

## The National Evaluation of On Track, Phase Two Theoretical overview of the programme and its evaluation

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### Introduction

*On Track* is a long-term multi-component initiative aimed at children and the families of children aged four to twelve who may be at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour in England and Wales. It was originally devised by the Home Office in 1999 as a pilot or demonstration programme, funded through the national Crime Reduction Programme. The aims, objectives and shape of the initiative have roots in the US programme *Fast Track*. A preventative intervention, targeting high risk school-age children, *Fast Track* aims to intervene in early onset conduct problems, and research has shown that the programme can be effective in reducing later conduct problems amongst children and adolescents and improving educational and social outcomes for adolescents. Recent evaluations in the US report effectiveness in a number of specific areas, for example in increased emotional and social coping skills, improved reading skills, better peer relations, better school grades and fewer behavioural difficulties (Conduct Problems Research Prevention Group 1999, 2002)

*On Track* was launched in December 1999 and since April 2001 it has been incorporated into the Government's £450m Children Fund programme. There are twenty four local *On Track* projects in England and Wales in areas of high social deprivation, each covering an average population of around 2,000 school aged children. Central to the ethos of *On Track* is co-operation and joint working between relevant agencies in order that children at risk of offending are identified early and that they and their families are provided with consistent services extending through the period of transition to school and to early adolescence. The services delivered, which like *Fast Track* in the USA include both universal and targeted approaches and are both school and home-based, are supposed to utilise 'evidence-based' methods. That is, they are supposed to use methods of delivery shown by research to be effective (or at least 'promising' in

this regard) in reducing antisocial behaviour and offending. Local On Track projects are also expected to shape educational and health outcomes, and so each project is managed by a local partnership comprising the main health, educational and social service providers, and including youth offending teams, the police and relevant voluntary sector organisations. The projects build on and link together existing services and initiatives for children and families.

This type of integrative, 'multidimensional' approach is very much in keeping with the model of service design and delivery that has been advocated in successive Green Papers produced by the British Government on services for children and families (*Supporting Families*, 1998; *Every Child Matters*, 2003). The development of On Track can be seen in the context of the general evolution in policy and practice in children's services in the UK over the last decade. These include, for example, the larger *Sure Start* initiative, another multi-component programme launched in 1998 as part of the child poverty reduction strategy, targeted at infants and pre-school children aged birth to four and aimed at improving children's readiness to learn by means of locally organised services delivering a range of support in early education, childcare, health advice and family support for young children and their parents. Since its inception, over 500 local *Sure Start* programmes have been established, initially targeting children within the 20% most deprived wards in England, but more recently expanded to cover all areas of the country. Other more recent developments in this 'family' of initiatives aimed at reducing poverty, reducing crime and antisocial behaviour, and enhancing positive outcomes for children include the establishment of multi-agency *Children's Trust Pathfinders*, bringing together health, education and social care services for children under one umbrella; the gradual introduction of information-sharing systems and protocols known as *Information Sharing and Assessment (ISA)*; initiatives such as *Extended Schools* and the *Safer Schools Partnership Programme*; and of course the establishment of funding streams such as the *Children's Fund* and the *Parenting Fund* and the *Family Support Grant Fund* that have made it possible for wide range on innovative new services to be set up and trialled across Britain.

## **Risk and protective factors in the development of antisocial behaviour in young people**

*If we can reduce risks while increasing protection throughout the course of young people's development, we can prevent problems behaviors and promote healthy behaviors and lifestyle choices.*

[Communities that Care, 1994]

It is now widely accepted that the likelihood of embarking on or persisting in a criminal career is strongly influenced by a combination of risk and protective factors in children's individual, family and community ecology (Farrington 2000;

Rutter, Giller and Hagell 1998). By *risk factor* we mean characteristics or attributes of an individual, family, social group, or community that increase the probability of certain disorders or behaviours arising at a later point in time. *Protective factors*, on the other hand, 'inoculate' or in some way mitigate against risk factors. They promote *resilience*, which is the process by which individuals maintain positive functioning in the face of adverse circumstances (see for example Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker 2000). Critically, protective factors should be more than just the mirror-image or absence of a risk factor: they should add something to our understanding of the causal pathways to different outcomes.

The precise nature of the causal relationships between risk and protective factors and various types of negative and positive outcomes remains, however, unproven (Rutter, Giller and Hagell, 1998). The relative contributions of 'nature' (genetics) and 'nurture' (environment) remain in debate, and in respect of the pathway to antisocial behaviour in young people, there are questions about whether some risk factors are more influential than others, and whether certain combinations of factors may have greater impact on future behaviour than others. In addition, relatively more is known about risk than protective factors: protective factors have been identified as playing a significant role in preventing criminal behaviour but as yet, much of the 'theory of protection' remains at an early stage of development.

Risk and protective factors are helpfully thought of in terms of the 'ecological' model of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979), which takes a systems perspective and provides a framework for understanding how factors that impinge on children and families nest together within a hierarchy of four interconnected levels - the level of the individual, the family, the community or neighbourhood, and at the level of the wider society or culture. For example, in terms of risk factors for violent behaviour, an individual level risk factor might be a low threshold for the tolerance of stress and problems with impulse-control; a family level risk factor might be family poverty, or inter-familial violence; a community level risk factor might be growing up in a community characterised by a concentration of peers also engaged in forms of antisocial and violent behaviour combined with low levels of community surveillance; and a social or cultural risk factor might be the tolerance or even endorsement of violence as a means to an end by the wider society (for example, a proliferation of glamorised depictions of interpersonal violence in the media). The ecological perspective reminds us that children do not develop in a vacuum but within a complex web of interacting, interdependent factors. It reminds us that we cannot understand factors associated with one level of the model without also exploring those at other levels.

The prevention research literature over the last several decades has drawn attention to a number of specific risk and protective factors that have been shown to be 'predictive' of the likelihood of future types of behaviour (Rutter, Giller and Hagell 1998). At the level of the individual child, commonly accepted risk factors

(or precursors) for youth offending include: early onset behaviour disorders such as hyperactivity; difficulties with learning, poor verbal and planning skills and poor educational attainment; problems with impulse-control; and a tendency to misinterpret social interactions and circumstances as more negative or threatening than they really are. Engaging in other related forms of antisocial behaviour including truancy and substance misuse is also a strong marker for offending at the level of the individual. At the family level, having a family that includes criminal offenders; family violence and discord; and poor parenting (including use of harsh or erratic discipline, low levels of parental monitoring and supervision, and poor parent-child communication) have all been shown to be associated with poor adolescent outcomes in general and youth offending in particular. At the community level, associating with antisocial peers is a major risk factor, as is growing up in a poor, crime-ridden neighbourhood where opportunities for crime are abundant and there is little else constructive for young people to do. In terms of protective factors, certain temperaments seem to help young people avoid becoming involved in crime, and children who engage well with school and make strong peer relationships with those who are not themselves inclined to antisocial behaviour also seem more resistant to becoming involved in antisocial behaviour. Within the family, at least one strong and reliable relationship with an adult who takes a warm interest in the child's development can be protective, and within the community, opportunities to engage in constructive leisure activities and develop talents, and a community that takes an active interest in the well being of its younger members may be especially protective.

Risk and protective factors share a number of common characteristics. They tend to be:

- Overlapping (for example, poor mental health is a risk factor for a host of problems, from substance misuse to unemployment)
- Often occurring in multiples (people tend to be subject to several related factors, rather than just one at a time)
- Cumulative in effect (the higher the 'dose' of factors the greater the likelihood of certain outcomes)
- Not static; they change over the life course
- Not deterministic (factors do not 'inevitably' lead to certain outcomes, though they may nevertheless be 'predictive' in a statistical sense)
- Differential in effect (the same factors may impact differentially on individuals depending on other characteristics present in the individual's ecology)

Official statistics show that young people are responsible for between a third and quarter of all crime in Britain. As tackling crime – and especially youth crime – has risen up the policy agenda, so has interest grown in exploring effective models of prevention, and in understanding not just how to 'treat' the problem

but also in how to prevent it arising in the first place. However, all of the characteristics listed above combine to make intervention to avert poor outcomes and foster good ones much more complex. Because theoretically, the more risk factors to which an individual is exposed, the greater the likelihood that the individual will engage in problem behaviour, intervention must necessarily function at several levels simultaneously. Certainly, interventions at the 'treatment' end of the scale (ie, responding to young people once they have become known as offenders) have to be complex and relatively intensive to make much of a difference. The most successful interventions (such as Multi- Systemic Therapy [MST], for example; Henggeler et al 1998; Borduin et al 2000) 'wrap around' young people's lives, operating at all levels of the young person's ecology. However, the interconnected and complex nature of risk and protective factors also - theoretically at least - offers great promise for preventive intervention (ie, 'getting in early' before children begin to engage in outright antisocial behaviours). If risk factors are interconnected, so too are protective ones, and if we can both reduce the risks in young people's lives and at the same time counter risk by nurturing protective factors, the chances of preventing problems should be greatly increased. The more risk factors that are tackled and protective factors that are boosted, the greater the pay-off should be. Further, since many different forms of problem behaviour share common risk factors, reducing common risk factors is likely to reduce multiple problem behaviours and poor outcomes - not just those directly connected with crime and antisocial behaviour.

## **Intervening in antisocial behaviour: On Track and the research evidence**

Interventions like On Track make three key basic theoretical assumptions:

- Antisocial behaviour is multiply determined;
- The main risk factors which place children at increased likelihood of future offending can be reliably identified at an early stage;
- Certain types of intervention have been shown to be effective in terms of reducing the likelihood of future offending.

Although primarily concerned with longer-term crime prevention, the On Track programme was also devised in order to impact directly upon more immediate social and community problems - that is, the precursors to youth antisocial behaviour - such as under-achievement in school, poor school attendance, poor 'readiness to learn' on entry to primary school, and poor parenting. The movement of policy responsibility for On Track from the Home Office to the Department for Education and Skills via the Children and Young People's Unit has undoubtedly enhanced the family support aspect of On Track's identity. Moreover, broader child and family welfare outcomes may well be the most

immediate concern of both the service providers and the users of On Track themselves, rather than the risk of long-term criminal behaviour. Thus, although On Track is a 'crime prevention' initiative, its outward form has much in common with initiatives more frequently described in the UK as about 'family support'.

The central feature of On Track is the use of five 'core' interventions – many of them based on (primarily American) research that indicates effectiveness. The five core interventions are:

- Home visitation
- Parent support and education
- Family therapy
- Home/school partnerships
- Pre-school education

In addition, to allow for local flexibility and innovation, another 'specialist' category of intervention was allowed to develop alongside these five, covering a multitude of different services (not all of which are, however, evidence-based as robustly as the five core interventions). Many of the school-based elements of On Track projects fall into this group.

The development of the On Track pilot programme, especially in relation to the five core interventions, has in general reflected well the attributes of risk and protective factors outlined above and has been designed to be both targeted and universal, and to be multi-dimensional, and ongoing. Thus key assumptions underlying the On Track programme design are that:

- The concepts of risk and protection can be used appropriately by a wide range of service providers, in order to identify those groups of children who are most at risk of criminal or antisocial behaviour
- Having identified those most at risk, providers work with children and families in ways that ensure that they positively engage in particular interventions on a voluntary basis, and are not stigmatised
- The provision of two or more core interventions, at critical points through the child's life, is likely to be more effective than the provision of only one type of core intervention
- There would be a focused 'continuum of care' in which children are tracked through their development and where agencies would cooperate in providing appropriate services as and when they need it.

## Family-based initiatives, and Pre-school education

Four of the five 'core' intervention categories fall into this group. Three of On Track's five core interventions are targeted directly at the family and parenting: family therapy, home visitation (generally called home visiting, in the UK) and parent support and training. Pre-school education is a further busy area of On Track activity, 'joining up' (in theory, if not always in practice) with local Sure Start projects' work because of the overlapping age range of the children involved. The inclusion of these four types of interventions in the On Track design was based on evidence from research that interventions that address family-level and individual-level risk factors can have a substantial impact on later rates of offending in high-risk populations, and that interventions that combine home visitation, parenting support and pre-school education seem especially effective. Indeed, it has been claimed that the promise of family based crime prevention is subverted only by the failure to devote financial resources to more extensive research and development (Sherman et al., 1997). The work of Olds and colleagues on home visitation projects in the United States was one of the earliest interventions to report substantial evidence of efficacy in this field, showing substantial improvements in parenting skills, maternal life course, and reductions in child abuse and neglect (see for example Olds et al, 1997). Another celebrated family-based intervention was the US-based High/Scope Perry Pre-School Programme which began in the early 1960s, targeting children of low-income African-American families (Schweinhart et al. 1993). The children's families underwent an intensive two-year pre-school educational course. The participants subsequently performed better in school and in adult education and were more likely to gain high school qualifications and later enter employment. Female participants were less likely to become pregnant in their teens. Rates of arrest for those who had been subject to the intervention were 40% less by the age of 19, and by age 27 they "*were significantly more likely to have completed their education, to own their homes and to be earning more than \$2,000 a month*" (Graham, 1998). Less than one in ten of those who had been involved with the initiative had been arrested five or more times, compared to over a third from the control group. Furthermore, the estimated cost-benefit calculation suggests that for every \$1 invested there was a return of \$7.

In the United States, Sherman (1997) found positive outcomes for a number of other family-based interventions; elsewhere in the US and also in the UK parent support and training interventions are increasingly being shown to be effective, especially those that focus on teaching parents coping strategies and practical techniques for managing children's problematic behaviours (Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe (forthcoming). UK examples include the SPOKES programme in South London, which has shown promising results in reducing children's scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Scale (measuring conduct and behaviour difficulties; Scott and Sylva 2001), using a modified version of the Webber-Stratton *Incredible Years* video-modelling programme, combined with home visits and pre-school education; and the Youth Justice Board's Parenting Programme

(Ghate and Ramella 2002) which is aimed at parents of pre-adolescent and adolescent children at high risk of offending and consists of both group work and one-to-one parent education and support.

The family support or 'family-based' interventions used by On Track vary in terms of the way they are delivered according to the intensity of need. Universal services (eg health visiting; ante natal classes) may provide all parents or families with non-intrusive but helpful services. Beyond this, it may be helpful to think in terms of two levels of targeted services, aimed at reaching families on whom it may be especially beneficial to focus if the ultimate goal is crime prevention. First, services for families 'in need' cater to individuals who live in an identified deprived area (for example, parenting support groups located within a poor neighbourhood); second, within these areas, there are interventions targeted at specific families 'at risk', focused on imparting 'intensive care' interventions to families where there is a particularly high risk that the children may become involved in crime and antisocial behaviour (for example, family therapy; and one-to-one parenting support offered by home visitors).

### Home/school partnerships

In recognition of the importance of school experiences and relationships in the pathway to antisocial behaviour, it is a key objective of On Track to formulate a strong partnership between parents and schools by enhancing co-operation, communication and understanding between the parties.

The efficacy of strong and effective home/school partnerships is made evident by research which has shown that family and school are two institutions which can have a substantial influence on a future career in crime (Graham and Utting, 1996). *"One of the most significant protective factors found in the backgrounds of children from disadvantaged homes whose attainment is above average is having a parent who displays a keen interest in their education"* (Utting, 1996). Parents who support and actively engage with the school can improve their children's educational attainment and actively engage with the school.



who is capable of assisting them with any personal problems they may be experiencing.

Home/school partnership projects in the On Track context have taken a variety of forms. These include both group-based and one-to-one sessions for parents in schools (for example, surgeries and advice sessions), and the appointment of specialist home-school liaison workers to work directly with families. For example, in Kerrier where there is a community of traveller families, the On Track project supports a liaison worker who specifically addresses issues of school attendance and attainment with these families. Other Home/School partnership activities within On Track include events to engage parents in the life of the school, for example encouraging parents to participate in trips, activities or help out in special lessons at school.

### School-based initiatives

Working with schools is a core feature of the On Track programme, even though school-based work was not specified as part of the core set of intervention models. Indeed, in some areas many of the elements of the local On Track project are school-based. Although *'the empirical evidence for a causal role for schools (in antisocial behaviour) is limited'* (Rutter, Giller and Hagell 1998) the qualities of schools as social institutions (in terms of ethos, management, teacher-pupil relationships etc) and as places in which to interact with peers and form social relationships are thought to be influential in shaping future attitudes and behaviours of young people. School-based risk factors include low attainment; exposure to bullying and disruptive behaviour; persistent truancy; and exclusion. Interventions developed in the US and being gradually implemented in the UK include those that concentrate on individual pupils, involving either adult or peer support, and those that work on the overall school culture and organisation (for example, anti-bullying programmes, substance misuse education). Many of the best interventions include both of these elements. In the US, the LIFT programme in Oregon provided an intervention containing three components; a group-based parent training course; classroom sessions on social and problem-solving skills; and a peer-group intervention at school involving a game (the 'Good Behaviour Game') that encourages pro-social behaviour by rewarding groups of children who keep negative behaviours to a minimum. A randomised trial used to evaluate the success of the programme showed that children who received the intervention exhibited significant decreases in aggressive and other antisocial behaviours when compared with children who did not take part (Reid and Eddy, 1997). Also in the US, Fast Track (also multi-component, including parent training, home visits and classroom components, and delivered on a more intensive basis than LIFT) has been identified as having an immediate impact in reducing aggression and anti-social behaviour following implementation of the programme, as well as improvements in reading skills: *...findings suggest that after one year, the experimental groups are showing signs of*

*improvements in cognitive skills, problem behaviour and parental involvement in the child's education'* (Dodge, 1993; see also Reid and Eddy 1997; Graham, 1998). Other examples of successful school-based interventions include the Seattle Social Development Programme in the USA (Hawkins et al 1992), which has also reported positive results in reducing aggression and delinquent behaviours amongst pupils. Studies by Olweus in Norway of results from school-based anti-bullying programmes have demonstrated that these kinds of initiatives can cut bullying by as much as half (Olweus 1993).

Research has shown that the relative success of school-based interventions are however chiefly reliant on the school's aptitude for beginning and sustaining novel initiatives. When programmes are located in economically depressed communities and weak infrastructure for supporting the initiatives, positive outcomes are less likely (REFS?). Moreover, the extent to which schools themselves can influence how children's behaviour develops may be eclipsed by criminogenic elements in the community context, and may be '*crippled by the lack of parental support for learning and the breakdown of order in the classrooms'* (Sherman et al 1997). Additionally, the peer-group element of many school-based programmes (either pairing a child at risk of antisocial behaviour with a child not showing negative behaviours; or delivering interventions to groups of antisocial peers together) comes with something of a health warning; the former seems to be effective, but the latter has been reported to have '*iatrogenic*' effects (ie, negative impact resulting from treatment). An example of the former approach is the '*St Louis Experiment*' (Feldman 1992), which showed that experienced peer-group leaders could have a positive effect on the antisocial behaviour of the peer group as a whole, and that this in turn had a positive impact on individuals within that group. The operative word here is '*experienced*', however. It appears, that '*bad*' peer-based initiatives may even be counterproductive; for example, Dishion and Andrews (1995) report that an intervention involving delivering training to groups of at risk young people together in school actually *increased* levels of antisocial behaviour, and it is now generally thought that these types of approaches may unintentionally result in reinforcing peer-influenced antisocial behaviour by providing antisocial young people with a way of increasing their networks of other at risk children (Reid and Eddy 1997).

In the On Track context, school-based initiatives take a wide variety of forms. They focus both on social skills and functioning, and more directly on key skills necessary for better education attainment (ie literacy, and numeracy). They include for example peer-mentoring projects (where specially trained pupils befriend and support other more vulnerable children); school counselling and advice surgeries; After-school and Breakfast clubs; work by community police officers within schools running sessions on drug and alcohol education; anti-truancy initiatives and patrols; art and drama therapy; and various clubs and holiday play schemes to engage children in constructive activities and develop special talents in their out of school time. Special work either in groups or on a one-to-one basis helping children prepare for and negotiate key transitions in

school life (starting primary school, going on from primary to secondary school) is also a feature of a number of On Track projects.

## Evaluating On Track

### Challenges

Measuring outcomes from initiatives like On Track is distinctly problematic (Utting 2001). First, there are the characteristics of youth offending itself that make evaluation a complex business. Antisocial behaviour (including offending) is extremely heterogeneous. For example, most youth offending is fleeting and minor in nature, but a small proportion is persistent and more serious, and it is this group that are responsible for perhaps as much of half of all youth offending in the UK. Most offending is adolescence-limited (young people grow out of it); perhaps only around three to six percent is 'life-course persistent' (Rutter, Giller and Hagell 1998). Home Office figures show that a substantial minority of adult men in Britain (around one third) will have a criminal record by the time they reach their thirties, mostly acquired as juveniles. An even greater proportion are likely to have engaged in some form of offending but not been caught. The widespread and heterogeneous nature of youth offending creates challenges in identifying the various sub-groups, yet this is essential for understanding the specific impact and future potential of crime-prevention initiatives. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) state that while there is a growing body of evidence that supports the effectiveness of multi-dimensional initiatives such as On Track, there is still a great degree of lack of specificity as to how precisely such initiatives promote positive youth development. They contend that this vagueness hampers endeavours to evaluate the benefits of such initiatives, which in turn affects the ability to improve the range of services and interventions available. Moreover, the impact on crime of even the most promising initiatives so far has been modest: the most successful programmes have typically achieved only a twelve percent reduction in re-offending (Rutter, Giller and Hagell 1998)

What then are the likely outcomes of On Track and how should they be measured in an evaluation? At one level, the task looks simple and could be seen in terms of the reduction or prevention of crime in the areas where On Track is being delivered. However, to measure On Track's success purely on its ability to show a measurable reduction in youth crime would be to miss the point. Firstly, the nature of On Track means that it is much more than a simple 'crime prevention' programme. Rather, it aims to impact on a host of factors connected with child and family welfare and these too need to be measured. Second, On Track is a prevention programme targeted at early intervention in the *precursors* to anti-social behaviour, and it is thus not expected to achieve significant outcomes in crime reduction *per se* in the short term. In the longer term this should be both possible and appropriate, but given the age of the children

involved in On Track (four to twelve year olds), and that the peak age for youth offending in the UK is in the late teens, from fifteen to eighteen years old for young men and slightly later for young women, we will have to wait a long time to measure this aspect of On Track's impact. Short term and mid-range outcomes can be identified from changes in the incidence of risk and protective factors within the population of On Track users, however; it is also a reasonable hypothesis that if On Track were efficacious in reducing the likelihood of youth antisocial behaviour, we would be able to see changes in whole community trends beginning a few years after On Track had begun to deliver services. This is because we assume that given the peer-element of youth offending (most young people offend in groups, not alone), some of the positive effect of On Track on children using the services should be rubbing off on their friends and peers.

The evaluation of On Track is certainly likely to generate an assortment of difficult questions for the evaluators to tackle. On the question of the impact and outcomes of the programme, first, there is a requirement to measure the *overall* impact of On Track – as a programme, does it result in positive changes for its users? Next, the evaluation should ideally determine *which particular elements* of the On Track 'portfolio' of services had an impact on the risk and protective factors connected with offending and anti-social behaviour. Does receiving the multiple interventions that make up On Track really enhance the outcomes of service contact, as the literature on other multi-dimensional programmes would have us believe? Is the whole more than the sum of its parts? Third, there is also the question *why* those services were particularly effective: was it the 'dosage' of an individual intervention (ie, frequency and intensity of service use), the content of the intervention (ie, what was actually done with users), or a combination of the two? Merrington and Hine (2001), along with just about every other author on the evaluation of community-based interventions, note that is vital not just to understand what it was about a particular project that worked, but also to identify what was it about the particular approach that worked. This is all the more problematic since the myriad of interventions administered within individual On Track project areas interact with their communities in complex ways, and because the extent to which there is programme integrity (ie, consistency of delivery across multiple sites and multiple recipients) within On Track as a whole is limited. Lastly, we need to understand *for whom* On Track works best. What groups of children and families respond well to On Track and are there some groups that are missed by the interventions? Therefore another important facet of the evaluation will be delineating the best ways of engaging hard-to-reach groups and families, minority ethnic communities (Johnston 2001).

On the question of the process of implementing On Track, the evaluation will also need to weigh up the success of the interagency co-operation that is one of the founding principles of the programme. At the 'macro' level, it will be important to understand how services evolve, and how projects plan and deliver different components of On Track. At the more 'micro' level, the evaluation will

need to focus in on actual practice in direct work with families and children, for example, understanding how different models of On Track project collaborate to share information, make referrals and manage cases, and how this affects outcomes for individual children.

It is reasonable to assert that while On Track has a general overarching aim to reduce youth crime, it lacks a clearly delineated set of concrete, measurable objectives. The precise “mechanism of change” to be generated by On Track’s impact in deprived areas which will drive the outcomes of the programme is at best woolly. A full understanding of the complexities of programmes like On Track includes knowing something of the ‘theories of change’ that underpin the programme (Kubisch et al. 1995). Figure 1 shows a basic ‘logic model’ for the On Track initiative and how it might work. It should be emphasised that this model has been constructed *post hoc* by the research team and that the original On Track documentation was not very specific on the theory of change envisaged.

### **Design of the evaluation**

The first phase of the national evaluation of the twenty four On Track projects began in 2000 and was conducted by the University of Sheffield. Phase Two of the evaluation (2003-2006) is being carried out by a consortium led by the independent Policy Research Bureau in London, in collaboration with the National Centre for Social Research, the Jill Dando Institute at the University of London, and a private sector consultancy Martix-MHA. Overall the evaluation will measure the short and (to a lesser extent) the medium outcomes of On Track for children, families and communities. Long-term outcomes will not form a focus of this phase of the evaluation, though the research has been structured to make continued research feasible should this be deemed desirable.

In looking at *what* works, for *whom* it works, *how* it works and *why* it works, a range of rigorous, multi-method techniques are being employed. Ghate (2001) amongst others advocates a diverse and multi-levelled methodology as good practice in evaluation design, claiming that high quality qualitative data (for example, on the experiences of service users and individual case histories) as well as sound quantitative data on risk factors and outcomes for the sample from multiple sources need to be collected. Our design also incorporates a ‘counterfactual’ element; that is, we will be able to compare the outcomes for children, families and communities who experienced On Track with similar groups who did not by means of a carefully selected comparison group.

With this multi-method approach, Phase Two of the evaluation is currently underway. The research is organised into discrete but related strands, which will each ultimately inform one another:

### *The Tracking Study*

This strand will provide central monitoring information about each of the twenty four On Track projects individually, and about the initiative as a whole. Data are being collected on the nature of interventions that exist within each On Track project, (that is, what services are actually being delivered), and on the child and adult users of each intervention (e.g. demographic characteristics, referral routes, and service history). The analysis of outcomes from the programme will depend heavily on the ability of the Tracking system to provide data that can be manipulated to serve as independent and control variables in multivariate models. The Tracking study naturally involves close collaboration between the research team and the local projects, who have to collect and store the data, and pass it in on a monthly basis to the central research team. To keep the burden on local projects to a minimum, a relatively streamlined data base (developed in Microsoft Access) has been specially designed for Phase Two, and data returns from local projects are being analysed and fed back in the form of short reports to projects on a regular basis. There is an ongoing project to migrate the data collected in Phase One of the evaluation into the new, more streamlined system so that historical information on services and users can be retained where possible.

### *Community profiling*

This strand of the evaluation will provide detailed descriptive and contextual data about the twenty four areas in which the On Track is being implemented. Area level data on deprivation, crime rates, health, education, and service availability are being collated and updated on an ongoing basis. This will help account for differences between areas and changes in the areas over time when modeling the effect of the interventions. As well as describing the local background against which On Track should be viewed, key questions will include: are there particular types of area in which the interventions are more successfully implemented; and do the On Track interventions have any effect on area-level characteristics over time?

### *Study of On Track service users : longitudinal (cohort) survey; and qualitative follow-up study*

This strand of the evaluation comprises a quantitative longitudinal survey of families (including both parents, and children themselves where aged seven to thirteen) in On Track and Comparison areas; and a follow-up qualitative study of a sub-group of those users in On Track areas to explore in more depth the issues of engagement and outcomes for users. The cohort study comprises two waves of data collection with an achieved sample in Wave One of approximately 1,500 families in On Track areas and 1,000 families in matched comparison areas. Wave One data collection commences in late April 2004; Wave Two begins in April

2005. For the most part, the sample will be drawn by random systematic method from all households in the selected areas. This means that in On Track areas, we should capture both users and non-users of the programme. A small 'booster' sample will however be utilized, drawn from On Track project records to ensure that users of 'rarer' services (such as Family Therapy) are included in the study. A particular challenge for the design of the data collection tools for the cohort study (which is being carried out by Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing : CAPI) is how to assess accurately which services users have been in contact with, whether these services were provided by On Track or some other agency, and what 'dosage' applies to service use (i.e frequency and intensity of use). To this end, in On Track areas only the questionnaire uses an innovative, high detailed and locally customized method of asking about local service use. To our knowledge, this method has been employed in the UK in only one other instance and so the results will hopefully help to advance methodology in this notoriously challenging field.

As well as providing information about the characteristics of the population of users of On Track and comparing these with the characteristics of non-users, the cohort study will be a very important element of the overall design of the evaluation, since it is the only strand that can generate and quantify information about the impact and outcomes of On Track on service users. It will do this by measuring the incidence of a selection of key risk and protective factors, and monitoring change in these indicators between the first wave of interviewing and the second. The framework for data collection for the cohort study is shown in Appendix 2. Since a one-year intervening period between Waves One and Two is a relatively short space of time, there will naturally be limitations on what we can expect the cohort study to tell us about medium and longer-term outcomes. However, depending on the results of the study and on the availability of funding, further waves of data collection could be commissioned to shed light on the more enduring aspects of the outcomes of On Track. A critical aspect of the cohort study is its incorporation of a counterfactual element. Twenty four matched areas in which On Track is not being delivered have been selected for research, using a method known as 'propensity score matching'. This method uses a logistic regression technique to select two wards in each of the twenty four local authorities where On Track is being delivered, which have similar demographic characteristics but where On Track is not available. Families in these matched areas will be systematically randomly approached for interview and the same demographic measures and measurements of incidence of risk and protective factors will be taken in these areas as in the On Track areas. By this means, we will be able to be more confident that any changes we measure amongst users in the On Track areas are genuinely related to the presence of On Track, rather than to the particular characteristics of the On Track users or their communities.

Through the qualitative follow-up study, the strand will also explore the range of factors which influenced families and children to engage with On Track services

in the first place. Approximately 40 parents and twenty children in six areas who have already participated in the cohort study will be purposively selected for interview. The qualitative study will unpack in more detail background circumstances of families in touch with the programme, and the extent to which the range of services needed was actually provided. We will also be able to explore what underlies the findings of the cohort study – for example, what elements of the services received were most or least useful, what impact do parents and children feel the services had upon them, and how different interventions could be improved and tailored more precisely to families’ needs.

### *Qualitative research among On Track service providers.*

This strand of the research is intended to throw light on the process and operational aspects of On Track: how the projects developed, were staffed, delivered and managed. It will capture the perspectives of 30 service workers in a sample of six areas, with areas selected to give us a broad cross-section of the different variants of On Track structure and delivery. This strand will also include a number of facilitated discussion groups with key stakeholders in On Track. Vital aspects of practice development will be addressed in this strand, and we will be inviting service staff to reflect on what worked well and what proved less effective, in their own estimation. This strand will include the collation of brief (anonymised) ‘case illustrations’ of the projects’ work with individual users of On Track, to complement the data on impact collected in the study of users from their own perspective. This will allow us to triangulate data on impact from the multiple perspectives of parents, children, and service providers and give some powerful information to illuminate any conclusions about effective (and ineffective) practice. The group discussions will also give us an insight into aspects of joint planning and working across multiple agencies, as well as allowing us to explore how the various agencies perceive On Track and its impact within the local service context.

### *Schools survey*

This strand of the study replicates a schools survey conducted in Phase One. In that Phase, a ‘census’ of all children in all schools in On Track areas (primary, middle and secondary) was carried out<sup>1</sup>. In Phase Two, a more streamlined sample design has been implemented, selecting randomly one secondary school, all middle schools and two primary schools per area. Children from Years Seven to Twelve are invited to take part. In the interests of obtaining robust trend data, the same questionnaires (paper self-completion, to be administered in schools under ‘exam’ type conditions) as were used in Phase One are being utilised, one

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<sup>1</sup> **Drafting note:** The numbers achieved however suggest a sample design, or else a much poorer response rate than claimed in the Phase One report. It would be good to clarify this with Home Office as it has implications for the Phase Two analysis and reporting.



for primary school children designed by the Phase One national evaluation team in Sheffield, and another for middle and secondary school pupils designed by and used under license from 'Communities that Care'.

The aim of the strand is to investigate the characteristics of the child population in On Track areas, in terms of a constellation of risk and protective factors. Thus the questionnaires ask children to self-report on involvement in antisocial behaviour of various kinds, exposure to drugs, tobacco and alcohol, victimization experiences (bullying etc); and truancy. The questionnaire also seeks children's views on school, and information on family activities and out-of-school interests. Though not all children who take part in the survey are direct 'users' of On Track, and the survey results cannot be used as evidence of the 'impact' of On Track, the schools survey will shed light on the degree of 'need' for On Track amongst a representative sample of school-aged children in each area. In this second phase of data collection, it will also shed light on whether things are improving, getting worse or staying the same for schools in On Track areas. Comparison with other national datasets drawn from surveys of school children may also shed light on ways in which schools children in On Track areas are different or similar to others. Fieldwork for the Phase Two survey ends in May 2004.

## Conclusions

On Track is an innovative, programme in UK terms, multi-dimensional, community-based and conducted across home and school locations. Originally modelled on a highly successful US intervention programme called Fast Track, it is aimed at reducing recognised risk factors or precursors to youth offending and antisocial behaviour, and at boosting known protective factors. It is located in twenty four areas across England and Wales, and delivered by multi-agency partnerships under the general umbrella of the Children's Fund. Although a clear theory of change was not articulated in any of the early literature that accompanied the development of the programme in the later 1990s, the model of risk and protection upon which On Track rests is now fairly well articulated in the international literature. Moreover, integration of home and school and the provision of multi-modal services working at both the universal and the targeted levels, and incorporating parenting support alongside direct work with children is now thought to be best practice in delivering interventions aimed at improving outcomes for children in high risk environments.

Evaluation of On Track has been ongoing since 2000, first by the University of Sheffield (who focused on mainly on process and implementation issues, in addition to the collection of area level and school-level data), and since early 2003 by a consortium of four research centres led by the Policy Research Bureau. This second phase of the evaluation will add (short run) impact and outcome data collected direct from users to the growing body of knowledge on how On Track is working, as well as fleshing out the process and implementation issues for local projects and mapping the community context in more detail.

The evaluation presents many challenges, both conceptual and methodological. No two On Track projects are alike, and the problem they seek to address – the development of youth offending and antisocial behaviour in poor environments – is one about which there is still much we do not understand. However, to the extent that On Track follows in the well-trodden footsteps of previously successful interventions, and will no doubt lead the way in establishing the feasibility and potential of the future development of multidimensional intervention models in the UK, the next two years of continued project delivery and ongoing research and evaluation should prove exciting.

**Policy Research Bureau**

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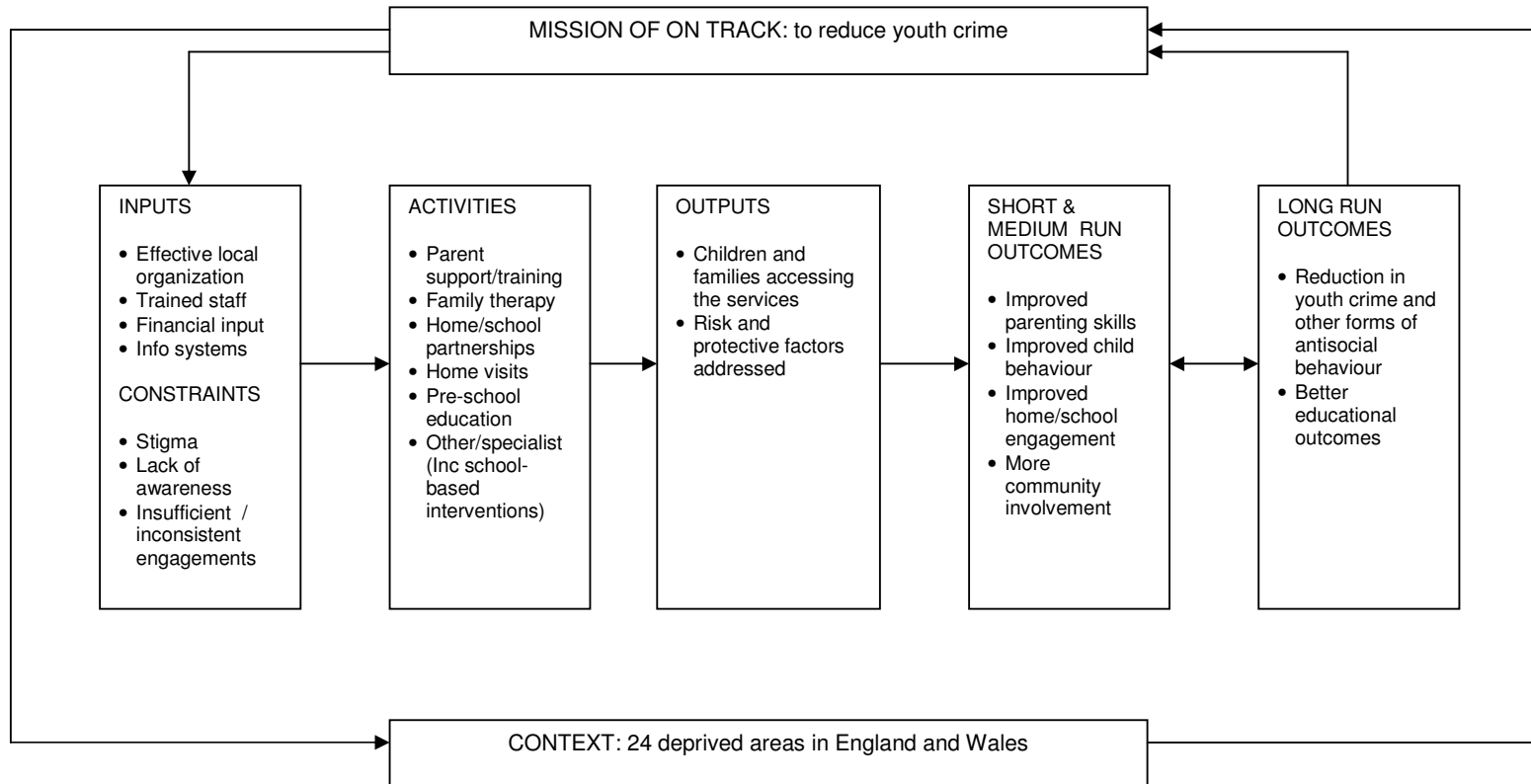
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## Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Logic Model for On Track



**Appendix 2 : Framework for data collection on risk and protective factors**

Unit of analysis	Factor	Risk	Protective
Child	Emotional and behavioural indicators		
	<i>Prosocial</i>		✓
	<i>Aggression</i>	✓	
	<i>Hyperactivity/attention deficit</i>	✓	
	<i>Conduct disorder</i>	✓	
	<i>Self-esteem/self concept (?)</i>	✓	✓
	ASB & offending behaviour	✓	
	Association with antisocial peers	✓	
	Attendance at school (truancy/exclusion)	✓	
	Use of leisure time/out of school activities	✓	✓
	Educational attainment		✓
	Special needs/learning difficulties	✓	
	'Readiness to learn' (attitudes to school; aspirations?)		✓
	Substance misuse	✓	
Parent	Family relationships	✓	✓
	Supportive adult in network		✓
	Victimisation (e.g bullying)	✓	
	Parenting skills & competencies		
	<b>Communication &amp; negotiation</b>	✓	✓
	<i>Discipline and handling conflict</i>	✓	✓
	<i>Supervision and monitoring</i>	✓	
	<i>Confidence /self-efficacy (?)</i>		✓
	<i>Problem-solving skills</i>		✓
	Relationship w/child (warmth, hostility etc)	✓	✓
	Involvement with child		✓
	Emotional and mental health	✓	
	Current life circumstance problems	✓	
	Supportive partner		✓
Social support	✓	✓	
Family/household	Poverty/low income/financial strain (various)	✓	
	Social class/ educational level		✓
	Current problems	✓	
	Criminality/ ASB in family	✓	
Community/area/ neighbourhood	Family conflict	✓	
	Community integration (sense of cohesion, connectedness) & social networks, & social capital (?)		✓
	Service availability and accessibility		✓
	Environmental and social problems (perceptions of)	✓	



Research Question	Data source				Type of data		
	Intervention		Comparison		Outcome	Descriptive or baseline	Process & implmntn
	Parent	Child	Parent	Child			
1. What are the characteristics of <b>families/households</b> in OT/ Comparison areas?							
family composition	✓		✓			✓	
poverty and deprivation (material)	✓		✓		?	✓	✓
ethnicity and citizenship	✓		✓			✓	✓
social/occupational class	✓		✓			✓	✓
Family conflict and relationships	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
ASB and offending	✓		✓		?	✓	✓
substance misuse	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
2. What are the characteristics of <b>parents</b> in OT/ Comparison areas?							
physical health	✓		✓			✓	✓
emotional and mental health	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
educational level	✓		✓			✓	✓
ASB and offending	✓		✓		?	✓	✓
substance misuse	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
parenting skills (see table 1)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
relationship with child (see table 1)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. What are the characteristics of <b>children</b> in OT/ Comparison areas?							
physical health	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
emotional and mental health & conduct (see Table 1)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
- truancy/excl etc	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
- SEN	✓		✓			✓	✓
- attainment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
- readiness to learn/attitudes to school		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
ASB and offending		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
substance misuse		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
relationship with parent(s) & carers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Research Question	Data source				Type of data		
	Intervention		Comparison		Outcome	Descriptive or baseline	Process & implmntn
Service use questions:	Parent	Child	Parent	Child			
4. What <b>services</b> have families in OT/Comparison areas <b>used in past</b> ?							
Formal (universal, targeted)	✓		✓			✓	
Semi formal	✓		✓			✓	
5. What <b>services</b> are families in OT/Comparison areas <b>aware of &amp; using</b> currently? ( <i>type, incidence &amp; dosage – need to develop a measure of intensity of service use</i> )							
OT Services :		???			???		
Parent support and training	✓					✓	✓
Family therapy	✓					✓	✓
Home visiting	✓					✓	✓
Pre-school	✓					✓	✓
Parent/school partnerships	✓					✓	✓
Specialist group	✓						
Other Services :		???		???			
statutory	✓		☐			✓	✓
voluntary	✓		☐			✓	✓
6. What <b>reasons</b> do families have for <b>using and not using</b> services (needs & expectations)?	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
7. What <b>perceptions of services</b> do users have?							
Satisfaction & perceptions of helpfulness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Reasons for satisfaction/dissatisfaction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Quality of services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Likelihood of future use etc	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
8. <b>Attitudes/relationships with specific services/agencies (?)</b> (e.g schools)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓