

# Moving into maturity



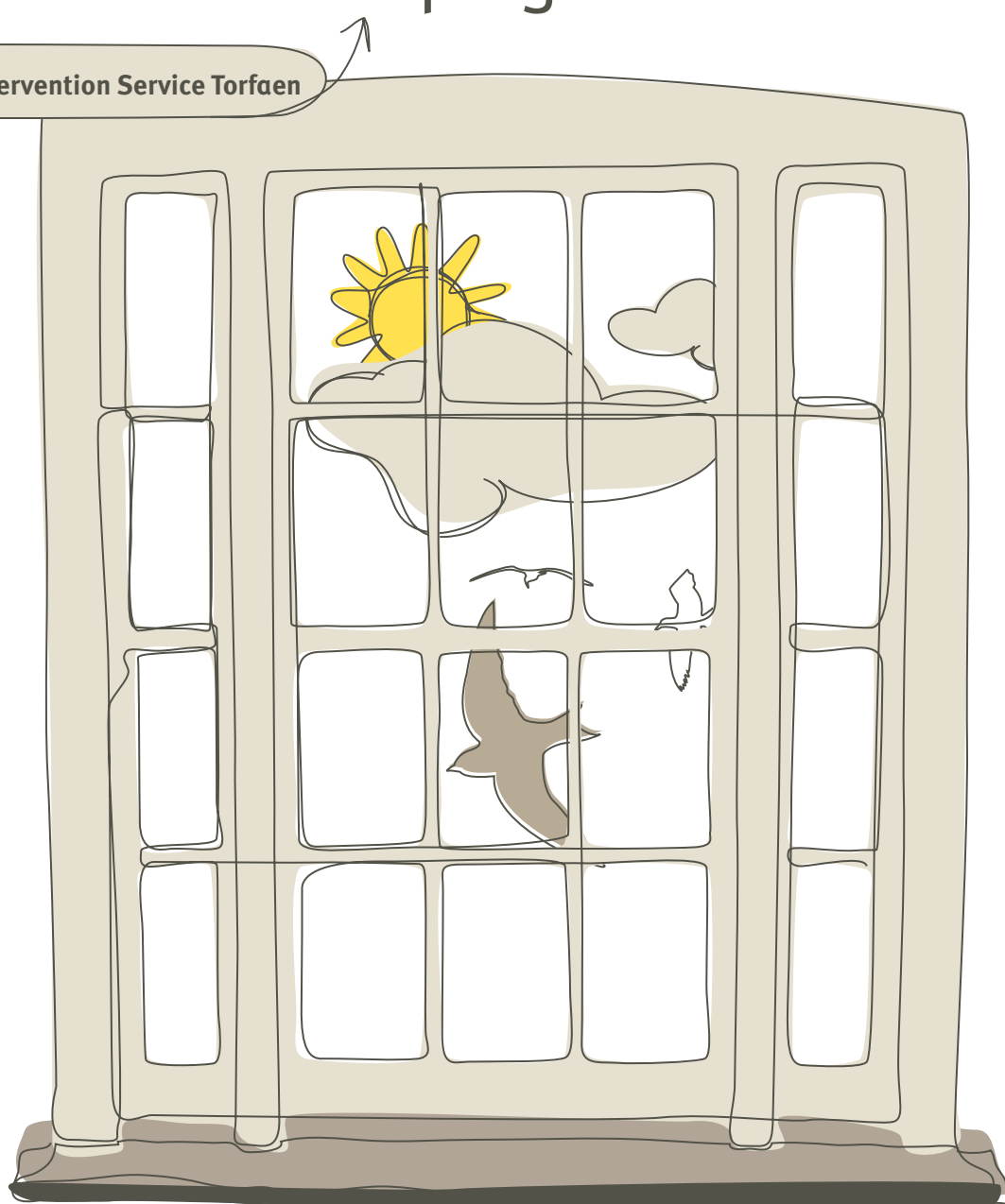
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## An evaluative review of the Action for Children MIST programme

The Multi-disciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen

### Executive summary

Eddy Street, PhD  
Psychologist



*as long as it takes*

## Foreword

I am pleased to write this foreword on behalf of the Torfaen CAMHS management board.

The Multi-disciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen (MIST) was established in 2003 from the proposals developed by a steering group comprising representatives of:

- ▶ Social Services
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Local Health Board
- ▶ Gwent Health Care Trust

At the point of establishing this service, major budget pressures were being experienced in Children's Social Services and Education's SEN budget, as a result of a rising number of out-of-area residential placements.

The MIST project became an integral part of the local authority's placement strategy and pivotal in our prevention policy.

The local authority has reduced its out-of-area placements from 13, at its highest, to four. A number of young people have continued to present difficult and challenging behaviour but, through the project, their local placements have been maintained by the intensive support offered.

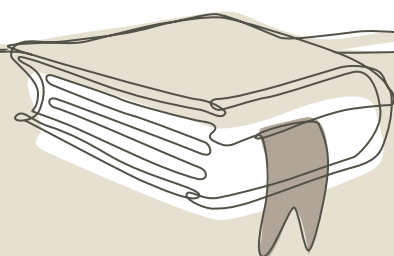
I have no doubt that without this project more children and young people would have experienced placement moves and some would have ended up in out-of-area residential placements.

The MIST project is an excellent example of partnership working, where professional boundaries have been put aside with the focus being on positive outcomes for children and young people.

**Keith Rutherford**  
**Head of Torfaen Children's Services**

Emotional wellbeing – that is inner strength, resilience and self-esteem – is a fundamental building block in the development of children and young people. Increasingly recognised as key to becoming a happy, stable adult, emotional wellbeing provides a platform for achieving educational success, and establishing positive relationships and good mental health. Through our Growing Strong campaign, Action for Children's aim has been to raise awareness of the impact of emotional wellbeing on young people's futures and demand a greater focus be given to the issue by any organisation providing services that support children and young people. This executive summary – and the full report from which it is taken – form part of a programme of research that underpin Growing Strong, helping to build a base of evidence of effective and innovative interventions. For more information on Growing Strong, go to [www.actionforchildren.org.uk/growingstrong](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/growingstrong)

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# 1. Introduction

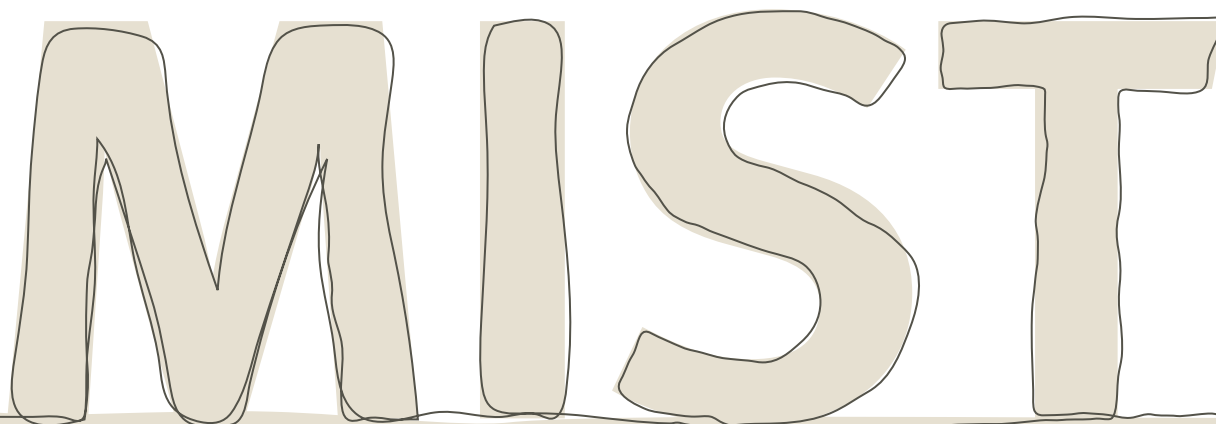
MIST (Multi-disciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen) is a 'wraparound' therapeutic service managed by Action for Children–Gweithredu dros Blant (previously called NCH Cymru) and based in Torfaen. It works with looked-after children and young people aged 11–21 who have such significant challenging and risk-taking behaviour that their placement is threatened. These are young people with complex needs requiring considerable resources to manage them and maintain their safety.

The MIST programme provides intensive support to foster carers and intensive ongoing work with the young people themselves. MIST supports carers in a variety of ways, including a 24-hour on-call service, ongoing advice and supervision, training and education. The service works

therapeutically with the young people, utilising a variety of individual psychological therapies and activity-based inputs such as drama, music, art, as well as practical support, befriending and learning support. It works closely with all other professionals involved in each young person's care, through consultation, liaison and joint direct work.

Established in 2004, the project is in the process of moving into its maturity; it is perceived as providing a highly valued resource that is working very well. This review was commissioned to establish which factors allow the programme to be successful as well as those that are obstacles to its functioning. It used an evaluation strategy to assess the programme's delivery and outcomes, which entailed studying the processes involved in the delivery of the service.

'The MIST project is an excellent example of partnership working'

The word 'MIST' is written in large, bold, hand-drawn style letters. The letters are filled with a light beige color and have a dark outline. The 'M' and 'I' are connected at the top. The 'S' is a simple, rounded shape. The 'T' is a simple, rectangular shape. The letters are positioned on a horizontal line that represents the ground.

## 2. Evaluating MIST

The review evaluated the MIST programme in a way that allows service providers to reflect on current practices and consider how these could be developed.

It used an evaluation strategy to assess MIST's delivery and outcomes, based on studying the processes involved in the delivery of a service. As the evaluation process itself required reflection from the service providers, it encouraged a culture of continuous improvement.

### MIST outcomes

Placement stability is a key outcome measure, although it is not the only indicator of the effectiveness of a MIST intervention. For those young people who are selected for the programme and who remain within a placement over a significant period of time, the work is considered 'successful' on this outcome measurement. For those who do not manage to remain within a placement over a significant period, the work is considered 'unsuccessful'.

However, when the notion of 'outcome' is considered from other perspectives, it raises other issues that should be taken into account.

From the **individual psychological perspective**, outcomes include the young person's educational functioning, their ability to deal with life transitions, their mental health, a reduction in difficult and anti-social behaviour, improvement in their relationships with peers, family and other people, and other elements that contribute to their psychological wellbeing.

From the **service context perspective**, outcomes for a service such as MIST include greater understanding among professionals who are peripheral to the project, developing similar strategies in care contexts that sit alongside the project, improved planning in the caring process, and general improvement in the assessment and recognition of the difficulties that these young people bring.

In addition, MIST deliberately selects young people who have been identified as 'failures' in other programmes, and who are not thought to benefit from typical services. As a result, the MIST programme should be seen as a 'service of the last resort' and the usual ideas of success should be absent to some degree.

It should be noted that MIST has not been in existence for very long (four years) and it deals with small numbers of young people at any one time. Therefore the population to be investigated is quite small.

### An individual approach

Rather than asking generalised questions about the MIST programme as a whole, the evaluation process concentrated on how the programme has worked for **individual** young people. By focusing on the individual, service and organisational narratives of particular 'cases', it is possible to identify the general issues for the service.

## Methodology

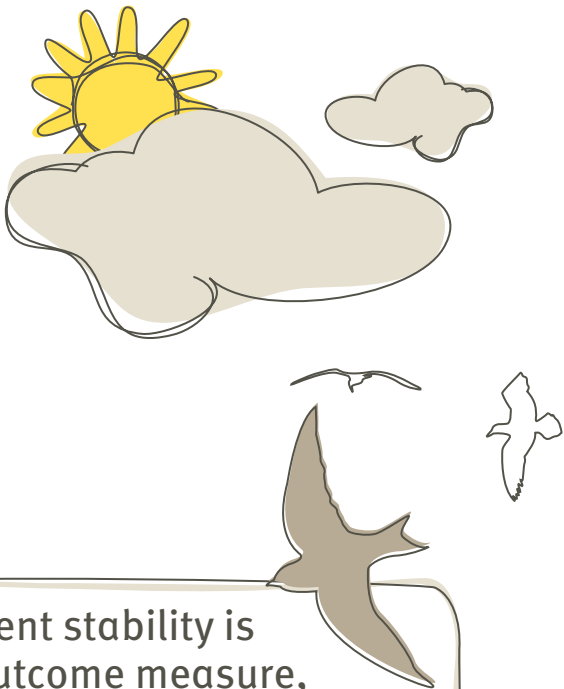
The basic process involved retrospectively considering the 'history' of particular young people who have passed through the MIST programme; three cases of 'successful' placements and three cases of 'unsuccessful/failed' placements.

The review process then followed three distinct phases:

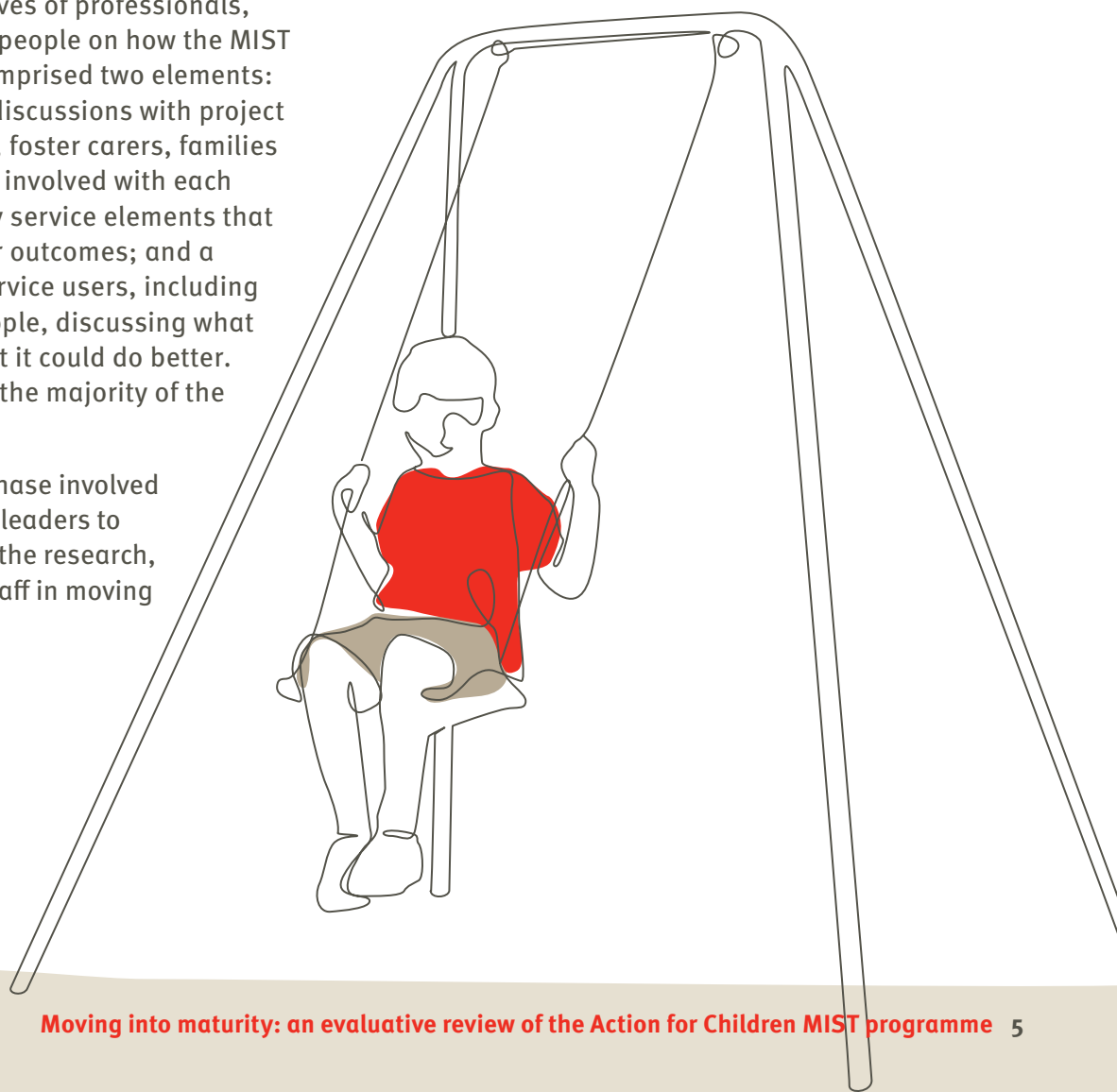
**Orientation phase:** The researcher looked at how the service views both itself and the difficulties presented by the six young people. This was done via: a discussion with the project manager and clinical lead about MIST's aims and operation; a review of their case notes and documentation; and a focus group with project staff, discussing what they felt they did well and not so well.

**Interview phase:** This phase involved obtaining the individual perspectives of professionals, participants and young people on how the MIST programme works. It comprised two elements: individual open-ended discussions with project workers, social workers, foster carers, families and other professionals involved with each young person to identify service elements that helped or hindered their outcomes; and a focus group of young service users, including one of the six young people, discussing what MIST does well and what it could do better. This phase represented the majority of the evaluation work.

**Reflection phase:** This phase involved discussions with project leaders to reflect on the process of the research, and ultimately to help staff in moving forward in their work.



Placement stability is a key outcome measure, although it is not the only indicator of the effectiveness of a MIST intervention



## 3. Review findings

### Summary: MIST is working well...

The review clearly indicates that MIST is operating very well and it provides an excellent service for this challenging group of young people because it has:

- ▶ a supportive multi-agency context which appreciates that a service of this nature is best located within a voluntary sector setting
- ▶ a functioning local structure with capable managers who have considerable experience in this field
- ▶ excellent integration of its three components: the MIST team, foster carers and the wider network. The team manages this integration through the process of therapeutic key working, high-quality foster placements that are very well supported and trained, and the ongoing construction of a professional ‘team around the young person’.

These features would be essential to the establishment of a service such as MIST in any other location.

The review included the following key observations about MIST’s successful operation:

### Local management

The team managers have constructed a very close and tight-knit team and all young people on the project are known by all team members. Supervision is provided to all team members on a regular basis to ensure that their clinical work follows the framework and philosophy that has been established.

As the team is small, it is able to transmit information to and from different members rapidly. As well as the informal process, there are regular reflection meetings about how each young person is progressing and how the programme is developing in response to their needs. These meetings focus on how the programme and the young person are managing, and on how other professional and non-professional systems around the young person are dealing with the situation.

### Managing risk

The team operates with clear guidelines and communications about potential problem areas for each young person. For each individual, each type of risk is evaluated and there is an established protocol to follow, if that difficult behaviour occurs.

### MIST culture

The MIST team works with a clear therapeutic orientation derived from a health and development viewpoint. They focus positively on young people and their development, in order to enhance their psychological wellbeing.

There is a team culture of ‘hopefulness’ based on the view that anyone can be worked with and everyone is worth taking a risk for. The latter point is particularly important, relating to the way team members work as active advocates for the young person within the immediate professional network. There is a clear desire not to engage in stereotypical views and prejudices and, as a result, an approach of ‘not simplifying’ individuals or situations.

The MIST team understands the multi-disciplinary context where no one person or idea is right and where everybody has a contribution to make.

The team aims to connect rather than control, by forming trusting relationships between the MIST key worker, the foster carer and the young person.

The MIST team’s approach to liaison means that all professionals involved with any particular young person are actively included and are ultimately seen as working towards the same goal. MIST works to create an active and involved ‘team around the young person’. The clear aim is to move professionals from an individual approach based on a sole-agency perspective, to one where there is a systemic view and a shared ownership of all problems.

There is a clear ethic of persistence that derives from a view of the young person being worthwhile. The team operates on a philosophy of ‘stopping not being an option’. The team has a clear view that crises and problems present the young person, and everyone concerned with them, with an opportunity to work with an issue and develop from the difficulties these circumstances produce. The team therefore has a view of the management of risk as presenting an opportunity that could ultimately be beneficial. It is also aware that at times this view may be in conflict with the need to control and manage, and contrasts with the child protection perspective that has to focus on the negatives of situations.

### **Therapeutic key working**

Each young person is assigned a key worker who operates in a variety of modes with the young person, their carers and the wider network. The key worker may work with the young person as a befriender, counsellor, mentor, adviser, therapist, programme organiser, liaison worker, advocate, etc.

Within this relationship there is a consistent focus on the young person’s ‘agenda’ and much of the content of the conversation is based on topics and perceptions brought by the young person. Working from this foundation, the aim is to help the young person develop more positive perceptions and behaviours and more mature emotional responses.

### **Foster carers**

MIST operates two types of foster care programmes – therapeutic and supported. MIST has four therapeutic placements in which foster carers are employed by the Torfaen local authority. It is also able to support ongoing placements and kinship placements (where the young person is placed with family members).

Interviews with the foster carers associated with MIST indicated that they are very committed and are able to work with the young person’s agenda; they expect and anticipate problems; and they respond in a ‘non-emotional’ way, dealing with problems in a matter-of-fact way and with no outward display of negative emotions. They have good communication skills and are not overly psychologically inquisitive. (Adolescents who meet many difficulties tend to view questions about the reasons for their behaviour as very intrusive and blaming.)

Carers are particularly pleased with the support they receive for the MIST team. The carers all pointed out that the way MIST deals with them is different from the usual way they had encountered with social workers and other professionals. They referred to the way in which the MIST team were consistent in the advice they offered, and to feeling empowered by the way they were included in the MIST process and decision making.

### **‘By-product’ services**

Because of MIST’s position in the local professional system, some ‘by-product’ services have developed involving consultation and advice, education and training, and the presentation of a psychological wellbeing perspective throughout the professional network. Through this involvement, the philosophy and orientation underlying the MIST model has made a contribution to the development and management of other services.

## 4. Factors affecting success

Factors that may hinder the successful functioning of a service such as MIST include:

### Lack of a multi-agency context

The lack of a multi-agency context and a voluntary base would be an obstacle to the optimal functioning of a service such as MIST. This has not occurred in Torfaen, although the understanding of multi-agency working varies at different levels of each organisation, so agencies need to maintain a continuing dialogue.

The multi-agency context places the programme within a voluntary agency location, providing it with the autonomy it needs to function. A programme of this nature would not be successful in the long term if it were located in the social services department, in educational services or in the NHS, as each of these locations could not consistently provide the necessary philosophy, supervision and team management processes.

### Local team structure

The two current job descriptions of the leading professionals in the MIST team reflect a health service model of team manager and clinical lead, which presume a particular hierarchy and a division of labour that may not suit MIST's work and authority structure. Job descriptions/person specifications of these two posts need to ensure that appointments can reflect the ongoing nature of the MIST service.

### Foster placements being unable to subscribe to the model

There have been occasions when foster placements have been unable to subscribe to the model. The MIST team and the placements team now have a much clearer view of the characteristics of foster carers and the requirements of placements that need to be incorporated into the programme. Successful placements will be achieved by successful recruitment, together with ongoing support and training.

### Disruption from other agencies' major processes

Other agencies will implement major processes to manage young people at particular points in their lives. These changes can undermine the stability being sought for the young person, particularly those relating to service transfers for young people aged 16 and above within social services departments. The social work system and social services management process have not recognised the full impact of the changes that come with the bureaucracy and change of approach introduced by 16-plus services. An innovative approach is required to overcome this issue.

Successful placements will be achieved by successful recruitment, together with ongoing support and training

Training

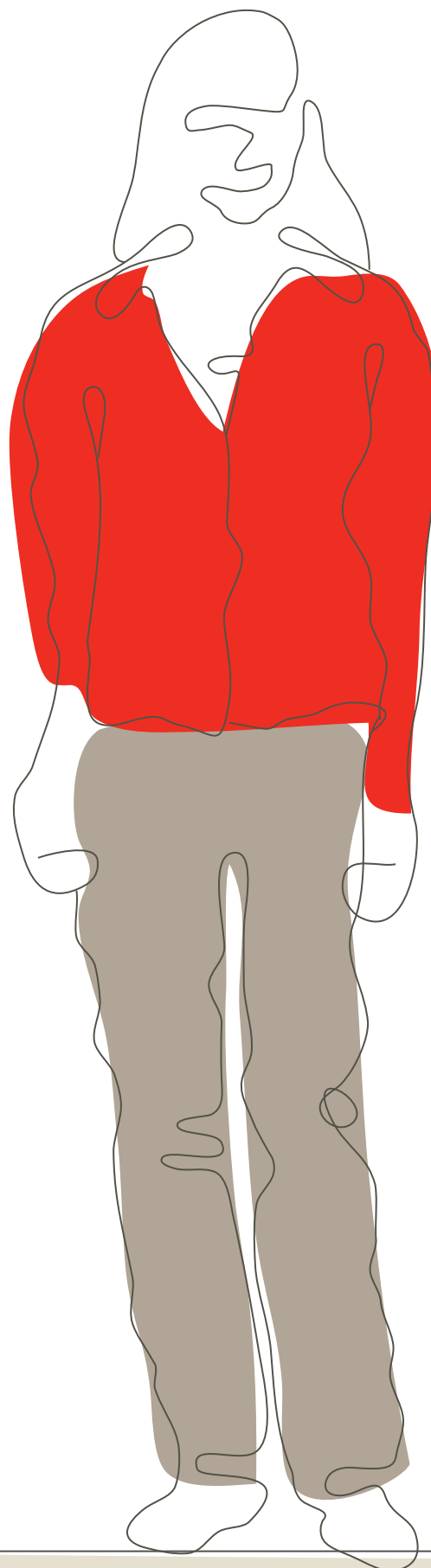
## Not integrating one element into the 'team around the young person'

For a variety of reasons it is not always possible to construct and maintain an integrated team around the young person; for example, where there is no allocated social worker, or where the police have a different approach to a young person. When the network team fails, this results in a loss of direction and consistency in the management of the young person's behaviour. Even though the MIST staff, often supported by other professionals in the network, attempt to eliminate such difficulties, these problems do and will continue to occur by the very nature of the work and the systems in which it is embedded. Where such problems are significant, the equivalent of a 'disruption meeting' would be helpful, so professionals can be debriefed about their role in the matter and agency managements can reflect on the process.

## Unhelpful geographical location

Sometimes the 'missing' element in the 'team around the young person' concerns family members. Not every family supports MIST's and the other professionals' efforts. Sometimes this does not interfere with the ongoing work. However, there are times when family relationships and interactions handicap a young person's management.

Some of MIST's young service users find it difficult to extract themselves from unhelpful family involvement. Obviously, in such situations it is not possible to move the family and for these young people a placement near home (ie Torfaen) may not carry any advantage and may even be a disadvantage. Therefore, there may be situations where the 'location' needs of the young person directly contradict the Welsh Assembly Government's aim to repatriate looked-after children to local placements. This issue requires further discussions with policymakers.



## 5. Issues and recommendations

The evaluation of the MIST programme raised particular issues that need to be addressed at different levels of the system in which MIST operates.

### At organisational level:

- ▶ appreciating that power issues predominate throughout the professional network
- ▶ the training and management of social workers in psychological wellbeing perspectives
- ▶ appreciating the full impact of the 16-plus processes on these young people
- ▶ securing the full involvement of educational services in MIST's work
- ▶ appreciating that not all young people need to live near their familial home

### At management structure level:

- ▶ appreciating that power issues predominate throughout the professional network
- ▶ appreciating the full impact of the 16-plus processes on this population of young people
- ▶ systematising 'by-product' services
- ▶ ensuring the management structure, job descriptions and person specifications work effectively

### At local management level:

- ▶ the need to maintain the philosophy/perspective
- ▶ appropriate management of files and records
- ▶ accounting process for problems (a way to collect statistics)
- ▶ establishing 'disruption meetings' when problems within the professional network have occurred

### Other issues:

**Clinical:** It will be important to make clear decisions about future involvement with young people whose time with the programme may be ending.

**Ethical:** An important question involves the ethics of offering an attachment-based relationship to a young person lacking in such relationships, when it is likely that the significant professionals will end their relationship with the young person later on, due to the professional demands of the programme. Commissioning services such as MIST in an ethical manner will involve the commissioning of ancillary services that actively support the psychological consequences of MIST-type outcomes. The way this particular issue is resolved for MIST will have a considerable impact on how it functions in the future.

One option is to work with 14-plus age group, which would be a continuation of current practice; it would be important to develop work around the 16-plus transition, including outreach work into young adulthood. It's possible to conceive of a service where therapists offer 'post-placement' therapy and support to young people aged 18–21.

Another option is to focus on younger adolescents in the 10-plus age group, with more active attachment issues. Phase 1 work would deal with developing trust and phase 2 would challenge the young person. Currently MIST offers an intensive phase 1 process on placement that is highly successful, and phase 2 aspects (due to the age of the young people) occur in the post-placement period.

‘It’s no good having bits and pieces of things, you need the whole package. It’s like a jigsaw; you can’t do it if some bits are missing. MIST is the whole thing and then it’s up to you.’

### MIST client

At the same time as the evaluation process was undertaken, a research literature review was prepared called *A review of principles, processes and procedures in the foster care of children and adolescents*. This is available from the MIST office.





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The Multi-disciplinary  
Intervention Service Torfaen

# MIST

## Eddy Street, PhD

Eddy Street is a Chartered Clinical and Counselling Psychologist. He is an elected Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Senior Practitioner on the Register of Psychologists Specialising in Psychotherapy. For over 30 years, he worked in South Wales in NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. His interests include family interaction, the effect of stresses on children, the means by which families deal with a variety of chronic physical conditions and child development in abusive environments. He has been instrumental in setting up mental health services for looked-after children and has published widely on themes related to his work. He is a past editor of the *Journal of Family Therapy* for the Association of Family Therapy and is an author of standard texts on family therapy. He currently works in a freelance and private capacity.

Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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