future sessions
	Jun (3rd)	'Oldest and newest significant objects'
	July (1st)	'Lost (and found) objects' (for self in personal life)
	Aug (5th)	'Lost (and found) objects' (for others in professional work)
	Sep (2nd)	'Cultural objects', 'novel objects' (objects that are deliberately introduced into the work by the practitioner), 'objects of identity'
	October (7th)	Final reflections
Sheffield Hallam	April (21st)	*Introductory webinar cancelled – insufficient numbers*
	May (13th)	'Oldest object still in your possession'
	June (8th)	'Most recent significant object'
	July (13th)	*Cancelled – insufficient numbers*
	Aug (10th)	'Objects of safety', 'objects of anxiety'
	Sep (14th)	Final reflections

A typical objects group session would focus on one or two object-related topics, agreed at the end of the previous session. Mark would begin the session by sharing his own object story. For example if the session was about lost and found objects, he would share a story of a lost and found objects in his own life and the significance of this.

Attendees would then be invited to share their own stories from their own lives, followed by some discussion and reflection. As attendees are encouraged to apply objects to their practice, the final

part of the session would involve reflecting on any objects stories they have from their practice, talking about what happened and what they took from the interactions.

3.2. Objectives

The report is structured around three key research questions in order to gather as much insight and information as possible about the perceived effectiveness, value and impact of objects in social work:

1. To what extent could the use of objects in social work improve outcomes for children and young people? Specifically:
    - Improving relationships with children and young people
    - Enabling better support for children and young people
    - Enabling others around children and young people (such as family) to better understand them and their needs

2. To what extent can the objects work positively contribute to the sector? Specifically:
    - Improving skills of practitioners
    - Improving confidence of practitioners
    - Increasing levels of engagement of practitioners

3. What are the key strengths of the objects in social work group sessions and how could they be developed further?

3.3. Methodology and sample

3.3.1. Data collection methods

We used the following data collection methods to inform our evaluation:

- Observations and transcripts: a researcher observed 8 groups, one in each of the three locations in August and September, and two in October 2021 (London and New York; the Sheffield group did not meet in October). After each session, Mark Doel created a set of notes and transcripts containing details of the discussions in the sessions.

- We received information on how many people attended each group, either by directly attending and observing the groups or via transcripts that included this information.

- We conducted 1:1 semi-structured interviews with 11 attendees via video conference, between 20th September and 8th October. These explored feedback about the objects work, the group sessions themselves and their thoughts/advice on whether to and how to develop an objects training programme. These were audio recorded and transcribed.

- We conducted 1:1 semi-structured interviews with 2 group facilitators via video conference, between 23rd and 29th September 2021. Mark Doel, and Carol Cohen, New York group co-facilitator, reflected on their experience of the sessions and their advice for future facilitators was explored. These were audio recorded and transcribed.

3.3.2. Interview sample

We interviewed a total of 11 attendees across the London, New York and Sheffield groups: 3 in London, 4 in New York and 4 in Sheffield, representing 22%, 40% and 57% of the attendees of the respective groups.

While the interviewees in the London and Sheffield groups were all practicing or trainee social workers, not all attendees in the New York group were; some had a therapy background and one was a retired social worker.

3.4. Analysis

Given similar themes emerged from the group session transcripts and the 1:1 interviews, both were combined and used together in analysis, which took the form of thematic analysis. Key themes, sub-themes and relevant quotes have been shared throughout this report.

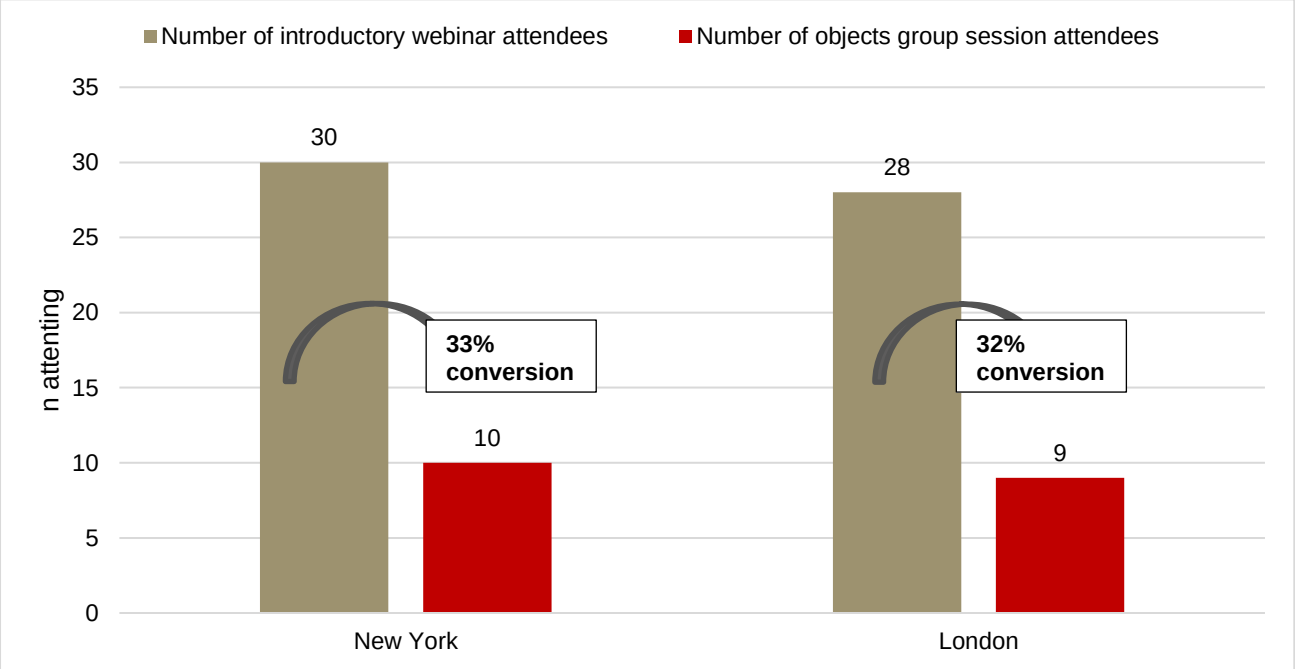
Descriptive quantitative analysis was carried out on attendance data. No significance testing was applied.

4. Findings

4.1. Getting involved in the objects work

Introductory webinars were held in New York and London to explain the objects project to practitioners and recruit them onto the subsequent group sessions. Of those who attended these webinars, around a third took part in the objects group session (figure 1):

Figure 1: Conversion of attendance from introductory webinar to objects group sessions*



(n=58) *No introductory webinar took place in Sheffield.

We asked interviewees how they became involved in the project and why it was something they wanted to get involved in. The majority of interviewees described being directly approached to take part, initially receiving an email about the project inviting them to sign up to the introductory session.

Almost all of the interviewees described the objects works as something that piqued their interest, right from the initial contact they had about it.

'I get emails from [a] university and this was one of them and it immediately grabbed my attention. This topic is of interest to me. It really speaks to me.' – Clinical Supervisor, New York

It was clear from speaking to interviewees that all had a keen interest in developing their knowledge, learning new skills and developing the confidence to try new things - this is likely to be the audience for further objects groups. Some of those we interviewed mentioned already using objects in their work and wanting to build on this further. Others who had not used objects previously recognised the potential of it and wanted to learn more.

'I'm always interested in new things. A new way of working. I've been in the team for a long time, and it was a new thing. I also like learning and sharing things with others, and for personal development.' – Social worker, Sheffield

One social worker recognised Mark's name in an email she received about the group, and his credentials encouraged her to participate. This indicates the importance of Mark having continued presence in further development of the project.

'As soon as I saw Mark's name I knew it would be good. I've always followed his work as a practitioner and educator, so that made me want to get involved.' - Practitioner, Sheffield

4.2. Overall thoughts about the use of objects in social work

When asked to share their overall reflections of the objects work, all interviewees were positive and none spontaneously mentioned any drawbacks. The project left many excited about where the objects work could take them in their work with service users.

Many felt the use of objects in social work was such an obvious tool and questioned why they were not incorporating objects before or why they were not taught it before as part of their training, highlighting a clear gap that the objects work could fill.

For those that were already using objects in their practice, their involvement in the objects project validated their approach and gave them the confidence that using objects is a beneficial tool.

'It's left me excited about branching off into what I can do with this kind of work. Since I started I've been introduced to so many objects, and I've asked people to bring in things and a specific topic. It's a big thing that I can use with people, perfecting the craft in that sense. You can be so creative with it. It's something that can be utilised with younger children, teenagers, adults, there is really no limit to that.' – Practitioner, New York

'I thought the objects work was engaging, creative and thought-provoking' – Social worker, London

'It's something so simple as to speak about objects and memories. I saw it as a simple tool we can use in our practice' – Social worker, Sheffield

4.3. The impact of objects in social work

Interviewees were asked about the impact of the objects work on their service users and on themselves. The most commonly mentioned impact on service users was that, by using an object to talk around, they could open up about difficult subjects that would not have ordinarily come up in conversation. For example, telling a social worker about an object that their deceased parent had given them or showing photos in a family photo album. Through these conversations, social workers and practitioners developed stronger relationships with service users and could better identify the service user's needs, e.g. extra bereavement support or ensuring support solutions respect family dynamics.

Some other impacts on social workers and practitioners included becoming more reflective and thoughtful about their practice, something they rarely had the time to do. The objects work also gave them the confidence to be creative and think outside of the box about how to engage children and young people in conversation.

Some key themes that emerged are presented below.

4.3.1. Surfacing life stories

Some interviewees shared examples of how the objects work had acted as a mechanism to help their service users bring their life stories to the surface. For example, some social workers mentioned that they were able to better understand their service user's family dynamics and relationships by using objects:

'One of the things we've used is stones, and I've used them with young children, and they are just amazing. They can put them in order, who they are close to, describe people. One girl put the stones in order of her family. She put herself close to her mum and said that "mum is near the contact centre too so I feel close to her". We've described how they are feeling in the placements.

Another girl, there was a shiny stone, she picked a diamond for her foster carer, and then picked a different one for her sister.' – Social worker, Sheffield

'I had asked a service user "what's your oldest object?", and she brought this stuffed animal. She told me that she lost the object when she was very young, a neighbour took it from her and didn't want to give it back. She went home in tears without her stuffed animal, and then I asked the family, "what did you do?" The parents devised this plan together to get this stuffed animal back, by distracting the neighbours and going into their house to take the stuffed animal back. It was a fun way of seeing how they bonded and solved the problem as a team. It gave me an idea of the family dynamics.' - Practitioner, New York

One social worker told us how objects can be used to help children and young people piece together events in their lives in order to make sense of their life story:

'I've done life story work with one little girl. She couldn't remember places or a timeline, so we built a physical timeline rather than just going through years. We used teddies and toys from different periods of time and lined them up which helped her understand the events in her life' – Social worker, Sheffield

The objects work also helped staff from different cultural backgrounds interact, for example there were attendees from Lithuania in the New York and Sheffield groups, for whom English was not their first language. Through showing and talking about their objects, many understood the stories of the Lithuanian attendees, demonstrating the cross-cultural and universal nature of the objects work in surfacing life stories. Similarly, objects of cultural significance were discussed which enabled staff to hear stories they perhaps would not usually come across.

4.3.2. Improving non-verbal communication

Many interviewees agreed that while the objects work is beneficial in helping all types of people communicate their thoughts and feelings, it is those who are non-verbal that would benefit the most. For example, this could be children who are very young and cannot effectively communicate their needs or connect with others through words. The objects work has helped these children and young people form relationships with their social workers, or has strengthened the relationships that were already there.

'It works especially well with young ones – it brings everything to life. I sat down on the floor with a 2 year old and some beads and by the end she was waving goodbye to me.' – Social worker, London

Some practitioners also felt that those who may be verbal but are very shy and nervous to open up particularly benefitted from the use of objects. Some interviewees recalled that at the beginning of their journey with especially quiet and reserved service users, it was difficult to extract any meaningful conversation, but introducing objects made a positive difference.

'I used the objects work on a child who was very, very shy and direct work was difficult and it offered a lot. She would disengage so much and stare at the window and absolutely didn't want to answer any of my questions. I used some of the ideas around if you were an animal which animal would you be and she was very quick to respond – she said fish because fish don't speak and I found that so interesting. She also liked Roblox so I asked her to create an avatar of herself and she was happy to do that and explain why she chose to create it like that. I really got to know her better, prior to that I'd be struggling a lot.' – Social worker, London

'It works so well for children who just don't want to talk. For example a client of mine loves bears, and it was a time when she was missing her mum so we went to Build-A-Bear. She built the bear and put the heart in the bear and named it her mum's name and said thank you to me. Those were the first words she ever said in the 6 months I worked with her. We probably wouldn't have got anywhere if I just asked her to speak without the help of the bear.' – Practitioner, New York

4.3.3. Improving support

Many interviewees had not yet had the opportunity to use the objects work in their practice long enough to see an impact. However, one social worker in Sheffield did recall that they felt the objects work changed the way they approached children and young people's belongings when packing them up to go to a new placement. They now pack items that are emotionally important to the service user, rather than items that are most practical:

'I now have a better understanding of the importance of everyday objects that I might not have thought important before; e.g. social workers focus on the child having enough clothes rather than looking after the things that are most important to the child – objects of transition. I've been very mindful of how I've packed objects – and what is taken.' – Social worker, Sheffield

Another social worker recalled that by using objects they were better able to understand why their service user was avoiding going to school, and as a result they were able to provide the service user with dedicated tutoring at home:

'I was working with a boy with behavioural issues. I asked him to pick an object to tell a story and he picked the colours in my necklace (he loves green, blue), then he showed his massive collection of different cards and he linked them with his things (a duck, soldier), matching by colours. Within an hour I learned so much about him - he doesn't like school, because he can't take his cards and toys to school. So a tutor goes to him and gives him 1:1 attention.' – Social worker, London

4.3.4. Improving social work practice

Interviewees described a range of ways that the objects groups had improved their practice – the key benefit was adding a new, simple yet innovative technique to their toolbox. At the start of the session, some had never thought about the role objects play in their service users' lives. By the end of the group sessions, many were clearly demonstrating that they had learnt the importance of objects and that they had become skilful in applying the work to practice. As mentioned above, many became particularly skilful in having meaningful conversations for those younger or more guarded children. For many interviewees, they now had more confidence in engaging with these types of service users.

'It has made me feel more confident in dealing with children who are harder to reach, I have some different resources I can use now. I tend to get given cases with older children and teens because I connect better with them but now I have a toolbox to deal with younger children who aren't able to verbalise.' – Social worker, London

Coming together in a group setting gave social workers and practitioners the space and time to reflect on their own experiences of objects as well as using objects in social work. It created excitement, togetherness and a way to network and share ideas, something that social workers and practitioners agreed they do not always have the time to do.

'It made me more proactive, I wanted to go back and share what I was doing with the group. I think it was because we were getting closer in that sense, it was a huge benefit as it was this 'we-ness'. I made these connections with people that I will continue to be in contact with. I don't want to stay isolated, I want to share and network.' – Practitioner, New York

By speaking about their own objects, many attendees felt they were able to put themselves in the shoes of service users and feel how it feels to talk about objects and their meanings. This helped them empathise with the service users, in turn making them more thoughtful and conscious about their practice. Seeing and interacting with objects of significance in their service users' lives helped social workers and practitioners bring their experiences and life stories to life.

For those already using objects in their practice, the group sessions validated their approach and added some structure and credibility to it, giving them the confidence that it was an appropriate and effective technique.

'I think that I am a person that already views objects, kind of explores their complexity. It's validating. It's given more of a conceptual framework bringing it into discussion with other professionals. This is a real thing.'- Practitioner, New York'

4.4. Drawbacks to the use of objects in social work

Overall, interviewees did not spontaneously mention any drawbacks to the objects work or group sessions. When prompted, a few who were new to using objects in their practice expressed the most worries. One worry was that objects could bring back traumatic memories and practitioners were nervous about how to then deal with this. Being prepared for trauma to be surfaced and how to deal with it are key topics that should be incorporated in any further development.

'There were two people (not in any of the three experimental groups) who found it very hard – and quite threatening. Some felt uncomfortable with the activity [objects work], and this made me reflect on how the work could be challenging for those who are more anxious. One of the participants has been more cautious – and raised the worry of having a discussion with someone based on an object, but finding it difficult to contain and manage this – a "Pandora's box"'. – Mark Doel, group facilitator

Some interviewees generally felt apprehensive about inviting objects into conversations, either in case they brought up particularly sensitive objects, or in case it felt unnatural and jarring to talk about objects in a conversation. Therefore, being conscious of objects and weaving them into conversations seamlessly was a challenge for some.

'A challenge is to listen to where the story about an object is being given to you. You don't have to introduce it. You need to be aware that objects are already being told, used for vehicles of meaning for people but we don't notice.' – Practitioner, New York

Typically, interviewees felt the objects approach was universal, however some social workers recognised that the objects approach may not work for everyone as not everyone can open up and share stories in this way. Therefore, there is a limit to the objects work and it may not be well received by all service users.

'Some people just can't think like that. They can't think abstract. I think you have to judge that person of how they are thinking. It's incredible how different these personalities are and how they learn. How some people want information and other people want more of a discussion.' – Social worker, Sheffield

'For [one of my clients] it's either black or white and they don't want to open up or tell me about their objects. So the willingness to participate is a challenge.' – Practitioner, New York

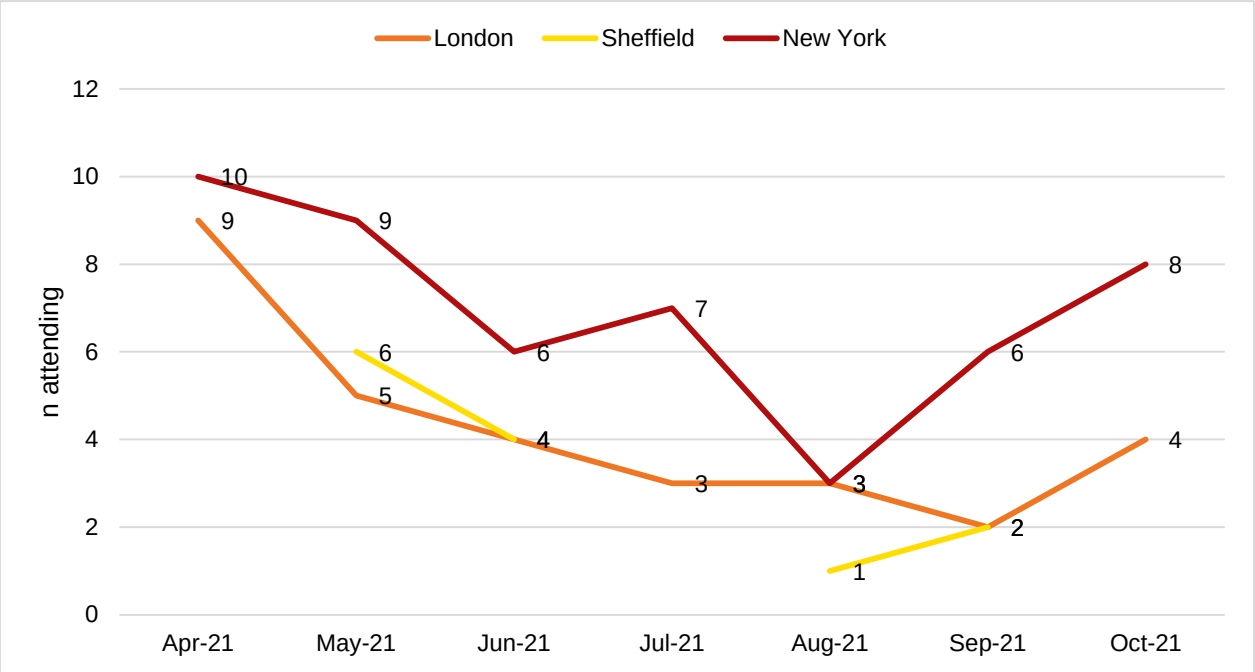
4.5. Feedback on the objects in social work group sessions

4.5.1. Engagement and attendance

Attendance at the objects group sessions started off high in all three locations, with 10 attending the first session in New York, 9 in London and 6 in Sheffield. However, there was a slow decline in attendance over the next sessions. The summer months, perhaps unsurprisingly, saw the lowest numbers - in August 2021, just 3 attended in London and New York and 1 in Sheffield.

Attendance in the London and New York groups did then pick up again in September and October 2021, although not reaching the same levels as in the first group session.

Figure 2: Attendance in each objects group in London, Sheffield* and New York



(n=25)

*Groups in Sheffield did not meet in April or July 2021

4.5.2. Structure and contents

The vast majority of feedback about the structure and content of the group was positive. Interviewees liked that Mark Doel shared examples of this own object story first because it gave them some direction and inspiration and encouraged them to open up.

'I like the format and that Mark starts off and shares, it avoids any awkwardness and encourages people to share. If we didn't have that people wouldn't be as comfortable and relaxed.' – Associate Director, New York

They also spoke positively about attendees having the opportunity to share their own experiences of objects, this was powerful in helping them realise the value of objects. There was an overall consensus that if social workers and practitioners were to use objects in their practice, they should experience what it is like to be a subject.

For some interviewees, the opportunity to share object stories from work practice was more engaging than personal examples as they were more applicable to their field. It helped them learn from others' experiences.

'It was a good way of sharing what we learned and how we were using it. It gave everyone the opportunity to speak as well. I was listening and learning how others have used [object work].' – Practitioner, Sheffield

Overall, interviewees felt that the balance between rigidity and fluidity in the session was good. There was enough time for open unstructured discussion while still remaining on topic. However, in developing the objects work further into a training programme, some interviewees would prefer to see more practice-based content featuring in the sessions. For example specific tasks, topics and aims of each session, grounded in more theory and practical advice as to how to apply objects to their work. They recommended using a PowerPoint or interactive whiteboard and including links to the readings mentioned in the session too.

'I do think it should have been more structured, or a bit more specific. Maybe if Mark gave specific tasks or something perhaps there would be a bit more willingness to keep attending.' – Social worker, London

A minority would have liked the resource pack to be referred to more often and suggested this, or ideally another shorter practice-based written resource, could be used more to guide tasks and additional reading.

'I like the resource pack, it's very beautiful and poetic but many social workers would look at it and think it was too much and wouldn't read it because they don't have the time. So I think a more cut down version would work better – I really like at the end there are examples of questions we could ask to implement the ideas so more of those would be good. Need something easy to digest, action-oriented. I love the longer one as background reading though.' – Social worker, London

4.5.3. Logistics (frequency, online format etc.)

We asked group attendees how they felt about the groups logistically, for example frequency of sessions, format, communications in between sessions etc. Approximately half of the group attendees who we interviewed expressed that it would be better if the groups were more frequent than once a month. Having the groups monthly meant that attendees forgot about what was covered in the previous sessions or what the next session would be on and had to wait a long time to share their experiences.

'Twice a month I would say is ideal. It's really hard because everyone is so busy, that's the difficulty. But when it's only once a month, you lose a bit of a momentum.' – Social worker, London

'It could be a topic where we get really into it and it may be trauma focused, so we need to come back to it earlier than a month.' – Practitioner, New York

However, this was not a view shared by everyone. One interviewee felt having a month between sessions allowed the time to think about things between sessions and apply them to their practice.

The group sessions started off being 1 hour long, however over time they were extended to either 1.5 hours or even 2 hours for the New York group. Many commented that the sessions were over by the time people told their stories and discussed them, suggesting that 1 hour is perhaps too short and 1.5-2 hours is more appropriate.

'Our last session was even extended to two hours because we had so much to talk about. By the time people tell their stories and we discuss, the sessions are over. Because it's only once a month people have lots to say and need to get their thoughts out.' – Practitioner, New York

One interviewee liked that they were always prepared for the next session as they were given one reminder in advance about what they would be discussing, however some recommended having more communication and engagement between sessions to remind people about the upcoming group and its theme. When probed, some felt this communication should be taken off email, which often gets cluttered, and onto another forum such as a WhatsApp group. This could also be used as a way to share experiences and updates and seek advice in between sessions.

'I like the idea of WhatsApp. If nothing else it keeps conversation consistent, you get nuggets of info rather than emails which you are less likely to absorb. We have a WhatsApp group with foster carers where they share info about training or if they have any problems, they can reach out, a support group via WhatsApp. That's been successful, so if you have that for professionals it would work well.' – Social worker, London

Group facilitator, Mark Doel, also felt that that more contact between meetings would be beneficial:

'I'd potentially have more contact between meetings – weekly email, reminder of theme, share own written account or similar, and request written accounts. Social workers can be reactive – so regular emails may help to encourage them to incorporate this into their practice.' – Mark Doel, group facilitator

Interviewees tended to like the group format of the sessions as it allowed them to hear from other people in the sector with diverse experiences. The sizes of the groups felt appropriate, with most recommending smaller groups of 6 to 8 people.

'A smaller group, around 6-8 is better for the discussions we're having because it is intimate and emotional. I wouldn't want to get that emotional around 20 people, I probably wouldn't have opened up.' - Senior Practitioner, London

Overall, interviewees would have preferred the groups to be in-person given how honest, personal and open they require attendees to be. Generally, there was a consensus that in-person sessions would result in much more organic conversations, and seeing objects in real life would be much more powerful than on a screen. A face-to-face format would also be better for comforting attendees where physical support could be given.

'All those little conversations in between, you lose them, it can be a bit formal. I think you're more relaxed in [an in-person] group and it would be richer.' - Social worker, Sheffield

'I want to say "do you want to go for a chat" or put a hand on them for support, and when it's virtual you can't do that. So there is a need of how to look after people's wellbeing. They're opening up about memories and there's no support. – Social worker, London

That said, interviewees didn't feel virtual delivery was a deal-breaker and said the online format worked for now, given everyone is so used to that way of working. One mentioned the benefit that people can access the group sessions from a variety of locations, even internationally.

4.5.4. Feedback on the facilitator

All of the feedback about the group facilitator, Mark Doel, was positive. He was described as engaging, open to discussions, down to earth, flexible and thoughtful – all qualities that interviewees felt future objects work trainers should have.

Interviewees liked that he was willing to open up with his own objects story at the start of the sessions, it was important to them that the facilitator participates as it shows they are open to learning from others. One interviewee highlighted his ability to relate to students.

Another commented that he did not put pressure on attendees to do 'homework' if they did not have time, which helped them feel at ease about attending the sessions unprepared but ready to just listen in on conversations. This is important in ensuring attendance remains high.

When we asked interviewees what we should look for in a trainer, they commented:

'Someone like Mark! Very down to earth, very experienced, professional. Very kind when people couldn't make it or similar. Not pushy. Encouraged people to share as much as they wanted to share. Good at facilitating communication.' - Social worker, Sheffield

'Be like Mark!! Need a trainer willing to be open about themselves and demonstrate the ideas themselves.' - Senior practitioner, London

5. Conclusions and recommendations for further development

This report set out to evaluate:

1. The extent to which the use of objects in social work can improve outcomes for children and young people.

2. The extent to which the objects work can positively contribute to the sector. Specifically:

3. The key strengths of the objects in social work group sessions and how they could be developed further

The objects work has met its aim of positively contributing to the sector, with all social workers and practitioners feeling that they have developed new communication skills by using objects in conversations. As they were encouraged to use objects in their social work and then had the space to reflect on this as a group, the confidence of social workers and practitioners did increase.

Many social workers and practitioners did feel they became closer with their service users, particularly those who were non-verbal. They better understood family dynamics and their service users' life stories. However, further evaluation needs to be carried out on longer term outcomes such as enabling better support for children and young people.

The objects in social work group sessions went well on the whole, with many enjoying the group format, the chance to discuss and reflect, and the skilled group facilitator. There were some practical suggestions from social workers and practitioners about how to improve the groups further, prevent the drop in attendance over time, and keep attendees engaged:

- More communication between sessions e.g. more reminders about the next session, a space to share stories ahead of sessions etc.
- Flexibility to adapt the frequency and length of the sessions as they go. Some felt more frequent sessions would keep the momentum going, however others who dropped off who were not interviewed in this research, may have done so due to the time commitment required.
- Continuing to reduce the pressure to contribute, reassuring attendees that it is okay to listen even if they feel they cannot contribute.
- More practice-led content, guided by structured tasks such as role play about how to handle certain situations, especially where objects open up trauma.
- Supplementing the resource pack with a shorter, more practical guide with some reflective tasks included.
- Ensure that those who sign up to attend the groups are motivated and committed from the start - a paid programme, one you have to apply to, could be beneficial.

Overall, the use of objects was considered a powerful tool worth embedding in practice, developing further, and rolling out on a wider scale, so that anyone interacting with children and young people can benefit.

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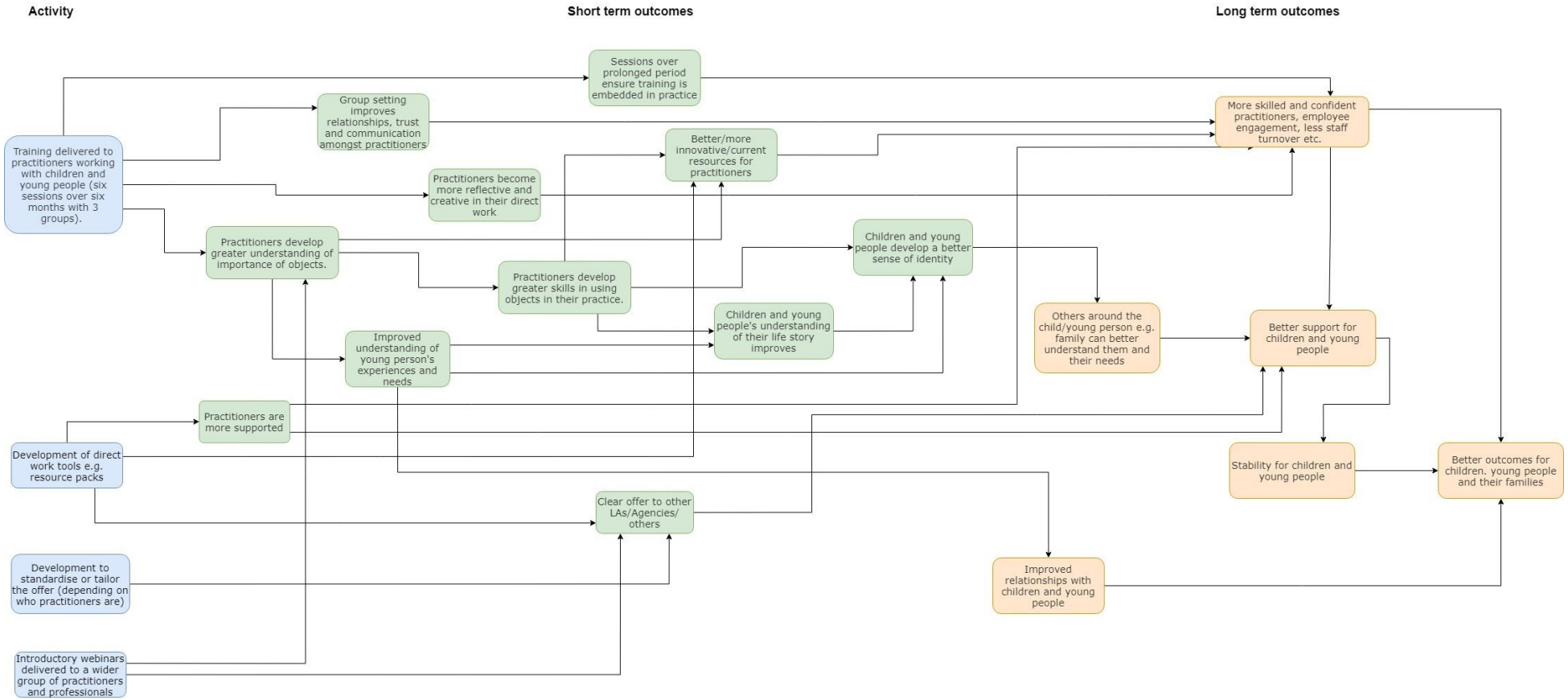
7. Appendix

a. Objects in social work Theory of Change



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