

Is *Asset* really an asset? Risk assessment of young offenders

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Introduction and context

Scope of the paper

Merrington (chapter 2) has given an overview of the development and use of a number of different assessment tools and helpfully highlighted the range of functions that we could reasonably expect such tools to perform. In contrast, this chapter focuses on the development and use of one particular tool, namely *Asset*, the assessment tool introduced for use in the reformed youth justice system. More generally, a number of the issues discussed will be relevant to the broader debate about the role of risk assessment tools in the development of evidence-based practice.

What is Asset?

i) Design and development

Asset is the name given to the assessment profile currently used across England and Wales with young people who offend¹. Before looking at the impact of *Asset* on practice in the youth justice system it is appropriate to give a brief outline of how and why it was introduced. One of the first initiatives of the newly formed YJB in 1998 was to commission the design of a risk/need assessment tool for use with young offenders aged 10-17. This had a clear symbolic value in two ways. Firstly, it was intended to provide a common framework for assessment practice within the new multi-disciplinary YOTs and, secondly, it was intended to be different from tools used with adults in order to reflect the particular risks and needs of young people who offend.

The design and development work was undertaken by the Probation Studies Unit of the University of Oxford and began in the spring of 1999. This was informed by the earlier work of Roberts and Burnett in developing ACE (Roberts et al 1996; Merrington, this

¹ *Asset* is not an acronym but for the first three years of its existence was capitalised by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and appeared in YJB documentation in capitals – perhaps to signify its central role within the new youth justice system.

volume) and by subsequent initiatives to adapt ACE for use with younger offenders.² The design process involved a thorough review of the research literature relating to risk and protective factors for young people who offend and extensive consultation with practitioners, managers and specialists from a range of relevant services. The draft forms were piloted for a short period and subsequently revised before being issued to Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) with accompanying guidance. A national training programme was funded by the YJB although it was limited in scope and many practitioners did not receive any training in the use of *Asset* before its introduction into practice in April 2000.

Asset is now in use in all YOTs with young people at each of the different stages of the criminal justice system. An increasing number of youth justice teams in Scotland have also chosen to use *Asset*.

ii) Components of Asset

Asset consists of a number of different elements which are briefly described below.

- Core *Asset* profile

This includes some static factors (e.g. criminal history) but focuses on dynamic factors. There are 12 main sections addressing key issues such as living arrangements, family and personal relationships, education, training and employment (ETE), neighbourhood, lifestyle, substance use, thinking and behaviour, attitudes to offending. It also includes a section on positive factors and sections to screen for vulnerability and/or risk of serious harm to others.

- Final Warning *Asset*

This is a shorter version of the core profile which covers the same areas but in less detail.

- ‘What do YOU think?’

This self-assessment form, to be completed by young people who offend, mirrors the sequence of the core profile and addresses similar issues so as to facilitate comparison between the views of young people and those of practitioners.

- Risk of serious harm form

This is only intended to be used with a minority of young offenders and provides a more in-depth assessment of whether a young person presents a real risk of serious harm to others.

- Bail *Asset*

² For example, a version of ACE for young adult offenders was developed for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

This is similar in style to *Final Warning Asset* but with a focus on information that would be relevant to decisions about whether a young person is remanded or receives bail.

- Intervention plan

This was introduced by the YJB as part of the relaunch of *Asset* in August 2003 (Wright 2003) and is intended to help practitioners make clearer links between the outcome of an assessment and the subsequent plan of work that is agreed with a young person.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on the core *Asset* profile and the ‘What do YOU think?’ form but it is important to bear in mind that *Asset* is a package of material for use in YOTs. Judgements about its value need to take this into account rather than focusing too narrowly on specific details of just one of the forms.

Opinions about Asset

When a tool such as *Asset* is introduced into practice at a national level it is inevitable that it will provoke a diverse range of responses. Views about *Asset* are likely to vary according to people’s roles within the youth justice system such that we would expect to see different perspectives held by practitioners, managers, the YJB, courts, academics and staff from other agencies. Views from within role groups also vary e.g. practitioners differ amongst themselves in their attitudes to *Asset* (Roberts et al 2001).

The YJB clearly views *Asset* in a very positive way. For example, it was stated recently that ‘More than any other aspect of the reformed system, this tool, properly used is capable of preventing further offending’ (Youth Justice Board 2002a: 9). One reason for this is that *Asset* is seen as improving the quality of practice in assessment and planning. ‘Prior to the introduction of *Asset* the process of assessing risks and planning interventions lacked rigour and was unable to quantify the issues or contribute effectively to the delivery of joined-up solutions’ (Wright 2003: 5). *Asset* enables more effective targeting of resources through increasing diagnostic accuracy: ‘offenders who are most likely to continue to offend can be identified at the earliest stage and steps can be taken to prevent it with confidence’ (Youth Justice Board 2002a: 9).

By contrast, others have been very critical of *Asset* and, in particular, of its use of numerical ratings. For example, in a recent account of developments in youth justice, Roger Smith refers to ‘the spurious scientific accuracy offered by actuarial instruments such as the

ASSET form' (2003: 211). A second strand of criticism has been that *Asset* concentrates too much on the negative aspects of a young person's life. 'Indeed, the preoccupation with risk is likely to generate a predisposition to "seeing the worst in people" and focusing unduly on the possibility of failure. Is it entirely a coincidence that its adoption as a key assessment tool has accompanied a surge in custodial sentencing?' (Smith 2003: 192)

These examples are intended to highlight the polarised range of views about *Asset*, although of course most people would be found somewhere along this spectrum of opinion rather than at the extreme ends. A user survey for example found that practitioners had a number of concerns about *Asset* such as its length, the potential intrusiveness of some of the questions, the time required to complete it well and uncertainty about using the ratings (Roberts et al 2001). At the same time however, practitioners were able to see the potential of *Asset* in areas such as promoting consistency, transparency and improved resource allocation. Burnett and Appleton (2004) also found mixed views about *Asset* in their case study of one particular YOT and this is similar to research findings regarding the use of tools with adult offenders (Aye Maung and Hammond 2000). The question we now need to consider is which of these views most closely reflect the emerging evidence about the use and value of *Asset*.

Investigating the use of *Asset*

Asset is a relatively new assessment profile and clearly there will be less evidence available than for longer established tools such as LSI-R. Increasing amounts of data are now available however and these come from a variety of sources. A two year YJB funded research project looking at the validity and reliability of *Asset* has provided a rich source of both quantitative and qualitative data (Baker et al 2002³) and additional data is also now emerging from other ongoing research e.g. the evaluation of the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (Moore, this volume; Moore et al 2004). Other sources of data include analysis of local *Asset* data by specific YOTs (for example, Jose 2001) and YOT quarterly returns to the YJB.

³ Some additional qualitative material collected as part of this study and not reported by Baker et al is cited in this chapter.

National Standards (Youth Justice Board 2000) state that *Asset* (either the core profile or the final warning version as appropriate) should be completed at the beginning and end of an intervention.⁴ It is difficult to obtain accurate figures on completion rates as it is likely that the data given by teams to the YJB include *Assets* completed retrospectively but evidence suggests noticeable variations between teams in this respect (Baker et al 2002). This is supported by recent data which indicate completion rates for initial *Assets* varying from 30% in some teams to nearer 100% in others (PA Consulting 2003).

Whilst this is a limited measure in that it gives no information about the quality of completed *Assets*, it is a useful starting point and gives one indicator of the impact of *Asset* on practice. The key finding here is that YOTs still vary considerably in their frequency of *Asset* completion.

Validity and reliability

This first section of evidence looks at those aspects of *Asset* use which are most amenable to measurement and quantification. These are frequently identified as amongst the key tasks for risk/need assessment tools (Merrington et al 2003, Merrington (this volume)).

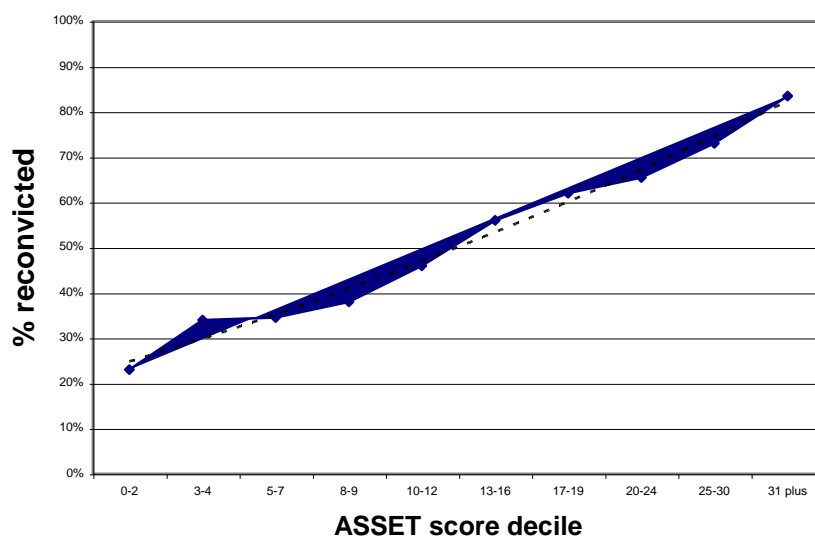
i) Predictive accuracy

The core profile and final warning *Asset* both produce a numerical score and it is important to note that this is essentially derived from clinical judgement. In each of the twelve sections dealing with dynamic risk factors, practitioners are asked to rate (on a 0-4 scale) the extent to which they think the problems they have identified are associated with a risk of reoffending (Youth Justice Board 2000c). How accurate is this at predicting the occurrence, frequency and seriousness of reconviction?

The ability of *Asset* to predict the occurrence of reconviction within a 12 month period has been shown to be comparable to or slightly better than that of similar tools used with adult offenders in England and Wales (Baker et al 2002). This finding was maintained for particular groups such as female, younger or ethnic minority offenders. Its predictive accuracy across the score range is illustrated in figure 1 below.

⁴ If a young person is sentenced to a Detention and Training Order (DTO), the core profile should also be completed at the point of release into the community.

Figure 1: Current *Asset* score by % reconvicted



Asset was shown to be able to distinguish between young people reconvicted more frequently within the 12 month period and those who were reconvicted less often. This was tested using both number of reconviction occasions and number of reconviction offences (Baker et al 2002). Using risk/need assessment tools to predict the seriousness of reconviction is more difficult however (Raynor et al 2000). Using the original scoring system, *Asset* was not accurate at predicting the gravity of reconviction offences but was more accurate at distinguishing between young people receiving custodial sentences on reconviction and those receiving community penalties or fines.⁵

ii) Reliability

A common concern raised by practitioners is that *Asset* is used inconsistently by different practitioners and teams (Roberts et al 2001). This is understandable given the multi-disciplinary nature of teams, the speed with which *Asset* was introduced and the lack of training. In this context, it would not perhaps be surprising to find evidence of significant variations in *Asset* use, particularly in regard to the ratings, but the initial evidence available suggests that this is less of a problem than might have been expected.

⁵ Revised versions of the scoring system (i.e. including static factors and weightings) were more effective in predicting seriousness of reconviction offences (Baker et al 2002).

A fuller account of research in this area to date, including methodology,⁶ is provided by Baker et al (2002) but the key findings are as follows. Firstly, there were no significant variations in the ratings given by different professional groups once account was taken of case stage e.g. police officers and social workers rated similarly at the final warning stage and probation officers/social workers rated similarly at pre-sentence report (PSR) and post sentence stages. There was some inconsistency between different YOTs (this was mainly at the PSR stage rather than for final warnings) but the level of consistency between the different teams within larger YOTs was good.

The initial results were therefore generally encouraging but it would be useful to have more evidence in this area, particularly if it could be based on a more recent data sample.

iii) Measuring change over time

There is relatively little data currently available on change over time because it has been difficult to obtain sufficient numbers of end-of-intervention *Assets* to undertake meaningful analysis of patterns of change over time (Baker et al 2002). Problems in this area were of two kinds: non-completion of forms and replication of earlier *Assets* without updating them or modifying the ratings. In some YOTs practitioners have either not found the time to complete end *Assets* or have not appreciated the importance of doing so in developing effective practice (Burnett and Appleton 2004).

The Youth Justice Board is funding ongoing research into this particular question and the project is due for completion in summer 2004. The results of this should provide clearer evidence about the ability of *Asset* to measure change over time.

Practice and culture

In addition to the issues discussed immediately above, Merrington identified a number of other, less quantifiable, functions that an assessment tool should perform. These can be difficult questions for which to obtain evidence but some initial indications of the impact of *Asset* in these areas is given below. This is drawn primarily from the study by Baker et al (2002) which, in addition to the quantitative data used to test validity and reliability, also

⁶ Practical constraints meant that it was not possible to use the preferred method of comparing assessments of the same young person made by different practitioners at a similar point in time. As an alternative, comparisons were made using a score derived from static factors as a control.

involved qualitative data, in particular semi-structured interviews with staff and analysis of completed *Asset* forms.

i) Explaining assessment conclusions

One of the key features of *Asset* is the emphasis on providing evidence to justify the assessments made. All through the core profile (and final warning version) there are evidence boxes which practitioners should use to explain the basis for their judgements. Similarly, the risk of serious harm form requires assessors to explain their conclusions. For example, if a practitioner states that a young person is likely to cause very serious harm to other people then one would expect that such a judgement could be backed up with clear and explicit reasoning.

The value of the evidence boxes is generally recognised by YOT staff. One worker for example said that ‘we would be able to measure what we did as opposed to just relying on someone saying “did something serious” which I have seen.’ Others valued the way in which the evidence boxes could be used to give a rounded picture of a young person. ‘If somebody else wants to pick up and read what is there, a well thought out and filled in *Asset*, it’s the actual evidence in it that brings everything together. It does give me a flavour of what young person I’m dealing with so I like to see a bit of evidence.’

Actual practice in this area appears to be variable however and examination of completed *Asset* forms provides examples of both good and poor practice. In the quote given below, for example, the assessor used the evidence box (in the ‘family and personal relationships’ section of the core profile) to record important details about a difficult situation in a young person’s life but also to explain that this was not linked to the recent offending behaviour. ‘Both grandparents have died recently within ten days of each other. No evidence to suggest this influenced the decision to commit the offence’.

In other cases, the use of evidence boxes was less constructive. In one case, for example, the initial *Asset* referred to ‘bizarre behaviour at school’ without explaining what this meant. The case had subsequently been transferred to another worker who did not know what this referred to or why it had been included in the original *Asset* form.

This is clearly an area in which many more examples could be given but the key finding here has been that practice is very variable and some practitioners are using the

evidence boxes more extensively and effectively than others. An advantage of *Asset* however is that it at least makes assessments more explicit and can be used to promote greater transparency in decision making.

ii) Planning interventions

As yet there is little data available on the link between *Asset* and intervention planning comparable to the research findings available in relation to other tools such as ACE (Merrington 2001, Haslewood-Pócsik and Skinns 2000) although work in this area is underway as part of ongoing research.

Early findings suggested that *Asset* was often viewed by practitioners as an isolated piece of work and was not closely linked into other areas of practice such as pre-sentence report writing, reviewing the progress of an order or intervention planning (Roberts et al 2001). To give one example in relation to planning programmes of work to be undertaken with young people, there was little evidence of practitioners incorporating positive factors identified in *Asset* into intervention plans. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that this situation is now changing. The YJB has recently issued an intervention plan to link in with *Asset* and we are also aware of a number of YOTs who have been doing their own work in this area to ensure that *Asset* becomes more integrated into practice.

iii) Open and transparent practice

To what extent has the use of a common assessment framework promoted or facilitated the sharing of information both within teams and between YOTs and other agencies? One aspect of this is the opportunity that *Asset* presents for managers to oversee the quality of assessments being made within a team and to take action where appropriate (e.g. through supervision or provision of training) to improve practice. Again, practice was variable between teams with some managers regularly sampling the quality of completed *Assets* and others never doing so. Other problems included a lack of communication between managers and staff in some settings. For example, one practitioner stated that ‘I know managers read them but I’ve never had any feedback on the *Assets* I’ve done so I don’t know if I’m doing it well’.

A second issue concerns the transfer of information between agencies. There was some confusion about what happened when young people moved into the adult system as to

whether *Asset* forms were always passed on to the Probation Service. The transfer of information to the secure estate has also been problematic in some cases. National Standards (Youth Justice Board 2000) state that a completed *Asset* should always be sent to the secure estate when a young person receives a custodial sentence but practice was variable. Some YOT staff were concerned about how information might be used by other organisations and there may be issues to address concerning the provision of information or training for staff in relevant agencies about how to use and interpret the *Asset* forms that they receive.

iv) Resource management

The scope for *Asset* to provide aggregate profile data of young people who offend has been demonstrated by Baker et al (2002). This type of analysis can give both broad-brush descriptions of large samples of young people and more specific comparisons of the differences between particular groups, for example by gender or ethnicity. Evidence suggests that a small number of YOTs have begun to carry out similar analyses locally to assist in decisions regarding resource allocation but for the majority this is not yet something which they see as central to practice. This may increase with the forthcoming publication of a handbook for managers which will include some guidance on how to use *Asset* data as a basis for allocating resources within the YOT and as a tool for securing funding from other services.

Is it an asset?

Is it achieving what was required by the original specification?

A first step in assessing the value of *Asset* is to consider whether it has met the requirements set out by the YJB at the initial stage of design and development. It was intended that *Asset* should:

- cover those risk and protective factors most closely linked to offending by young people
- produce a score for each young offender on the level of risk identified as an indicator of the service needs a YOT should put in place
- measure changes in needs and risk over time both in the community and in custody
- assist practitioners to plan a programme of interventions to reduce the risk factors and increase the protective factors associated with the young person
- give an overall prediction of the likelihood of reconviction including its frequency and seriousness

- contain triggers for further assessment in respect of more specific needs and risks (Youth Justice Board 1998)

The evidence outlined above demonstrates that *Asset* is achieving some of these goals, whilst in other areas further research is both required and ongoing (e.g. measuring patterns of change over time).

Fit for purpose

The list given by Merrington (this volume) of aspects of practice in which assessment tools need to demonstrate their value is broader than the specification set by the Youth Justice Board. Some of these issues – for example, the role of *Asset* in assessing young people who may present a risk of serious harm to other people – have not been discussed specifically in this chapter because of lack of space but it is anticipated that results of research in this area will be made available in the near future.⁷ For the areas in which evidence is available it appears *Asset* is working well in terms of the ‘technical’ issues such as validity and predictive accuracy but that there is a lot of variation between YOTs in the extent to which it is impacting on wider practice e.g. its use for allocating resources.

We might also want to add to Merrington’s list some criteria which are more specific to assessment tools being used with young people e.g. that a tool should take account of ‘welfare’ needs or should assist in identifying situations where statutory provision is not being given (such as a child not receiving any educational provision). *Asset* has the potential to contribute in this area as it incorporates questions about these broader issues (e.g. health needs⁸) but the evidence as to how YOTs are using this information is currently anecdotal rather than systematic.

What is the broader impact of Asset on practice and performance?

There are a number of practical issues that could be discussed here (e.g. the impact of *Asset* on the workload of youth justice staff) but I want to focus on three key themes that are central to practice.

⁷ In summary, practice is mixed. Some practitioners are using *Asset* to record thorough assessments of risks of serious harm to others but in some teams staff are much less clear about how to use this part of *Asset*. Its use is also influenced by whether or not teams have clear local policies on risk management.

i) Developing the knowledge base

Aggregate *Asset* data can help YOTs to be more informed about the profiles of the young people they are working with in any particular locality. Similarly, on a national scale *Asset* should be expected to provide useful data to help develop our knowledge about young people who offend. Clearly the use of data in this regard is dependent on the quality of *Assets* completed by practitioners but there are three main ways in which *Asset* can help to develop the knowledge base.

Firstly, it can support or reinforce existing research findings. For example the links between educational difficulties and offending or the multiple problems faced by many 'looked after' young people (Youth Justice Board 2001) were also found in the recent national *Asset* study (Baker et al 2002). The second area is in providing data on groups who have sometimes been previously under-represented in research e.g. female offenders and young people from ethnic minorities. As *Asset* is used with all young people from final warning stage onwards it has the potential to provide data on relatively large samples of particular groups. This can include, for example, highlighting differences between various ethnic groups, between male/female offenders and between those of different ages when providing an account of the assessed needs and risks of young people (Baker et al 2002) which can help staff in choosing appropriate ways of working with particular young people.

Third, *Asset* data can highlight areas for further research. This could include, for example, work in relation to young people who commit particular types of offences. One example from recent research is that it appears that young people from a mixed ethnic or dual heritage background were assessed by practitioners as having more risk factors and fewer protective factors than other groups of young people (Baker et al 2002). The initial sample was relatively small and it would be necessary to investigate this further before reaching any conclusions but it illustrates how *Asset* can identify interesting issues for an ongoing research agenda to expand our knowledge base.

ii) Routinisation and professional judgement

A criticism often made in relation to the use of assessment tools is that they de-skill staff and lead to ways of working that involve repetitious completion of tasks within a rigid practice

⁸ Other improvements have been made in the revised version of *Asset* issued by the YJB in August 2003 e.g. the ETE section now includes specific questions about the amount of provision a young person receives.

framework that restricts the use of professional judgement (Pitts 2003; Garrett 2002). A similar argument has been made against the use of *Asset*, for example, Smith refers to ‘the conflicts inherent in a standardized instrument such as *Asset*, which confronts professional judgement with a routinised scoring system in such a way as to challenge many of the core beliefs of those who see a role for individual discretion and creative decision making in the youth justice system’ (Smith 2003:101)

However this is to misunderstand both the purpose and the design of *Asset*. To use *Asset* well actually requires the use of considerable professional skill and expertise. Practitioners are asked to make decisions about a wide range of issues, from practical assessment of the suitability of a young person’s accommodation arrangements to judgements about their self-perception, levels of victim awareness and motivation to change. Information to form the basis of these assessments needs to be gathered in way that engages a young person and their parents/carers, thus challenging staff to work in a creative and dynamic way.

The ratings themselves are based on clinical judgement (such that it is not entirely accurate to refer to *Asset* simply as an actuarial tool). As practitioners are asked to rate the extent to which the issues identified in each section of *Asset* are associated with a risk of reoffending, it is quite possible for a worker to record details of problems in a young person’s life but give a low rating because there is no evidence to suggest that these are the issues most closely associated with the offending behaviour (for example, the case involving bereavement cited on p10 above). It is not an automatic system in which ratings are generated by the number of boxes ticked in any given area but rather it is a way of helping to structure and measure professional judgements.

The way in which the ratings are used in practice must also be considered. If they were to be used in a rigid way which prescribed exactly which services a young person received according to their total score then Smith’s criticism would appear more reasonable. Alternatively, they can be used in a more flexible way to indicate the intensity of provision that might be appropriate or which of a range of programmes might be most suitable.

iii) Risk and contextualisation

As a risk/need assessment tool, *Asset* obviously attaches a lot of weight to the assessment of risk – in particular risk of reconviction and risk of serious harm to others. This focus has been

welcomed by some staff who feel that it has corrected a previous imbalance in practice. For example, one practitioner stated that:

I don't think we actually looked at risk.....I think we were aware that they might be at high risk of reoffending but the *Asset* brings out other issues. They might be at high risk because of an emotional or mental health problem that we perhaps didn't highlight before. You might be going in the house and doing an assessment and all of a sudden it comes out that when they were little they microwaved the dog. I think it's made us much more aware of risk but also what can be done with it to reduce it.

For other observers however this focus on risk and offending behaviour is viewed negatively. 'The preoccupation with the offender *as an offender* and nothing else, reflected by the use of instruments such as the ASSET form, creates an arbitrary and ultimately unsustainable separation between the young person concerned and his/her social characteristics and needs' (Smith 2003:197)

I would argue that this represents a misunderstanding of *Asset* and that it is possible to use it in a way that combines an emphasis on risk with attention to other needs. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, *Asset* includes questions about a range of areas e.g. health, self-perception and positive factors that can contribute to understanding the context in which offending behaviour occurs but also to identifying particular issues that may need to be addressed in addition to directly offending-related work. This can apply to the specific work carried out with individual young people and to the use of aggregate data. From the recent national sample, for example, it was found that lack of access to health care resources was regarded by practitioners as a problem for nine percent of the young people being assessed.

Secondly, if *Asset* is used appropriately it should enable practitioners to take account of the complexity of young people's lives and to look at the inter-connections between different risk and protective factors. *Asset* was never intended to be used as an interview schedule (Youth Justice Board 2000) or to prescribe a fixed range of questions that practitioners cannot deviate from. Instead it is intended to be used to structure the process of collecting, recording and analysing information but it is clearly emphasised that this should be done in a way that engages young people (and their parents/carers) and encourages them to participate fully in the process of assessment and planning (Youth Justice Board 2002b).

Following on from this point, the third argument is that creative use of the ‘What do YOU think?’ (WDYT) self-assessment provides a clear opportunity for young people to express their own views about their circumstances, behaviour and the problems they may be facing. Once again, this has value both at the individual level and in terms of aggregate data. Analysis of a sample of these forms, for example, was able to show that a large proportion of those who completed the WDYT acknowledged that they found it hard to trust other people whilst a small but significant number recorded thoughts of deliberate self-harm or suicide (Baker et al 2002). In addition, comparison of *Assets* completed by practitioners with responses given by young people on WDYT can highlight interesting differences of perspective. For example, of two hundred and sixty five cases in which young people said they were worried about something that might happen in the future, only 49% of *Asset* forms contained an acknowledgement of this by practitioners.

Asset in the future

Progress so far

Asset has been developed and introduced into practice within a relatively short period of time and, as with the roll out of any initiative on this scale, there have inevitably been some difficulties in implementation.⁹ Nevertheless, it is now being used regularly across England and Wales and there is an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that it is a useful practice tool for the youth justice system. This chapter has highlighted the areas in which the evidence suggests that *Asset* is working well, the issues which are currently the subject of ongoing research and the areas in which more evidence would be desirable. Pursuing further research is clearly essential but it is also important to ensure that existing evidence is widely disseminated so that youth justice practitioners and managers can begin to engage with it and consider how it could inform the ways in which they work.

Making Asset more of an asset

Asset is clearly here to stay and, further, the Youth Justice Board has set a target for 100% completion (Youth Justice Board 2001b). How therefore might we build on the progress made so far in order to make *Asset* an even stronger asset?

i) Changes to the tool itself

⁹ Including issues around the development of electronic versions of *Asset*.

This could include changes in the style and presentation of *Asset* (both in paper and electronic formats) or more technical adjustments, for example, removing some items found to have a weak association with recidivism. One important area for development will be to refine the rating system. For example, the addition of static factors and weightings has been shown to increase predictive accuracy (Baker et al 2002). Over time, there may be sufficient evidence to justify the possibility of adding different weightings for ethnicity, gender or age. Bonta, for example, argues that ‘risk/need scales may need to be differentially weighted according to race’ (1989: 60). The advantage of such an approach is that it provides a closer reflection of young people’s particular characteristics whilst retaining a common assessment framework.

ii) Changes in systems

Practitioners might perceive *Asset* more positively if it was easier to use and easier to link to other areas of practice. Modifications to information technology systems could be important here, for example, making it easier to update *Assets* during an order, allowing information recorded in *Asset* to be copied over to pre-sentence reports (PSRs) and enabling faster transfer of completed assessments between teams (or between YOTs and the secure estate). Another area for system change might be in relation to the nature and frequency of data transfers from YOTs to the YJB.

iii) Changes of policy and culture

At a national level, this might include the Youth Justice Board placing greater emphasis on the use of *Asset* to inform planning and resource allocation so as to demonstrate its practical value. Within teams, managers may need to become more proactive at discussing *Asset*, providing feedback to staff or using *Asset* as part of the appraisal process. In some teams, or amongst some groups of practitioners, there is still a need for greater openness about assessment practice and a willingness to record the basis for professional judgements in a more coherent and systematic way.

3. Conclusion

It has rightly been argued that ‘while standardised assessment tools have a real value in promoting consistency and in giving structure to practitioners’ judgements, their uncritical application will be unfair and counter-productive’ (Eadie and Canton 2002: 21). The key issue therefore is how to ensure that *Asset* is used appropriately and creatively within a

practice framework that promotes high quality assessment, values professional skills and engages young people and their carers.

On the basis of the evidence currently available, it is possible to conclude that *Asset* can be an Asset in many ways. For practitioners, it gives comprehensive coverage of key risk and protective factors and provides an indicator of the likely risk of reconviction that can be used to inform subsequent service delivery. For young people, there are benefits to having higher quality assessments and intervention plans, particularly if practitioners make use of WDYT and incorporate young people's views into the planning process. For anyone working, or interested, in the field of youth justice *Asset* has the potential to be of significant interest because of its ability to help expand our knowledge about young people who offend. *Asset* has already had a significant impact on practice. This needs to be consolidated and further steps taken to ensure that it is used to the best possible effect

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