

The Reflection and Action Learning Forum (RALF)

Full Report

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Front page photo by Andrew Eccles

Introduction

Reflection is a key ingredient that enables workers and service cultures to effectively support children's growth and recovery in residential child care. Yet there are significant challenges in developing robust reflective practice and reflective cultures. Residential child care is a busy, lively space where eruptions of intense emotions – excitement, fear, joy, rage, hilarity, and pain – can be the norm. Time is needed to process these experiences, but time often feels in short supply.

Time, however, is not enough. Not everyone is naturally reflective, and even those who are need effective processes to support regular in-depth reflection. The more threatening the thoughts, feelings and experiences, the more difficult it will be to reflect on and mentally 'digest' them. Instead, workers can get caught up in unhelpful patterns of thinking, sometimes referred to as rumination, or they can suppress their uncomfortable feelings. Rumination and/or suppression can become the norm in service cultures, making it difficult for individuals and teams to use reflection to really look at practice, to learn, and to change what needs changed.

The Scottish Physical Restraint Action Group (SPRAG¹) formed in 2019 to bring about change in relation to physical restraint in residential child care. SPRAG's members recognise the central importance of reflection, both in those high-pressured moments where a physical restraint may be deemed necessary and where there is more space, in terms of time and emotions, to think. For change to be possible that isn't at the expense of children or those who care for them, support is required to enhance the reflective capacities of individuals and services.

Rumination and/or suppression can become the norm in service cultures, making it difficult for individuals and teams to use reflection to really look at practice, learn, and to change what needs changed.

This report will tell you about the work of the RALF project – a project aimed at developing reflective work cultures and individual workers' reflective capacity. The Promise Partnership awarded a grant for this project, which ran for 24 months starting in the spring of 2023. Craig McCreddie and Lorraine Sillars from CELCIS, and Laura Steckley from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy wrote the grant application for funding the project, and Sarah Deeley and Gemma Watson from CELCIS, and Laura Steckley made up the project organising team. Laura Quinn from CELCIS provided analytic and other support at key points over the course of the project.

We have chosen to include a wealth of detail from RALF participants' accounts of their experiences of the project and its impacts. This includes sometimes longer quotes than may be typical of other research reports. The level of reflection they brought to the project, including the research component, has yielded rich insights. It also facilitates greater transparency. This means that there is a great deal of information here, and so **we encourage the use of bookmarks to navigate easily to the areas of the report that are of most interest.** We have also provided a summary version outlining the 'bare bones' of this report. You can access it [HERE](#)

¹ For more information about SPRAG please see 'A final note' at the end of this document



What is RALF?

RALF stands for Reflection and Action Learning Forum, and is a model for supporting the development of in-depth reflection. The aim of RALF is to provide a practical and evidence-based approach that supports members of the residential child care workforce to develop the necessary habits and skills associated with genuinely reflective practice, even when some behaviour exhibited by children, young people or colleagues can feel challenging.

RALF sessions offer a structured, facilitated space that combines action learning with deeper reflection on thoughts, feelings and motivations. These sessions are not about giving members advice; rather, they support members to develop new ways of thinking and deeper insights about themselves, their practice and their service. For the purposes of this project, RALF sessions have been aimed at physical restraint and other forms of restrictive practice. They lend themselves, however, to a much wider focus on practice.

The RALF model was co-designed by members of SPRAG. Together, we trialled the model and collected information from three sets of group members about their experiences of the forum, which ran for three sessions for each trial group. SPRAG members identified that continuing RALF in some way should be part of its ongoing priorities, and so we submitted a grant application to the Promise Partnership.²

What did the RALF Project Do?

The main aim of the RALF project was to start a process of rolling out the forum more widely in Scotland. The first significant step towards achieving this aim was to co-design the roll-out process within a short-life working subgroup of SPRAG. Further information about this co-design process can be found in the [RALF Project Update](#).

Broadly, the roll-out took the form of recruiting project members, assembling and meeting with the oversight group, training forum facilitators, supporting these facilitators to start and maintain RALF groups, maintaining lines of communication with RALF members in order to adjust the process where needed, and using research methods to identify key learning from the process and impacts of the project.

² *The Promise Partnership is a Scottish Government grant that provides funding to support the implementation of the recommendations of The Promise, which is the outcome of Scotland's Independent Care Review.*

Diagram 1:
Component Parts
of RALF Project



The quantifiable outputs of the project are presented in the following table:

| RALF Facilitators |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32 Started Training • 30 Completed Training • 22 formed one or more RALF groups • 2 were active in the project supporting the implementation of RALF in service(s) w/o forming their own group or running sessions |
| RALF Groups |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size ranged from 3 to 8 members with the average size being 6 members • Of the 24 groups formed, 22 were in-service groups facilitated by a facilitator internal to the organisation, 1 had an external facilitator and 1 was a cross-organisation group. |
| RALF Sessions |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of sessions per RALF group at the end of the funding period ranged from 1 to 11 sessions. |
| Participants in RALF |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the organisations represented, 22 were direct providers of residential child care. There were 9 members, including non-affiliated individuals, in roles supporting residential child care practice. • Well over 100 residential child care workers and/or managers took part in at least 1 RALF session. |

Table 1: Quantifiable RALF outputs

In the latter stages of the project, members of the organising team met with every facilitator to ascertain numbers of group members and RALF sessions. Based on these meetings and subsequent attempts to collect information about RALF group activity, **well over 100 residential child care workers and/or managers have experienced at least one RALF session. Some of these 100+ workers and/or managers will have experienced up to 11 sessions.**



How Did We Collect Information about the Process, the Challenges and the Impacts of RALF?

While the RALF project was primarily focused on rolling out the forum, we also wanted to glean as much learning from the process as possible. Finding out about its impacts was important too, and so we used online questionnaires, research diaries and individual and focus group interviews to collect the views and experiences of RALF participants. The bulk of this report focuses on these impacts and learning.

The challenges related to making time for RALF were touched on in the **RALF Project Update**, and so it was important to be clear from the start that **participating in the**

research component of RALF was voluntary and that project members could choose to be involved with RALF without being required to complete questionnaires, keep a research diary and/or take part in a focus group. Because RALF facilitators were the most involved in the project, they were the most involved in the research component as well. We were aware that this added further demands on their time, and so we endeavoured to make taking part as easy and flexible as possible. The research component was approved by the University of Strathclyde's Social Work and Social Policy's Departmental Ethics Committee.

Online Questionnaires

Facilitators were invited to complete a Reflective Capacity Sub-scale of the Reflective Practice Questionnaire prior to starting their training and again at the end of each community of practice meeting throughout the life of the project. The Reflective Practice Questionnaire is an anonymous, validated, self-report questionnaire that measures reflective capacity. It is designed to be used across a wide range of professions and contexts (Priddis & Rogers, 2018; Rogers et al., 2019). The 16 questions of the Reflective Capacity Sub-scale were chosen from the 40 questions of the full questionnaire to reduce the time burden on respondents.³ Priddis and Rogers (2018) indicate the deliberate design of subscales for researchers to use selectively for practical or other purposes. Facilitators were given the option to devise and attach a code to their responses so that, at the end of the project, we could provide them with their scores over the life of the project should they want this.

In addition to the Reflective Capacity Sub-scale, facilitators were invited to complete a short series of questions that elicited feedback about what was working well, what could be improved and whether they were seeing any impacts of the project.

Facilitators were also invited to distribute a more comprehensive, anonymous questionnaire in their services around the time they started facilitating their RALF groups. This more comprehensive questionnaire contained the Reflective Capacity Sub-scale, as well as questions addressed to respondents' views on reflection in their workplaces and the impacts of physical restraint. Almost all of the questions addressed to respondents' views were Likert-type questions. This means the respondents mostly chose from a range of answers, for example, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were able to

write in any additional views they wanted to share. Facilitators were then asked to distribute the same questionnaire again in the latter stages of the funding period to the same people they had shared it with at the start of their RALF groups.

Only a very limited number of people completed the questionnaires, with no more than five from any one organisation completing it at the late stages of the project. We have therefore not included the scores from the Reflective Capacity Sub-scale or other Likert-scale questions, as there were not enough to provide measures at service level.

Research Diaries

'Solicited' research diaries are audio or written recordings that respondents make about their thoughts and feelings, created for the purpose of contributing to research (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Research diaries are a good way of capturing responses about emotionally complex topics, and they give participants more flexibility and control over the research process than other ways of collecting information (Burford, 2021). For these reasons, we included this method as part of the research component of RALF.

We invited facilitators to share written or voice-recorded entries and provided diary prompts on a semi-regular basis. In response to early feedback, a form was developed to facilitate the process. Due to limited initial engagement and based on feedback in the RALF community of practice, prompts were sent using online software so that recipients were able to write their entries in an open field, questionnaire-style (instead of typing or voice recording their entry and uploading it). This added option increased the number of written entries, but research diaries continued to be a more limited form of research participation. No one chose voice recording to provide diary entries.

³ For clarity, here forward 'participant' is used for people who participated in the RALF Project, and 'respondent' is used for people who participated in the research component of the RALF Project.

Individual and Focus Group Interviews

Towards the end of the funding period, we carried out individual and focus group interviews with facilitators and group members. Focus groups are useful for collecting views from a larger number of people in a shorter amount of time than individual interviews. Through their interactive format, focus groups can elicit memories and insights, sometimes through a co-constructed process between respondents that generates rich descriptions and new

insights (Robinson, 2019). Focus groups ranged in size from five to nine respondents, with a total of 23 RALF members taking part. The duration of focus group interviews ranged from 81 to 96 minutes and the individual interview lasted 37 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

The table below outlines the different methods of collecting this information, from whom it was collected, and the number of occasions on which the method was used.

| COLLECTION METHOD Referred to as Data Sets in the discussion below | RESPONDENTS | NUMBERS |
|--|--|---|
| Reflective Capacity Sub-scale Questionnaire (pre-training and post-CoPs) | Facilitators | 11 occasions |
| Feedback on Project Questionnaire (post-CoPs) | Facilitators | 8 occasions |
| Questionnaire to Services | Facilitators, Group Members and Colleagues | 2 occasions - early stages of RALF group forming and late stages of project |
| Research Diaries | Facilitators | 8 entries |
| Individual Interview | Facilitator | 1 |
| Focus Group Interviews | Facilitators | 2 |
| Focus Group Interviews | Facilitator and Group Members | 2 |

Table 2: Collection Methods and Data Sets



What Did We Find Out?

RALF was designed to work in harmony with the services' already existing efforts to increase reflective practice and/or reduce, or where possible eliminate, reliance on physical restraint.

It is not possible to separate out the impacts of RALF from the impacts of services' other efforts, and it probably would not be productive to try.

Indeed, we hope that RALF enhances these other efforts and acknowledge that they have likely enhanced the positive impacts of RALF.

Impacts on Individuals: Reflective Capacity Sub-scale (RCS) Results

The reflective capacity sub-scale (RCS) enabled us to track changes in facilitators' self-assessment of their own reflective capacity at different points throughout the project (the start, end, and after each facilitator community of practice).

Table 3 reflects the numbers of respondents who contributed across the 11 data collection points.

Limitations to the Data

The data was collected anonymously from mixed cohorts with varying attendance at data collection sessions. Not all participants contributed at every point, and new members joined throughout the project. While participants could create a unique code to track their scores, inconsistencies

| SESSION | RESPONDENTS |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| Cohorts 1 & 2 Pre-training | 5 |
| October 2023 | 7 |
| November 2023 | 9 |
| February 2024 | 5 |
| Cohort 3 Pre-training | 2 |
| April 2024 | 6 |
| June 2024 | 3 |
| Cohort 5 Pre-training | 5 |
| October 2024 | 7 |
| November 2024 | 7 |
| February 2025 | 9 |
| Total Responses | 65 |

Table 3: RCS Respondents

in code use prevented analysis of self-assessment shifts based on project duration. Consequently, average session scores were used for evaluation.

How the Data Was Scored

Participants rated themselves on a six-point Likert scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘extremely’, with scores converted to a range of 1 to 6. Individual question responses were averaged and repeated across sessions where facilitators completed the RCS. These averages were then used to calculate an overall collective self-score for each session.

Facilitator Averages Across the Project

The horizontal (x) axis represents the data collection sessions, of which there were 11. The vertical (y) axis represents the average score from each of the data collection sessions, which is presented in 0.1 increments to show the shifts in data.

Facilitators initial self-scores were high. This would align with the careful recruitment and selection process of the project that

included a requirement to demonstrate knowledge about reflective practice and reflective capacity.

There was a continued increase in self-assessment scores for the first three cohorts/sessions. Sessions four and five remained above the average, with average self-assessment scores of five. However, cohort three dipped below the average but remained above the upper control limit. It is not clear what caused this dip in scores. This cohort had the lowest number of respondents across the 11 data collection points. The self-assessment scores from subsequent data collection points remained above the average and below the upper control limit. There was, however, a slight dip in cohort five, but again remained above the average. This was potentially due to improved access to RALF materials and project adaptations.

Scores of six (‘extremely’) and two (‘slightly’) do not appear on the control chart, which reflects averages rather than individual scores. The first individual sixes appeared in October 2024, while no ones were recorded.

Control Chart with Upper and Lower Control Levels

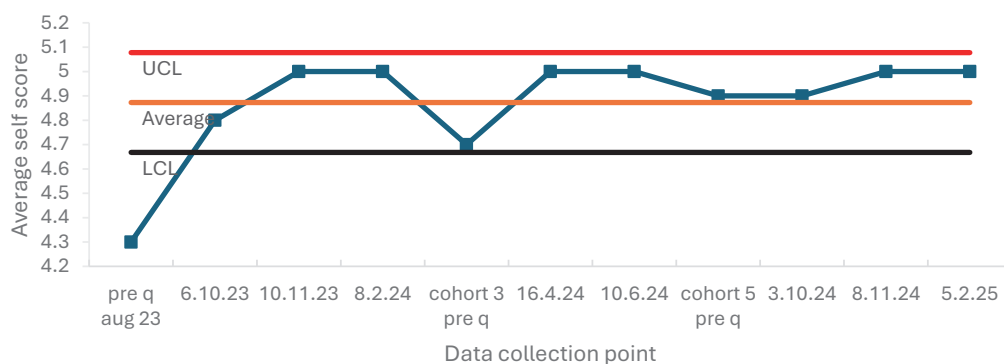


Diagram 2: Facilitator Average RCS Scores Across the RALF Project

Individual RCS Changes at the Start and End of the Project

Of the 65 individual RCS submissions across the project, 12 participants entered the same code at least twice, offering a first recorded average self score, and a last recorded average self score. The changes in both first and last recorded average self scores are presented below:

What Might these Scores Tell Us?

The data was collected from cohorts of participants with mixed abilities and variable length and depth of exposure to the RALF project, and so our interpretations are more tentative and reflective. While there are a number of limitations to this data, the average scores and dips in self scores when new cohorts completed their pre-questionnaires gave us pause to consider how learning environments shape individual growth.

The shared learning and reflection spaces offered across the RALF project appear to have a meaningful impact, not just due to the facilitators' skills but because of the collective knowledge and experiences in the room. The evolving self-assessment scores across cohorts suggest that new participants may initially perceive gaps in their understanding but later benefit from the cumulative learning process.

We were able to explore the meaning participants made of their learning in the RALF project in greater depth using the other methods employed in this research

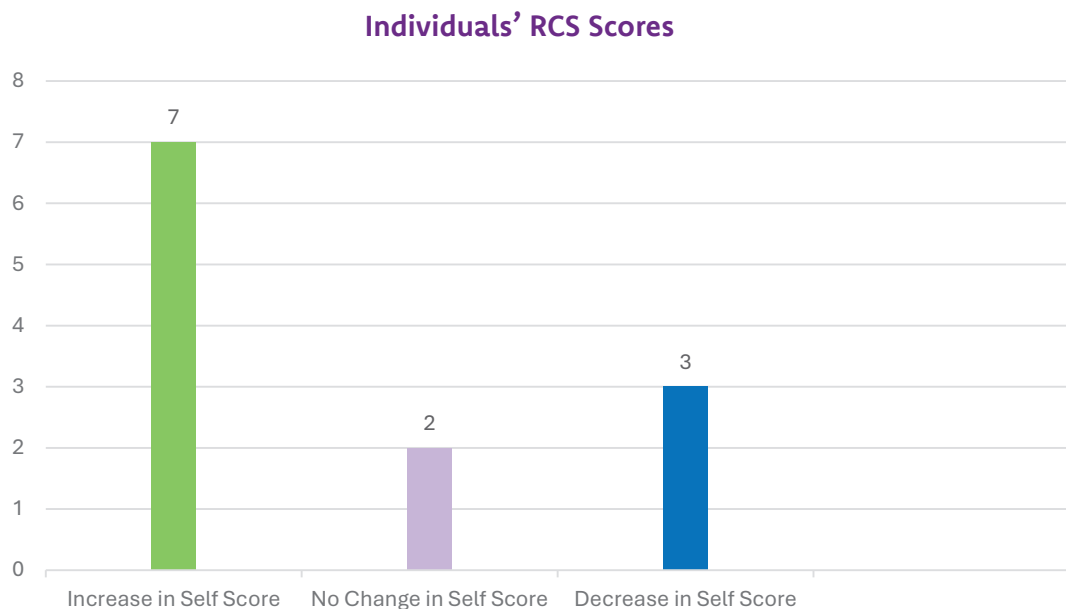


Diagram3: RCS Scores for those individuals who provided a code for tracking over time.

Impacts on Individuals: Respondent Accounts

Using NVivo© qualitative software, we carried out a systematic thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) on the written responses, diary entries and interview transcripts. This involved: applying codes to each transcript, written response set and diary entry; alternating between coding, documenting reflections, and diagramming relationships between codes; and identifying a distilled set of themes based on this process. The themes we identified are: impacts on individuals, impacts on services, impacts related to physical restraint, challenges in implementing RALF, and what is needed to make RALF work.

Respondents spoke⁴ the most frequently and at the greatest length about RALF's impacts on themselves and/or other individuals in their group or service. These impacts have been organised into facets of thinking, feeling, doing and being, though, as will become evident below, there were overlaps between them.

Thinking

Respondents spoke most frequently at the individual level about the impact of RALF on people's thinking. Most prominent was an increase in thinking and reflecting overall:

So it's the - being able to see an opportunity to use some reflective skill and using it intentionally and moments to help people think about a situation.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Within **this increase in reflection**, a smaller number of respondents, all of whom were facilitators, spoke of a deepening understanding of reflection:

So I think from our group, in particular, it's been that improved self-awareness and that improved ability to think critically about practice in residential childcare. Which, they've kind of said that up until this point

and this experience, they've perhaps not fully grasped that understanding of what's expected of them or how to do it. Or how to do it well, I suppose. So that's certainly been, I would say, an impact of the group.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Respondents also spoke in greater numbers and across all of the data sets about **RALF opening up theirs or others' thinking**, whether by seeing others' points of view, other possible solutions, their own blind spots, or the bigger picture beyond their own part of their service:

We all look inwards towards our own [parts of the service] rather than outwards towards ourselves or - towards ourselves as a team [...] So it feels like it's making us a team in a way that we weren't before because people are having experience of support within that group that they haven't previously.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The specific change to thinking that respondents discussed the most had to do with a shift from a problem-solving, fixing or rescuing orientation to reflecting more and supporting others to do the same:

In a way it's kind of made me think about my approach to some things. Because I think before I was - well [a] bulldozer [...] I'm trying to be more - a lot more empathy and maybe the rescue of things, that's - I'm trying not to - I'm trying hard

(Focus Group Respondent)

- not to rescue?

(Interviewer)

Not to rescue. Try hard to listen and not give all the answers. Because my answers might not be the answer the person needs.

(Focus Group Respondent)

⁴ For ease of writing and reading, all written data and transcribed interviews are referred to here using oral terminology (i.e. 'Respondents spoke ...' rather than using 'Respondents wrote or spoke ...' every time). When including direct quotations, we have indicated the data source.

This shift appeared to coincide with thinking more about asking useful questions:

Where they might have previously fixed, rescued or given advice and guidance right off the bat. They've sat back a wee bit and actually encouraged the other person to just tell them a wee bit more about what they were thinking, what they were feeling. They recognise that by framing their questions in certain ways it can really help to deepen the other person's understanding of themselves or a situation. Or even just the behaviours of children and young people.

(Focus Group Respondent)

In one focus group, respondents spoke about using the shorthand 'What would RALF do?' to access this shift in their thinking:

I think I probably follow the RALF process at times without even realising [...]

(Focus Group Respondent)

Yeah. I think, 'What would RALF do'? You know what I mean?

(second Focus Group Respondent)

That's what we do. 'What would RALF do'?

(first Focus Group Respondent)

[...] I think that's a really good point. Just for me, I've always been a bit of a fixer [... and] that's great in the moment, because I suppose your short-term solution is sorted, but in the long run, it's not going to help people grow and people develop. It's a little tweak to what RALF is, I suppose.

(third Focus Group Respondent)

Across all the data sets, respondents also spoke about their thinking becoming clearer. 'Aha' and 'lightbulb' moments were mentioned, along with repeated references to arriving at a deeper understanding about the issue they were discussing:

I had it clear as day last time. I was like, wow, that's what's going on, that's how we need to fix it. It was massive, huge.

(Focus Group Respondent)

A smaller number of respondents across fewer data sets spoke of **changes to their thinking about children and their behaviour**. Some comments were general. For example, in the feedback questionnaire after a facilitators' community of practice meeting, one respondent stated that RALF 'enriches the organic conversations that take place regarding children.' Some respondents spoke about understanding children's behaviour better, and some spoke of **children's rights**. The following respondent spoke in great detail about the impact on his own and his team's thinking about restraint and restriction, such that they changed their care planning and thinking more generally, from an overriding focus on preventing risk to one of risk enablement for developmentally necessary risks.

For us what we've noticed is that it's had an impact on how capable we are to make sure that the children's rights are enabled [...]. Because the team were already on a journey towards reducing unnecessary restrictions, it was something that they had confidence enough to question.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The respondent went on to describe how the team successfully reversed a decision made by other professionals that would have excluded the child from attending an important family event.

Feeling

The impacts of RALF on respondents' feelings were mentioned most frequently of all the individual impacts (thinking, feeling, doing and being). Feeling supported, a sense of solidarity and even nurtured

were discussed across most data sets. Respondents spoke of **feeling supported** by their group members both during and outwith RALF sessions, but also by their employer:

People are saying that they're feeling invested in and they're feeling cared about. So they're talking about, like, holding the hands of those who hold their hands.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Feelings connected to **sharing worries and experiences** were discussed most frequently overall:

With RALF, it's almost like I don't feel stupid for feeling that way, or inexperienced, or that it's open to them going, yeah, well, we've been here like 14 years and we can still feel that way. So I think that gave me the strength that maybe I was doing okay and it was okay to feel what I was feeling. You don't have to be like this cold person. You can feel these things. It's okay.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Respondents spoke of feeling validated, relief, less isolation and more motivation and empowerment related to this sharing:

I think we had within the group, I think it gave empowerment and voice to the people who were in the group and an opportunity to really express what they felt.

(Focus Group Respondent)

This motivation and/or empowerment also appeared to be related to the parts of the RALF model that support people to arrive at their own solutions and to take related action. Respondents spoke of successfully acting on decisions they made during RALF sessions, as well as their services acting on insights developed from the sessions.

Two other feelings, often connected to sharing, were discussed by respondents frequently and at length: vulnerability and a sense of release. **Vulnerability** tends to be

an uncomfortable feeling that many people want to avoid, particularly in their work setting. Yet across all of the focus groups and in one of the diary entries, respondents spoke positively about it:

People are sharing vulnerability a bit more [...] So things that feel really significant to people as risks and threats, people having a sense of, 'I'm not sure how well I'm doing', 'I'm not sure if I'm doing what I should be doing', 'I'm not sure what other people think of me'. It feels as though some of those things feel a bit easier to say at the moment than they did before.

(Focus Group Respondent)

In a different focus group, a respondent stressed the importance of care organisations making it easier for people to share their vulnerabilities. When asked why, he stated:

I suppose, for me, the vulnerability side of it is opening yourself to, I suppose, your feelings in terms of 'I'm not okay', or 'I'm really struggling with this young person', or 'I'm really struggling with this process'. I think being able to share how you're feeling and things that are annoying you or things that are challenging you [...] that all ties into staff welfare, staff fulfilment within the roles. Ultimately, for me, it creates better outcomes for our young people as well.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Also within discussions of sharing, respondents spoke of a significant sense of release, feeling lighter, and/or experiencing catharsis:

When we can be able to shine that light and focus on restraint and restrictive practice, I think there has been some sort of catharsis there for staff as well. In terms of being able to process what they perhaps didn't even realise was still lingering for them [...] Once people are aware of it, they can process, make

sense, and actually they can seek additional support should they require it. Whereas if it goes unprocessed or it's unconscious then it's a very powerful emotion to still be holding.

Does that then guide, at an unconscious level, people's responses or reactions? Or does it also defend against the vulnerability of reflection? Because actually I'm holding a lot of unprocessed, uncontained emotion from years that actually now, when I'm entering into some of these processes where I'm encouraged to reflect, unconsciously I'm already defended to that. But being able to bring some of that emotion to the surface and have that process, I think, helps practitioners to practice much more consciously.

(Focus Group Participant)

The experience of catharsis may be helpful for more than the sense of release or relief it brings. It was repeatedly linked in respondents' accounts to **making sense of feelings**:

I presented something to the group thinking it was one thing and then having the group help me manoeuvre and to arrive then at a different destination. The realisation of, actually, this is more than just this one particular issue.

Having a group that could hold space for me and just have a bit of - what felt like, for me, a bit of a cathartic release of [sighs] 'Here, hold a bit of this for me for a while, if you don't mind'. [...] I had never really been given space to consider it and then join it together. I think having a RALF space, for me personally, it really deepened my thinking and consideration around - if I'm contemplating this for myself, how do I then show up in this relationship with this child?

Rather than what you were saying, that projection of it's always about the child's

behaviour. Having that flipped back round to what's going on for me in this relationship and this dynamic that might be contributing to whether it's stressful or not?

(Focus Group Respondent)

Processing feelings was also linked to the above-mentioned **increase in clarity of thinking**, as well as reducing feelings of being stuck:

I think like coming into the group and sharing - allow to like move past a point of like ruminating.

(Focus Group Participant)

Okay, tell me what ruminating was like for you before the RALF group.

(Interviewer)

So like - I probably need to be specific. But I brought - like a kid I was looking after was possibly getting moved on. So I brought it to the group and I was really struggling [...] But I'd spoken to people in my work. I'd spoken in a lot of spaces. But really what you were just getting was everybody else's sort of 10 cents on it. You were no further forward, you were still thinking about it a lot. Whereas when you bring it into that [RALF] space, the onus is kind of on you to work through what's bothering you. After that I was able to kind of park it and move on, ultimately. Which was helpful for me in terms of just day-to-day work. Because it was becoming a big thing and every shift it was on my mind, every day it was on my mind. It was kind of a fundamental part of my working week. Whereas doing this allowed me to kind of - I don't know the right word for it - but process it and move past.

Doing

Respondents spoke with slightly less frequency about changes to what they do in their work and how they do it. As mentioned above, most of the research respondents are also RALF facilitators, and

most of the RALF facilitators are in positions of leadership and management. It was therefore not surprising that changes to how respondents role model, support and/or manage other workers was discussed extensively:

[RALF] has really slowed me down as a manager and given me so much more to consider and so many more skills to support and scaffold that reflection and consideration in others.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Often these **impacts on management practice** were linked with **changes in thinking around not fixing:**

It's definitely made me more self-aware of how much my default was to fix and rescue. Like both in here and outside of work. I think sometimes being a lead it's so easy to default into that [... It] has made me think about how, on shift, I approach certain situations and how I help people solve their problems rather than just doing it for them.

(Focus Group Respondent)

An increased sensitivity or even empathy within their management practice was also mentioned:

But I think for me, as being part of the group and just the wider picture, it's that - rather than saying like, 'C can manage this, she's done it a hundred times before', it's that, 'Oh God, C's had to deal with this a hundred times. I better make sure she's okay'.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Linked to a greater level of empowerment, respondents spoke of having (and seeing) **more honest conversations** and a greater willingness to challenge:

I think it's empowering to some of the members of the group in that it lets them have an honest conversation about the challenges, the barriers, the issues. I've

noticed people are more willing to have those difficult conversations of what the reality is versus what we like to portray the reality to be. Also, it's almost empowered them to go out and have those challenging conversations with other people outside of the group. Where I think they've been in a group where they can see that, actually, the - what the value base is that they have and that it's not an isolated - and that they're not isolated in the issues that they're seeing and exploring. From that comes a level of strength, I think, to go and challenge people outside of that group and in the organisation to have those conversations and to show the importance that actually, you know what? We need to talk about these things.

(Focus Group Respondent)

This excerpt also appears to reflect a collective doing in terms of values, and this may be more possible when people feel less isolated in relation to their own values and the related tensions or conflicts they may be encountering in practice. One respondent linked this to *doing* values and honest conversations to restraint reduction:

Calling out when you feel that someone has used restraint in an inappropriate way, the misuse of restraint. Those are conversations I don't traditionally - [are not] traditionally held within my setting.

Actually people are going out now and challenge that and saying, 'you know what, actually that was a misuse of restraint there and that shouldn't happen'.

And we need to stamp that out, we need to call that out. Actually being confident in that discussion rather than that shying away from that discussion. Because people think, well, is everyone else thinking this was all right except me? I think that's a really important first step for us.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Across three of the four focus groups, respondents spoke of **considering and using language differently** with colleagues and about children. In one focus group, language was cited as a factor in making RALF participants identifiable:

Across, like, the organisation you can tell who's participated in a RALF group – and who hasn't. Just/

(Focus Group Respondent)

/Can you? Tell me more about that

(Interviewer)

There's a certain calmness and confidence in approaching things. Whereas people might vent or be opinionated or, I suppose, put the problem out there and look for somebody to fix and rescue. Whereas the people that have done the RALF groups are a bit more open and encouraging reflection and maybe use a different type of language that would probably help re-frame things and encourage a wee bit more thought. Rather than just rush in, fix, rescue, this is your problem, [...] how to do it. So I think you can definitely hear it in the language and like when you're watching other people practice, you can tell who has participated and who hasn't.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Changes to how respondents listen was discussed with slightly less frequency, but across all four focus groups. Respondents spoke of being able to allow for silences, making space for young people to 'have their voice', and refraining from fixing, all of which contributed to **better listening** on their part.

I think it helps when it comes to listening, you know actively listening. I think just being in this group and sitting and actively listening to each other, without being able to jump in and help, helps me a lot with the kids as well.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Being

Respondents spoke frequently and sometimes at length about the impacts RALF had on their and/or others' way of being, both at work and in the world.

In many cases, some of which are reflected below, the impacts on thinking, feeling and doing appear to come together to impact respondents on a being level.

Becoming more confident was discussed the most frequently within this theme, and respondents made connections between feeling heard, supported, validated and less isolated. In addition to becoming more confident generally, respondents specified increased confidence in relation to their ability to facilitate RALF groups, to ask useful questions (rather than 'fix'), to support colleagues (particularly in management roles), to speak about issues to senior colleagues, and to be more effective with children:

But now I feel, like I said, more confident in my de-escalation strategies, that I can speak to [children]. I think I have learned that from RALF. I've learned talking is actually better.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The following respondent spoke of the support and solidarity he felt from his RALF group, and as a result, becoming more confident to effect change in his service:

The difference – I suppose the impact on being a group member is that when you're attending SPRAG or RRS [the Restraint Reduction Network], you're the sole representative of your organisation. So it still feels like a pretty lonely space that you're taking that information from back to. Because there's not a collective understanding of what it is that you're trying to implement. Being a member of the [RALF] pilot gave you the confidence then because there's a solidarity and empowerment about being part of a group that – there's a collective enthusiasm

about the quality improvement that you're trying to achieve in reducing restrictive practices. So it almost emboldens you when you were going back to the services.

That directly impacted initially one child who saw the elimination of chemical restraint. It was a young person who'd only been with us for three months, but had come from a place where all of these interventions were particularly restrictive.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The previously mentioned strands of empowerment, language ('vocabulary'), and doing values ('the right thing to be doing') can also be seen as relevant in this respondent's experience.

Becoming more self-aware was discussed only slightly less frequently than becoming more confident, and on occasion, respondents linked the two:

[RALF] allowed me to feel more comfortable, I suppose, in my role and how other people can support me in my role, and not just for these guys, just in general, to maybe have that confidence to recognise and explore my emotions.

(Focus Group Respondent)

On the back of a RALF session, another respondent made connections between the ability to feel vulnerable and a growing self-awareness:

There is so much learning potential from [RALF groups], not least the development of my self-awareness. I know that I struggle to be vulnerable and can often defend against this immensely – always easier to support others with their stress/distress than perhaps look at my own. I have been left pondering this a little deeper – why is this? I am really not sure. On reflection I wonder why I felt so able to embrace my vulnerability today (when usually I don't).

So the direct impact on me certainly was a much more confident practitioner, certainly

one with a better vocabulary round about restraint reduction. Also with a confidence that I didn't have before that this was definitely the right thing to be doing, and other organisations were moving in the same direction.

(Research Diary Respondent)

Alongside growing awareness of their own habits of 'fixing', becoming more aware of their own feelings and the impact of those feelings were repeatedly specified:

Again it all looks back to that improved self-awareness. People begin to notice about 'oh, right okay, that might be why I feel the way I feel on that day or in relation to that child or in relation to that situation. Because I hadn't really, fully considered, you know, there's been a bit of a legacy there from other experiences that have maybe impacted on my judgement, thought process, emotions in this current situation'.

(Focus Group Respondent)

This increased awareness of thoughts and especially feelings appears to have an opening effect, which was discussed just slightly less than self-awareness. Respondents spoke of **becoming more open** to experiencing their own feelings and sharing them, but also to others' points of view. On more than one occasion, respondents spoke of group members who were not particularly open, whether in practice or in the first few RALF sessions, becoming more open over time:

I've got somebody particular in my group who is really quite reserved with their emotions and their feelings and doesn't overly want to share or go too far into it. The feedback that I've had from their manager, supervisor, is they're far more willing to chat and share information and just their thinking's kind of changed a little bit, and it can be seen within the house.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The following respondent also spoke of an increased in openness that transferred beyond the RALF group – in this case, his own:

I just took the opportunity to say, 'listen, I'm struggling with this. I don't know if I'm doing something wrong. I don't know - has anybody got any insight into it?' [...] there were specifics people came up with that made me think quite positively. Rather than that I was getting it wrong, I'd opened the wrong door, actually, to think about it from that angle was extremely helpful and actually has resulted in quite positive interactions with the young person going forward from that little impromptu moment. [...] You know to, not just someone at my level but levels above me and below me as well within my house. To be able to say, 'listen, I'm having an issue, what do you think?' That was certainly a first.

(Focus Group Respondent)

This exposure to others' views and experiences through the RALF group appear to enable greater levels of empathy, as becoming more empathetic was also frequently discussed:

I think I've become a lot more attuned to people's feelings. I suppose that's around people's anxieties and how people are feeling at work. I think being part of the group's enhanced my knowledge of, okay, this person might not be okay, how can I support them?

A deepening of mutual understanding resulting from members' vulnerability and openness appeared to be keys to unlocking this empathy:

So there was a real issue, and particularly for somebody who sometimes feels those tensions quite strongly in the group was - said that - how useful that had felt because it felt as though it created a greater sense of empathy for each other to hear people talking about some of the difficult experiences of restraint they'd had. Some of the difficult feelings they had about restraints that had happened in the past, that they had been

involved in. Some of the confusion that they felt about what to think about those things now, and what to think about what our stance at this point in time should be. There was just a real sense of, again, that shared vulnerability, creating a sense of - seeing people's humanity and that leading to a greater sense of empathy and meaning that the tensions between them receded a bit and their shared humanity came forward a bit more.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The deepening of empathy was also discussed in relation to children.

Being part of that, I suppose, vulnerability of exploring your emotions and even understanding them - like how hard that must be for us, it's a hundred times harder for our young people. [...]

For our young people, if we're more tolerant with our emotions and more understanding of how we're feeling, and we've had the chance to explore that, then it makes it - it puts us in a better position to be able to support their emotions.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Impacts on Services

Service organisations, like any organisations, are made up of individuals. So on one level, the impacts on individuals and the impacts on the service are not separate categories. At the same time, we thought it helpful to offer some analysis on what respondents had to say about wider impacts. Some of those were mixed in with what they had to say about individual impacts, and this has already been present in some of the quotations we have shared, including: the clearer orientation towards children's rights, the shifts towards a more empowering approach, changes in language, and the increase in honest conversations – including ones that challenge decisions around restraint and restrictive practices.

Overall, however, there was less said about service-level impact. This is to be expected. Most participating services had only one RALF facilitator and so only one RALF group. The roll-out also took a staged approach, meaning that some services got involved later in the funding period than others and so had fewer RALF sessions. Other services encountered significant challenges in getting their RALF group(s) formed and the sessions regularly scheduled. This will be discussed further in the challenges section below. One service saw benefits early in the project and involved a significantly higher number of its employees in the project. RALF impacts on that service are more.

Even in this case, respondents were careful to speak of the combined impacts of RALF along with other work that they are doing. And rightly so. RALF was co-designed to work in harmony with services' other efforts around reducing the necessity of restraint and restrictive practices, and enhancing care practice more generally.

Impacts on Organisational Doing

Respondents across all of the focus groups, in the feedback questionnaires, and in a diary entry made mention of the impacts of RALF on existing practices or activities. Impacts on **post-incident debriefing** were spoken about at greatest length:

I think I would have probably have done debriefs – not too dissimilar to what R was describing. It was a means to an end in a sense of it was an expectation to do this and I probably had a lack of understanding of reflective practice myself. So I almost kind of assumed that me facilitating reflective practice was just asking you direct questions to look for a kind of solution of almost arriving at the destination of, how could you have avoided this restraint? So I think

for me personally it's helped me to rethink restraint in the sense of how I attend to the adults afterwards. Not come at it from an angle of, if you have restrained, you're failing somewhere. You've done something wrong. [...] moving a bit of the discourse back to, if this is a form of intervention that there is a threshold for – that for that particular child, how do we use debriefs to explore your thought process and your consideration around it? That dynamic risk assessment.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Several respondents spoke of the importance of a shift they were seeing from blame to reflection:

My experiences of debriefs 10 years ago were exactly what R was saying, that it was very accusatory. Whereas now the debriefs I get are a very reflective space. For me, that's a massive change in the right direction.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Training was also cited as being impacted by RALF, often in relation to improvements to post-incident practices, but also more generally:

In the RALF group, I'm facilitating but I'm hearing other people reflect on their thoughts, their feelings about restraint. So I think there's absolutely no way that's going past me without having an impact of when I'm then designing training. Or what the priority in training is in terms of, actually, we need to meet the needs of the people that are doing the restraining as well as the needs of the people being restrained. So I do think it absolutely has an impact there.

(Focus Group Respondent)

RALF sessions involve a supported process of identifying action and planning for carrying it out. The person who has received this support is then afforded time in the subsequent session to report back and further reflect on the content from the previous session and the actions it helped to generate. This practice of **planning and follow-up** was mentioned as carrying over into other meetings and approaches, including with children:

This has become a valuable skill within my personal tool box not only when working with staff in [RALF], but also within conversations with young people as the importance of taking responsibility making the plan and seeing the evidence of the person following up on their actions as they had set them, making it almost more important for them to follow up and achievable to do.

(Respondent to Feedback Questionnaire)

One respondent spoke of impacts on care planning and other forms of documentation, including policy:

Because we're undergoing a project now, which isn't solely about RALF but has definitely been influenced by it [...] we've got a wee pilot going on just now in the house around care plans and documents that we use and what language we want to use as a service, throughout that and throughout our policy writing as well and how our policies are written. So that was talked about as part of it [RALF] and that wee project's now underway on a larger scale.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Relationships

As discussed above, support, sharing, openness, empathy, improved self-awareness, better listening and an ability to be vulnerable were prominent in respondent accounts. These are clearly elements of good relationships. Unsurprisingly, most of the discussion of positive impacts on relationships was addressed to the relationships amongst RALF group members.

Impacts on relationships beyond RALF members were discussed less frequently, and sometimes indirectly. For example, the following respondent never referred to impacts on relationships, though her relationship with her senior, and seniors' relationships with their teams, are present in her account. Instead, she gets into some of the elements of what makes for good

professional relationships:

I know that after one of my last sessions, I had a few actions to carry forward to help me. One of them was to sit down and let my senior practitioner know how I was feeling at the time. It was really good, so she had a better understanding where my head was. Also she was like, 'It's okay, I've been there.' Yeah, I think it's a lot better for the senior practitioners as well to know where their team's head is and where to support.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Similarly, the respondent who spoke previously of the positive experience of opening up and being more vulnerable with his team did not specifically address any impacts on his relationships with them, though a positive impact could be seen, implicitly, in his account.

The most frequent relationship impact mentioned by respondents was on adults' relationships with children. The ability to approach children in a similarly empowering way to that which participants experienced in RALF was repeatedly mentioned:

A more recent reflection from a [RALF group] member was the realisation in how this approach can be so helpful in developing relationships with children and young people and how, by asking the right questions, we can support young people to discover and become part of the solution to any issue they may be having as opposed to an 'adult knows best' assumption often accompanied with unsolicited advice as to what the child or young person should do.

(Respondent in the Feedback on Project Questionnaire)

The broader benefits around tolerating feelings, active listening and empathy also coalesced in the following account:

I see the difference of all the range of topics and things that you've all discussed, and the

actions that have been taken forward. So you're sitting saying and laughing about how to get - you're a better person. So for me, what I'm seeing is that the young people are experiencing a different version of you [...] So there's the direct impact of their interactions with you and their relationships with you.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Culture

Developing and maintaining good organisational cultures is complex work, with numerous influences that are impossible to completely disentangle. Respondents were often aware of this complexity when addressing the impact of RALF on their services' cultures. **The shifting attitude towards the RALF project itself** was prominently discussed:

The more the whole group are beginning - are participating, they're valuing the sessions. They're asking me. 'when is the next one? Can we bring it forward?' I'm just like 'No, unfortunately, we can't. This is our date', for different reasons. But they're valuing the validation, they're valuing the space and they're appreciating that - especially during difficult times.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Respondents also spoke about colleagues in their organisation who were not members of a RALF group showing increasing curiosity about the project, with many expressing a desire (and even excitement) to join a group. While this was mentioned on a few occasions, in all cases respondents were from services that had more than one RALF group up and running. Because the benefits of RALF primarily happen at an experiential level, it may be that for services to enjoy discernible impacts on their organisational cultures, a single RALF facilitator running a single RALF group will likely not be enough.

Nevertheless, as RALF members experience transformation that reaches levels of doing and

being as described above, those not in a RALF group may still experience different kinds of leadership, management or honest conversations, for example, that will then begin to exert influence on the way they think, feel and practice.

I think going off just some of the brief feedback that has been in the space. People sharing that level of vulnerability in that space has given them confidence and almost permission to try and replicate that back on their teams. So how - I suppose in a way the impact I could argue is on culture. About how they're able to take that back into their teams. They're going, 'Actually if we're going to be really genuine about supporting one another to reflect, how do we help one another to feel safe enough to speak what otherwise might remain unspoken?' [...] I think the impact - or I hope the impact, has been that those individuals have gone back into their teams to try and cultivate those cultures of safety, reflection in embracing vulnerability. But it's probably - that element is at much earlier stages in terms of ripple effects.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Another respondent extended RALF impacts to the development of more nurturing care:

I feel like it's had the ripple effect across the teams in the houses and impact on the care that they're providing to the young people. I feel like they're more nurturing in their responses and - because they're feeling nurtured, it looks like they're appreciating the benefits of the nurture.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The following excerpt drills down into the impacts of RALF's explicit avoidance of giving advice or rescuing:

The learning that we took from that was when we were having young persons' meetings, team meetings, key team meetings, that we tried to look at the person who was

raising the problem the same way as we would have a [RALF] member, so that they then became their own resource [...] Which meant the whole process was just much more empowering for them as a group. The quality of the documents was much better than if I had just run a workshop and told people what to do [...] they were passionate about it because they believed it was theirs and they didn't see it as just, 'Here we go again, another change, a new document, another bit of work'. [...] They're the correct people to be making those decisions because they work with those children every day, they have their relationships and me just giving them a list of end goals is not really fulfilling.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Impacts on Physical Restraint and Restrictive Practices

Within the various facets of impacts on individuals and services that respondents identified, impacts on physical restraint were sometimes included. From the excerpts shared above, restraint was mentioned in relation to a **sense of release; increased honest and/or challenging conversations; improved de-escalation, confidence and empathy; and changes to training and post-incident debriefing.**

Respondents spoke about impacts in relation to physical restraint across all of the data sets. They also spoke repeatedly of impacts on the **way physical restraint and restrictive practices were thought about**, whether in relation to children's rights and challenging their misuse, or with respect to the related emotional impacts on workers:

The group have really reflected together, in particular, around the use of restraint. There's a number of people in my group that have been in residential childcare for a good number of years. There's been, I would argue, quite cathartic discussions around that legacy of people having used restraint, historically, and what emotions that still - what they probably didn't realise that they were still holding on to. Of practice that happened

previously in comparison to what we know now. Just what people were holding in relation to blame, shame, judgement. Yeah, it's that whole - you know, 'I wish I knew then what I know now'.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Changes to the way debriefs are thought about and carried out were also frequently discussed:

So we're quite lucky because our manager's actually facilitated in RALF as well, so the language is there, and it's filtered through. When we get a debrief from her it feels kind of intense in a way. But it's actually just opening up reflection.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The support to reflect on and make sense of situations involving restraint was linked with increases in confidence, resilience, self-awareness, and responsiveness in practice.

One respondent spoke very candidly of becoming less reactive and more confident in her ability to de-escalate situations. She spoke of being 'an absolute wreck' on days involving high levels of children's crisis prior to being in the RALF group, but was now able to approach these situations with greater calm and curiosity.

You said, 'Okay, let's go, see what the situation is', as opposed to being 'a complete wreck'. It sounds like you were able to think.

(Interviewer)

Definitely. You've got a clear frame of mind or space of mind when you go - before you go into an incident. Don't get me wrong. You still - I feel like if you - no matter if RALF is a thing or not and you see a specific house or a specific corridor, your heart does drop a bit and you're like, right, okay.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Several respondents made **connections between reflection and the reduction of restraint and restrictive practices.**

Using reflective practice should be a prerequisite of considering whether a physical restraint could be managed [...] Over the last few months, I've become aware of the differences in people's understanding of the link between physical restraint and reflective practice. This applies to all levels of the organisation, where some people seek instances of reflection to support them with difficult situations whereas others see reflective practice on incidents/ their work as superfluous and somewhat of an indulgence.

(Late-stages Services Questionnaire Respondent)

This excerpt reflects the varying levels of impacts both across participating services, and within them. It also speaks to some of the challenges involved in shifting organisational cultures. Respondents also spoke of historic and current experiences of debriefs as fault-finding and accusatory. There was a similar variability when respondents spoke of the use of physical restraint and restrictive practices. They rightly raised the issue of the difficulty separating out the impacts of RALF from other organisational efforts.

We have not yet seen any correlation with a reduction in restrictive practices within our services (as this has been a focus for some time so would be unable to associate it to RALF specifically). However, the introduction [of RALF] has really helped to cement a focus on the adults being the primary tool for intervention and the more they understand themselves, the more effective RCC practitioner they will become.

(Feedback Questionnaire Respondent)

In the next excerpt, the respondent also speaks to wider impacts, but links them more clearly to enabling change around situations that may be seen to warrant restraint or restrictive practices:

It's probably easier to think of in terms of ripples rather than direct lines, but I think - I definitely experience that the culture that we create makes a difference to how human the managers and the residential child care

workers that we supervise are able to be. How much are they able to be open and learn and acknowledge mistakes and worries and so on and think there's - I certainly have a sense that there's something that when we do it well is happening, that people feel a greater sense of safety. That they could learn and develop and explore with a greater feeling of safety than they previously could. I think that obviously the RALF is one thing alongside other things, but it felt like a significant thing to me because it's - I think of all the meetings I've been involved in in that group, that was the meeting that I felt people connecting with each other.

Also connecting just with the difficulty that people face when they're in violent situations and in situations that are unsafe. So I think those experiences help us to stay in touch with our own feelings of vulnerability about those things. I think that also helps us to stay connected to the vulnerability of the people that we supervise. To be less judgmental about them and more concerned to make sure that they get the support that they need from us.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Two respondents were clearer about seeing links between RALF and measurable impacts. One focus group respondent cited 62% and 78% percent reductions in a child's incidents of self-injurious behaviour during the two measuring periods following changes arising from RALF session(s). The other offered the following:

The two classes that had staff at RALF have reduced the number of holds this year compared to last year by 25% and 45%. We have been working hard on this and there have been various initiatives that have influenced this reduction but I believe RALF has been part of this.

(Feedback Questionnaire Respondent)

It is important to stress that on both occasions, RALF was cited as an important part of wider service efforts in relation to reducing restraint and restrictive practices.

Challenges

But I don't think - you can't ever really understand it until you've been part of it, part of it a session [...] I think you can explain it as much as you can, and you can read things, but I think until you've experienced it, you can't really understand.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The impact of RALF is likely related to its experiential nature, and this is also a challenge when it comes to rolling it out.

Respondents repeatedly spoke of how hard it was to explain or help people really understand it. It may have been that **people's discomfort** was also a part of this challenge. Respondents spoke of anxiety and discomfort around sharing at an emotional and/or vulnerable level, and fear of being blamed. Learning how to do action learning sets – particularly learning how to ask facilitative questions, was identified by facilitators and group members as challenging:

But that is a really hard part of it that all of us are still trying to kind of overcome is not - just being like, 'Well, why don't you do this?' It's letting someone figure out their own way to solve it. Because in our jobs and in our professions, we are fixers.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Facilitators spoke of significant anxieties related to their role, both in terms of **learning how to facilitate well, and the impacts, afterwards, of heavy sessions**. Some stated they found the structure and mindset of the Action Learning portion of the session more challenging, while a similar proportion spoke of holding the less structured, reflective space to enable participants to stay with their emotions as being more challenging.

Challenges in relation to **organising RALF sessions** were spoken about the most frequently across the data sets, with pressures on time repeatedly cited:

The challenge was getting the same group of people together for a two-hour period. Particularly as I was going across care and education, thinking that it'd be an interesting model to look at, which it was [...] just trying to get people free at the same time and people on different shifts was really, really difficult. That's why - that's why mine broke down in the end.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Holidays, sick leave and annual leave also were also cited repeatedly, alongside turnover or other staffing changes. This not only impacted the timetabling of sessions, but affected the cohesion of the group:

One of the impacts was like the kind of authenticity and the things that can influence whether people feel safe enough to share or not. That sometimes even just a change in the group space in terms of membership or a facilitator can actually send that stuff back to - it can be taken away - it takes time to build and it can leave quite sharply.

(Focus Group Respondent)

There were more significant challenges in organising the **participation of direct-care workers**:

In general, they are either on shift, which means that their availability is unpredictable depending on what happens, or they're on a day off. So you're always asking, whenever you schedule anything, it's either on somebody's day off or it's when they're on the shift. Neither of those things feels like it's the ideal time for somebody to be able to join.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The limited flexibility of direct-care workers' time may be why they were in the minority, in terms of RALF group membership (more facilitators were at some level of management). Respondents spoke of challenges related to **service size**: respondents from **smaller services** spoke of finding RALF participation more challenging due to the greater impact of removing workers from shifts (given the smaller overall number of workers), and also due to not having others in their service to help them get momentum going. Added to this was, for some, a lack of support at organisational level:

If there was a more explicit expectation on organisations to facilitate and implement RALF sessions, with them being accountable to this expectation. I often feel that time and resource constraints can be an easy excuse, however, if making a commitment to implement this approach then it requires priority status within services.

(Feedback Questionnaire Respondent)

Conversely, a respondent from a **larger service** spoke of the challenges associated with the larger numbers:

The other thing for me has been the times that being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people. [...] I don't have frontline staff in my group, but I would love to, but I'm also acutely aware we have [a very substantial number of] staff. Suddenly you're thinking, right, okay, so if I have a group of five or six, that's barely anything. It's that kind of, sometimes you have those moments where you're like, oh, [expletive]. Then you come back and you see the value in the group. So again, it's about, what's the best model for a large organisation?

(Focus Group Respondent)





What's Needed to Make RALF Work?

The RALF Space as a Containing Space

It's more than supervision, it's more than a debrief. It's that safe space and the feeling that people feel supported and understood and heard.

(Focus Group Respondent)

RALF can be thought of as a containing space that helps make unmanageable or uncontainable parts of the work more manageable or containable. Good processes of containment enable people to think more clearly, and to use thinking more effectively to manage experiences and emotions.

Respondents across all of the data sets spoke of RALF in a way that reflected essential components of containment, and frequently they named it as containment:

I know others have said it, coming in presenting in the space thinking it's one thing and arriving at a destination of, 'Oh, actually, do you know what? There it is. It's something completely different to what I thought it was'. So that's kind of been my own kind of personal experience in terms of improving my own self-awareness and having my own kind of emotions and vulnerabilities, I suppose, contained.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Interestingly, when respondents described RALF in containing ways, they consistently referred to RALF as **a space** (rather than a project, a group or a session).

It's a really kind of high-intensity environment. There's not a lot of time to really reflect on [decisions] and really even sit back and understand the impact that it has on you and other people. I think creating safe spaces and stuff, it actually helps you explore that a bit more.

(Focus Group Respondent)

As in the excerpt above, **space** was often equated with **time** – time being made and time being protected.

Of all of the components of the RALF space mentioned, in terms of what made it effective for respondents, not being judged was the most repeatedly cited:

I've had an extremely positive experience with RALF. I enjoy going to my group every month and feel like it's a safe place to talk about how I am feeling without getting judged. I feel understood and better about myself when people feel the same way as I do about topics that I bring up.

(Late-stages Questionnaire Respondent)

Trust and safety were also mentioned frequently:

The group I facilitate always want to present. I sense that trust and confidentiality have been firmly established and quieter individuals are now coming forward to share thoughts, feelings and experiences openly with the group.

(Feedback Questionnaire Respondent)

RALF's structure was regularly mentioned in relation to creating these spaces where people could trust and feel safe. This included mention of rules around **confidentiality**:

I think they really appreciate the confidential aspect of it without the judgement or the fear of it's going to be a supervision task. Or it's going to be a - something that's going to come up in my appraisal. I think just that value within space is what's definitely coming out as a big appreciation point.

(Focus Group Respondent)

RALF's two-part structure, and the structure of those two parts, were also mentioned in terms of helping to make the space work. The high levels of structure and scaffolding in the action learning component were repeatedly credited with helping to open up thinking, and the less structured reflective component was referred to as a place where difficult feelings could be brought and explored.

A kind of lightbulb moment I had recently was there's so much that can be gained from the structure of the set facilitation and how robust that is in supporting a sense of safety. But from my own experiences, presenting within an Action Learning set itself and within a reflective space was the experience of just having others hold the space for me.

(Focus Group Respondent)

The physical **location** where RALF sessions are carried out came up far less frequently, but this may be valuable learning to apply going forward. One respondent shifted the location for the RALF sessions from where other meetings were regularly held to a **more relaxed physical space**, and reported that this made a positive difference to the effectiveness of the sessions. Most RALF sessions were carried out **in person**, with some group members travelling to attend sessions. For logistical reasons, one RALF group was held in hybrid fashion in which the RALF facilitator joined online and the rest of the RALF group sat together in person. There were many benefits to an external person facilitating a group, however, the hybrid approach did bring significant challenges. This group had three hybrid sessions. **Online RALF sessions where everyone joined from separate physical locations were reported to be generally effective, though some participants indicated a preference for in-person sessions where possible.**

Beyond the RALF Space

The most frequent feedback from facilitators about what was going well was about their **training⁵**, which was regularly referred to as **helpful, enjoyable, useful, high quality, excellent, empowering, and outstanding**. As stated in the **RALF Project Update**, the RALF project is more than just training a group of people in a model. That said, the high quality of the training was an integral part of the project's success.

Other project supports that were frequently mentioned included the RALF facilitator community of practice (CoP) sessions, the identified support person for **RALF**

⁵ For more information about the two RALF trainers, please see the appendix.

facilitators to check in and debrief after each RALF session, coaching and support from trainers, and the general support provided by the RALF organising team.

Members of the oversight group, and latterly the organising group, were paired with facilitators for the check-ins and debriefs, and not all facilitators found this process to meet the intended purpose of an immediate well-being check in. We know this less from questionnaires and focus groups, and more from analysis of data shared with Laura Quinn during 1-1 conversations requesting feedback on facilitator supports. Given the importance of this element of support, as reflected in the following excerpt, one element of our learning is that a designated person for debrief and support assigned to each facilitator should be a funded part of any future project of expanding RALF in Scottish residential child care:

I've really benefited from having [a designated person] throughout this process. Particularly having that external to my organisation. That, as much as it was an oversight member that helped me as part of the process to help contain what I had therefore contained [from the RALF session]. They were also a bit of a critical friend in helping me to deepen my understanding of what I was thinking, what I was feeling. What unconscious bias may have been at play. So I probably would have a wee bit of concern moving forward to not have that in place. [...] I think it has been, for me personally, really, really important. [...] allowing facilitation to happen is knowing that there's somebody there that I've been able to call after that and process and digest it for myself. There's been a couple of occasions where I think it may have been potentially detrimental to me in my own welfare and wellbeing had that been left uncontained for myself. Because a couple of the sessions were really, really hard going.

(Focus Group Respondent)

Another learning point from the project, reflected in feedback from facilitators, is that the transition from RALF facilitator trainee to RALF facilitator is a critical process that required more planning and

support than anticipated at the co-design stage of the project. Some extra supports were initiated midway through the project, but this is also something that will be important going forward.

Not all of the challenges faced by RALF facilitators as they began to form their groups and carry out RALF sessions were about learning how to facilitate them. The organisational challenges described by respondents (above) – issues around rotas, schedules and colleagues' natural reticence – will likely be much more difficult to overcome when there is also a lack of organisational support. This seemed to be reflected in the respondent's suggestion, above, that there be 'explicit expectation on organisations to facilitate and implement RALF sessions, with them being accountable to this expectation'.

One Service's Deeper Dive with RALF

One service stood out, both in terms of number of facilitators put forward for training and in the level of organisational support provided to the process of implementing the RALF groups. We carried out an individual interview to learn more about their process, and what follows are some of the key elements that appear necessary to effectively implement RALF at organisational level. The element that stood out most strongly was the recognition that there was an investment required to implement RALF, one that had associated costs:

I suppose one of the other challenges was obviously about cost. There's two parts to that. There's obviously the cost operationally and then there's the cost financially. So in terms of operation, what we realised, in order for us to say that this is really important for people and we understand the value in it and we want people to receive this service, we have to create the conditions to allow for people to be able to attend them, essentially. What that meant was they couldn't be operational on the floor at the time of

their session, because, essentially, between sickness or whatever else, the priority is always going to be looking after the children [...] I'd worked with our finance team to look at all the different job roles and what those costs would be if we had people coming in to run those sessions.

(Interview Respondent)

Beyond the practical scheduling considerations around forming and maintaining RALF groups are the more developmental and relational considerations. Collective reflection and a shared ownership of the related thorny issues were evident in the interview:

One of the other challenges about people agreeing to be in a group, but then them not turning up. [...] Not everybody that you pick is either ready, or they think they're ready and they agree and then they're not ready, or they maybe avoid, or then they don't turn up. It's just really difficult because that impacts, then, the other members of the group as well. So that's one of the challenges. It's finding who's the right facilitators, but it's also finding out who's the right people for the group and who's ready.

(Interview Respondent)

On more than one occasion, RALF respondents in other services spoke of colleagues who, initially quiet or not forthcoming in their RALF group, over time became more open and eventually opted to present in the action learning portion.

In the individual interview, the respondent spoke of the nuanced ways the wider space around RALF was held for a more reticent member:

But one of the duty managers was a bit sceptical, so we weren't sure if he actually would end up coming. It's easy for them to go, 'Oh, well, nobody can take the phone, so I wasn't able to'. But because we're establishing

this culture where actually, 'No, this is really important. If you're scheduled to go, you need to go'. So we make other provisions to allow those people to come away.

(Interview Respondent)

Culture carriers – practitioners with a deep understanding, commitment and enthusiasm for RALF – were also identified as important:

She just is RALF. She understands it so completely. Her guidance and support have been invaluable for me [...] we've both done that training, but she's just so knowledgeable. So I suppose that's been the biggest things that have helped is the support from my peer and then also from the senior managers as well, in terms of understanding the value.

(Interview Respondent)

This again raises the challenges for small services, in terms of not having access to peer support amongst fellow facilitators within the service, in the everyday. Going forward, it may be that some kind of organisational pairing may be useful to attempt to replicate this kind of support.

Finally, the importance of the designated person for check-ins and debriefs was raised in the interview, along with concerns about no longer having this component of support once the funding period came to an end.

We, too, have been concerned about the potential impacts of stopping (any of) the support provided by the RALF project. As a result, an interim measure has been developed that will offer regular, structured support provided by the RALF organising team while we pursue funding for the project of expanding the roll-out of RALF across Scotland.

What are the Limitations of This Research Component?

All research has limitations and it is important to address them as part of our commitment to transparency.

The most significant limitation is that the RALF project was primarily funded for the work of rolling out RALF, with a smaller proportion of the funding used to support the use of research methods to explore the impacts and learning from the project.

This meant that the research component was carried out by the same people who were on the RALF organising team. Research carried out in this way is referred to as insider research (Costley et al., 2010). While there are clear benefits when researchers have inside knowledge of what is being studied, there is also the potential for negative impacts. We addressed the potential for participants feeling pressure to either participate in the research and/or express particular views about the project by emphasising the voluntary nature of participating in the research component, alongside our desire for their genuine views, at all stages of the research component. We also made it easy *not* to participate.

The other potential negative impact of insider research is bias, though bias is a potential to be managed in any research project. To address this, we used: multiple methods of data collection, recognised methods of thematic analysis to ensure the rigour of the findings, and reflexive practices within the organising team.





What are the Key Takeaways?

Feelings Work Requires Robust Support

While it is becoming widely accepted that good residential child care practice involves an important emotional dimension, the related feelings work is often unexplored and underappreciated. The same can be said of reflective practice. **Good reflection in this line of work will necessarily be emotionally demanding sometimes.** Residential child care workers and managers require concrete supports for this work. The relationship between the way workers think and feel will affect how they do the work and how they *are* with children. While this may seem obvious, the challenges consistently highlighted by respondents in relation to making time for reflection are a significant obstacle to addressing this relationship between thinking, feeling, doing and being.

Respondents' resounding accounts of making sense of difficult experiences and emotions within RALF sessions, sometimes for the first time in their residential child care careers, point to the pressing need for a concerted effort and an effective approach to support feelings work.

That individuals would be able to do this work without input or support, or that organisations would have spaces of deep reflection spontaneously arising in the hectic and sometimes crisis-driven pace of residential child care, is unrealistic.

While we were able to collect significant details about the impacts of RALF in a manner that makes clearer how it works and what is needed to implement it effectively, one element was strongly present behind these details but only named once: attunement. **Attunement** refers to the capacity to be aware of the emotional needs of another, and to be responsive to those needs. The experience of attuned care lays the foundation for children to begin to understand their own emotions and those of others (Daniel et al., 2011). It is especially important for children in residential child care to have reparative experiences of attunement as part of developmentally enhancing care. It is also more challenging for adults to remain attuned when they are experiencing fear, frustration, confusion or other feelings or events that disrupt their ability to reflect.

Just like children, adults' foundations of attunement are laid in their early childhood experiences of care. Even strong foundations will require maintenance and fortification to support the ongoing requirements of attuned practice, particularly during periods of difficulty. In the research component of this project, respondents spoke repeatedly of how important it was to feel seen, heard and understood in their RALF groups. Their references to increased empathy from RALF sessions are also significant. Respondents' descriptions reflected their experiences of attuned professional support, and, significantly, some of these attuned interactions appeared to continue beyond RALF sessions. Respondents spoke about

checking in with fellow group members, sometimes without the need for words; a look, a cuddle and a smile were all cited as exchanging a sort of knowing support.

It may be that intentional provision of attunement, especially in relation to restraint and restrictive practice, has not been prioritised or even named. Yet it also may be that in those situations of pressure and escalating risk, the level of attunement a worker is able to maintain with the child may be a deciding factor in whether safety can be maintained or restored while meeting that child's needs, and all while averting a physical restraint. The importance of creating the conditions for attunement, then, is a key takeaway from the project.

Some of the Work is About Changing Habits

Changing unhelpful habits of mind is an important key in unlocking the alternative ways of doing and being with children that make physical restraint less necessary or even unnecessary. At the same time, these unhelpful ways of thinking or reacting often serve a purpose, making them hard habits to break. This can be easy to see in the ways some children have learned to protect themselves and survive. Understanding this can help with the long and often difficult process of supporting children to develop new ways of thinking, feeling, doing and being. The same is true for adults.

Changing unhelpful habits of mind may well be trickier for adults for several reasons: simply by virtue of living longer, they are likely to be more strongly established. These habits may also be reinforced by the collective habits embedded within a service's organisational culture, and often they are hard to even identify and examine. For example, a habitual avoidance of vulnerability may not be something people are aware of, and yet the willingness to be vulnerable was repeatedly identified as a positive impact of RALF participation. Overcoming a habit of avoiding thoughts

or situations that might elicit feelings of vulnerability will already be challenging for some workers, in terms of turning up and engaging with RALF groups. In the pressurised situations that can potentially result in physical restraint, breaking the habit of avoiding vulnerability becomes even more difficult. The inclination to revert to a more defensive or protective position, in both thought and action, not only is natural when experiencing potential threat, it is powerful.

Similarly, an orientation toward fixing or rescuing – the most prominent habit reported by respondents – will likely be difficult to resist when sensing serious, imminent harm. The overriding 'fix' in such a situation will be focused on safety, possibly to the exclusion of other considerations and potentially involving physical restraint.

There is evidence that exploring habits of mind in RALF sessions may, then, enable a greater integration of feeling and thinking in the more pressurised moments. This integration can open up space for more effective assessments that consider risks and needs while enabling greater emotional availability at the same time. RALF sessions also provide a conducive space for participants to practice new habits, whether in relation to vulnerability, more enabling practices, or any of the other changes to thinking, feeling, doing and being that respondents described above.

Service Messaging: Plan, Prioritise, Protect Time, Play a Part in the Bigger Picture

Planning, prioritising and protecting time continues to be a key takeaway from the project, but with a few added layers. It became clear from our respondents that the way senior management in participating

services communicated with their workers about RALF had a significant impact on the process of establishing RALF groups that had regular RALF sessions. In some ways this communication was straightforward, and some of the learning from the project included the development of resources to support the sharing of information about RALF.

Less obvious, but possibly more important, is the way services communicate their expectations of workers, in terms of membership and participation.

Should group membership be completely voluntary, or should RALF attendance be considered a fundamental part of good leadership practice and/ or good direct-care practice? How a service thinks about this question will inform the subtle and explicit messages it communicates – not just about the RALF project but about reflective practice, empowerment, safety, vulnerability and the emotional work required of residential workers and managers. This messaging will affect the implementation of RALF groups as well as organisational culture.

Contradictory messaging – for example, that RALF or reflection more generally is important, but time for it is not protected or prioritised – is an obstacle to the development of reflective cultures.

Finally, if they're not already doing so, participating services may want to consider communicating with their workers about their contribution to Scotland's wider effort to advance how services support workers to improve the way children are supported through their most distressing moments. When asked what has helped RALF members overcome challenges related to participating

in the project, a few spoke of how feeling part of this bigger picture had sustained them:

Having a model that's been rolled out nationally, I think is absolutely crucial. We're talking about a sector and trying to create momentum at a sector level. The fact that we've now got a model, potentially, that's being rolled out at a more national level can, hopefully, support development of practice, development of congruence in relation to practice expectations. Yeah, I just think RALF has been integral to that. I think that it's been such a unique opportunity to be part of it at an organisational and an individual level as a practitioner.

(Focus Group Respondent)





Conclusion

The RALF project has made a strong start in rolling out the forum more widely in Scotland. Significant numbers of residential child care workers and managers have participated in RALF sessions, and participant views on the impacts of RALF are overwhelmingly positive.

There is compelling evidence that the support for reflection that RALF provides is making a powerful difference to residential child care practice and management generally, and in relation to reducing, and where possible eliminating, physical restraint while still meeting the needs of children and the adults who care for them. Challenges around implementation remain, and investment is required at both service and sector levels for RALF to continue.



Who is involved in RALF?

Members of the following services and organisations, as well as the following unaffiliated individuals, have been directly involved in the RALF project:

Aberdeenshire Council

Aberlour Children's Charity

Action for Children

Angus Council

Barnardos

Brodie Patterson, Independent Consultant

Care Visions Residential

CELCIS: The Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection

CYCJ: Children and Young People's Centre for Justice

Church of Scotland

CrossReach Children's Residential Care

David Grimm, Independent Consultant and Artist

East Ayrshire Council

East Park School

Harmeny Care and Education

Inspire Scotland

Judy Furnival, Independent Consultant

Kibble Education and Care Centre

Lee Hollins, PhD Student, University of Strathclyde

Moorehouse Group

Nether Johnson House

Our Promise, Scotland

Pebbles Care

Rossie Young People's Trust

Seamab Care and Education

St. Mary's Kenmure

St Philips Residential Care and Education

The Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde.

The Good Shepherd Centre

The Scottish Prison Service

Up2Us

Who Was in the RALF Organising Team?



Laura Steckley

Laura teaches and carries out research in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde. Her teaching and research focus primarily on supporting the development of high quality residential child care and through it, the improved care experiences and life changes of the children and young people it serves. Laura started working in residential settings for children and young people in 1990 and she has worked in both the United States and Scotland in direct practice, management and training positions.



Sarah Deeley

Sarah is the Residential Child Care Lead at CELCIS at the University of Strathclyde. A quality improvement leader, she supports and facilitates the improvement of care experiences for children and young people, focusing on residential child care practices and policies. Sarah is also Editor of the Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care. Her work reflects a deep commitment to enhancing the quality of care and support for both children in residential settings and the workforce.



Gemma Watson

Gemma is an Improving Care Experiences Consultant at CELCIS at the University of Strathclyde. She is committed to enhancing the care experiences of children living in residential child care. In her role, she works alongside practitioners, managers and organisations to elevate the quality of residential child care in Scotland. Her expertise is rooted in community education and child protection, complemented with a background in championing the participation of children and young people with care experience. Gemma believes in the power of collective impact and the transformative potential of relational practice to foster environments conducive to healing and growth.

Who Were the Trainers for RALF?



Judy Furnivall

Judy has been involved in the residential child care sector for over 50 years. She has undertaken many roles- practitioner, manager, consultant, trainer and researcher. She worked in the University of Strathclyde for many years, joining the Centre for Residential Child Care shortly after it was set up in the wake of the Skinner Report. She was involved in the creation of the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care where she subsequently worked and was later part of the transition to the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland.

She is passionate about the transformational power of good residential child care whilst remaining clear about the continuing systemic problems that exist, and which contribute to adverse outcomes for many children. She was involved with SPRAG from its earliest days and was an ardent advocate of the importance of embedding opportunities for reflection in the residential child care sector that provided a particular focus on the ethical dilemmas inherent in physical restraint as well as the practice and policy challenges it presents. She facilitated one of the pilot RALF groups and later provided training and support to facilitators in the Promise-funded RALF project.

Judy is nearing completion of a professional doctorate that 1) examines how individual and group dynamics, as well as systemic factors, influence the whole process of restraint and 2) explores the impact on practitioners of providing a holding environment in the form of a reflective group focused on restraint.



Su Blanch

Su is the managing partner of 3D Coaching, a coaching and training organisation which focuses on enabling people to do the thinking they need to, meaning they are deeply seen and heard and have insights into their own stuff.

She has been training action learning set facilitation for over 15 years, and sees action learning sets as an impactful space for people to work out what they need to develop and grow. In order for that to happen, facilitators need to be clear on what their role is and how to hold good structure so that there is safety and potential for exploration.

As well as training action learning sets, Sue coaches 1:1 and works with teams, across the UK and across industries. She has a real passion for releasing people's potential, and giving them space to discover what they need to.

A Final Note

We would like to thank **The Promise Partnership** for funding the work of the RALF project.

We would like to thank the members of **SPRAG** for identifying the need to do something different in the ambition to change culture and practice related to physical restraint, and for supporting this project. SPRAG is a member-led group of over 70 organisations and individuals working towards a common vision of:

bringing about more effective, empathic, loving ways of holding children, young people and the adults who care for them in residential child care – in relationally rich environments, populated by adults who are properly equipped with requisite skills, knowledge and ways of being with children in the way that children need.

[**SPRAG**] will work towards making coercive forms of holding less or even unnecessary and, when children are restrained, ensuring that it is carried out relationally and with care.

(SPRAG's Vision Statement)

We would also like to thank the services who directly support RALF through enabling their employee(s) to be members of the RALF project, and our most heartfelt thanks goes to project members themselves who shared their experiences, expertise and feelings about what is such a difficult subject.

Laura, Sarah and Gemma

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