



# The Reflection and Action Learning Forum (RALF)

## Project Update

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## Introduction

One important way to hold the hands of those holding the hand of the child (Independent Care Review, 2020) is to support workers' reflective practice. Regular reflection at depth is critical for maintaining a steady state of relationship-based care and managing the demands of bringing the self fully to the work, both of which are linked to improved outcomes for children and young people.

Safe spaces to reflect and learn are vital in supporting good relationship-based practice and managing the self at work. They are also necessary for individuals to effectively challenge themselves and their organisations. This is especially important in relation to the use of physical restraint and other restrictive practice.

This update will tell you about the work of the RALF Project – a project aimed at developing reflective work cultures and individual workers' reflective capacity – during the first part of its funding period. The Promise Partnership awarded a grant for the RALF project, which started in the spring of 2023. Sarah Deeley, Gemma Watson and Laura Steckley make up the project organising team, and the research component of the project was approved by the University of Strathclyde's Ethics Committee.



## What is RALF?

**RALF sessions offer a structured, facilitated space that combine action learning with deeper reflection on thoughts, feelings and motivations.**

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RALF stands for Reflection and Action Learning Forum. RALF is a model for supporting the development of reflection at depth. 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 combine 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 the Scottish Physical Restraint Action Group (SPRAG<sup>1</sup>) as part of the group's overarching commitment to help bring about a change in culture with regards to physical restraint and restrictive practice across the residential child care sector in Scotland. 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 continuing RALF in some way as part of its ongoing priorities.

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



# What's Happening in the RALF Project So Far?

The primary aim of the project during its funding period is to start a process of rolling out RALF more widely in Scotland. The first significant step in achieving this aim has been to co-design the roll-out process within a short-life working subgroup of SPRAG. This step took time

In the co-design phase, we utilised tools from The Design School – The Promise Scotland's training provision for all grant holders. The project's overall process has been informed by evidence-based models from implementation and improvement science. For example, because practitioners

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but was vital because it elicited the inside knowledge and buy-in from residential child care services to create something that, while challenging to establish, would be supported within participating services. The thoughtful commitment demonstrated by codesign-team members spoke to the need for reflective spaces at all levels in order to make positive change around physical restraint and restrictive practices. Much like RALF sessions, we created a collaborative space, together, where everyone was responsible for the learning and decisions that took place in those spaces.

understand their part of the system best (Deeley & Fleming, 2023), the codesign, support and oversight processes have included people with a range of roles in the sector. We also utilised a Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) approach (Langley et al., 2009) that involved small-scale cycles of iterative testing. This enabled us to catch any misalignments and make adjustments so that the best possible version of the project can develop.





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The co-design sessions were thought provoking, energizing and inspirational. The process also felt challenging and a bit messy at times. Sitting together in uncertainty allowed us to design a model to bring back to SPRAG that would work for the members. We paid particular attention to principles of participation and safeguarding, and how all participants would be supported to hold children in mind throughout.

The other half of this update period has been taken up by rolling out RALF. This has included the recruitment of project members, assembling and meeting with the oversight group, training forum facilitators, supporting these facilitators to start and maintain RALF groups in their services, and beginning the research component of the project to identify key learning from the process.

It is important to stress that the RALF Project is more than just training the model to a group of people. Indeed, evidence indicates that training alone has far more limited impacts (Fixsen et al., 2019). The project supports its facilitators, for example, by incorporating multiple, ongoing processes, including: peer support, refresher training, a facilitator community of practice and access to regular check-ins/debriefs on a one-to-one basis. The systems in which RALF participants are affecting change must also support the work, and so recruitment includes establishing services' support as part of individuals' applications.

# What Changes Are Already Starting to Happen?

The CoP has been cited as important for sharing, keeping members motivated, and increasing their confidence to be able to 'hold the space' so that group members feel safe enough to reflect:

It really allows people to expand their own thinking in relation to restraint and move it beyond just the physical action of this type of intervention.

*(RALF Facilitator)*



The overarching change the RALF project aims to make is the development of reflective capacity in residential child care practitioners and services. The Promise emphasises the central importance of reflective, relationship-based practice; the Scottish Physical Restraint Action Group (or SPRAG) has identified reflection as a key priority in the aspiration to become a country that does not restrain its children; and the RALF project was co-produced to support the development of reflective practice and cultures necessary to achieve these aspirations.

Thus far, participants in the project have indicated a strong sense of support from the design process, their training, and the community of practice (CoP) developed to support the rollout of RALF. The CoP has been cited as important for sharing, keeping members motivated, and increasing their confidence to be able to 'hold the space' so that group members feel safe enough to reflect:

It really allows people to expand their own thinking in relation to restraint and move it beyond just the physical action of this type of intervention.

*(RALF Facilitator)*

Wider impacts cited by participants include: improved skills in asking questions that support reflection, greater clarity in relation to physical restraint and distressed behaviour, improved awareness of and ability to process emotions related to the work, increased self-awareness more generally, and an improved ability to embrace the vulnerability that goes along with reflecting more deeply about practices related to physical restraint. Impacts on children and young people, at this early stage, will be subtle and difficult to discern. Data about these impacts (as they strengthen and become more evident) will be collected during the latter half of the project.

The most significant way in which behaviour is changing, at this early stage in the project, is around the consistent focus and action directly addressed to reflection – what it is and what is needed to support it. While this may seem obvious, prioritising RALF was



a significant challenge for SPRAG and prioritising reflection has been similarly challenging for our service members. There is a lot of talk about the importance of reflection, but project members spoke of there being much less actual reflection or action to support its development.

The creation and maintenance of protected spaces for reflection, supported by model of implementation that facilitates related skills development, is a necessary precursor to the development of reflective capacity at individual and organisational levels. As one RALF facilitator told us, 'Often I am not given space [...] to just think and process'. This first year of the project has been primarily focused on the hard work of creating and maintaining these spaces.

In the busy, sometimes crisis-driven climate of residential child care, reflection can continually take a back seat. Reflecting at depth about the difficult, sometimes painful aspects of practice and organisational culture can be uncomfortable, particularly as they relate to physical restraint. Often, people will not be aware of the ways in which they may avoid such reflection. Simply maintaining focused action on the development of reflection (through rolling out this forum) is a significant development in its own right. It is necessary, but of course not enough.

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As a result of their experiences in the RALF training and forum groups, there are already indications of beginning changes to members' thinking and care practices. It will take sustained RALF groups over time for there to be lasting impacts at the level of organisational culture, but already, one service organisation has requested to have more of its staff trained and supported to facilitate RALF groups due to the impacts of just one of their employees going through the training and starting up one group.



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# Looking Forward: A Few Early Takeaways

## Plan, prioritise and protect time:

Time pressures continue to be the biggest challenge in carrying out the RALF project. Services across Scotland are experiencing significant difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, making it difficult to maintain staffing levels. Reflection is in danger of being put on the back burner. While we have seen some related impacts at project level, the vast majority of RALF Facilitators have managed to prioritise training and forum sessions. This is testament to their commitment to the project's aim, but also reflects the positive impacts of project involvement.

**The habits of collective reflection – especially during periods of intensity, crisis or even chaos – will serve all involved in coping with those periods and reducing the natural, human reactions that can perpetuate them.**

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## Maintain open, active feedback loops:

The project's design has incorporated multiple, easy opportunities for RALF facilitators to feedback about what is and isn't working so that the process can be adapted accordingly (Horton et al., 2018; Syed, 2020). This approach has yielded significant improvements and reflects a core principle of the project -- that open, reflective, collaborative thinking in which primary aims are firmly held in mind, together, is necessary for role clarity and staying on track.

## Promote co-ownership:

The successes of the project thus far are also attributable to collective ownership amongst its members. From the co-produced model prior to funding, to the co-designed process of rolling it out, to the monitoring and amending the roll-out itself, project members have listened to each other and acted on what they heard. For this to be possible, sufficient time was committed by all involved. Like reflection, co-production takes time.



## Who is involved in RALF?

*Member of the following services and organisations, as well as the following unaffiliated individuals, have been directly involved in the RALF Project so far:*

**Aberlour Children's Charity**  
**Action for Children**  
**Angus Council**  
**Barnardos**  
**Brodie Patterson, Independent Consultant**  
**Care Visions Residential**  
**CELCIS**  
**Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ)**  
**Church of Scotland**  
**CrossReach Children's Residential Care**

**David Grimm, Independent Consultant and Artist**  
**East Park School**  
**Harmeny Care and Education**  
**Inspire Scotland**  
**Judy Furnival, Independent Consultant**  
**Lee Hollins, PhD Student, University of Strathclyde**  
**Moorehouse Group**  
**Nether Johnson House**  
**Our Promise, Scotland**

**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 in the University of Strathclyde.**  
**The Good Shepherd Centre**  
**The Scottish Prison Service**

# A Final Note

We would like to thank **The Promise, Scotland** 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 share their experiences, expertise and feelings about what is such a difficult subject.

**Laura, Sarah and Gemma**

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