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Contact info:

National.Research@noms.gsi.gov.uk

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Probation staff views of the Skills for Effective Engagement Development (SEED) Pilot

Angela Sorsby, Joanna Shapland, Stephen Farrall, Fergus McNeill, Camilla Priede, and Gwen Robinson

This report focuses on practitioners' views of the SEED training and SEED model, as assessed by evaluation questionnaires completed by participants at the conclusion of each training event. It covers the Probation Trusts included in the external evaluation of SEED pilots by Sheffield University: London, Merseyside and Thames Valley.

The full report is: Sorsby, A., Shapland, J., Farrall, S., McNeill, F., Priede, C. and Robinson, G. (2013) *Probation staff views of the Skills for Effective Engagement Development (SEED) project*. Sheffield: Centre for Criminological Research [http://shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.2930931/file/probation-staff-views-seed.pdf]. It reports on one element of the external evaluation by Sheffield University: staff perceptions of training and the usefulness of skills covered in training as well as the continuous professional development (CPD) they received as part of the SEED model.

Key findings

- The vast majority of practitioners rated the core training as relevant to their practice, with proportions rating the different elements as very relevant ranging from 72% for RNR to 92% for CBT
- Most people reported at the first quarterly follow up event that they had been able to use most material delivered at the core training at least some of the time. Over 80% reported using PSM and structuring sessions most of the time, over 70% relationship building, and around half MI, RNR and CBT
- All elements of the training were considered interesting and useful by the majority of participants both at the time and after using the material in practice. Although some elements were considered more useful than others, different people found different components useful
- At the final session, practitioners thought the totality of SEED training had a positive (or very positive) impact on their practice, and 87% thought it very important to their practice to continue to use the model. Seventy per cent saw their time as more focussed and three-quarters mostly or always had a plan for supervision sessions
- There was considerable commitment by practitioners and middle managers to CPD: action learning sets, observation and support from colleagues were all valued. At the final session, over 90% of respondents thought it important for action learning sets and observation to continue

SEED components

Relationship building (RB) – combining clear boundaries with work to get to know and understand the individual

Motivational Interviewing (MI) – interviewing techniques that promote readiness to change

Structuring sessions – a consistent framework for all sessions, which focuses on purposeful engagement

Cognitive Behavioural Techniques (CBT) – Addressing unhelpful thinking and behavioural patterns, teaching cognitive skills and providing opportunities to practice

Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) –directing resources to those with the highest risks and needs, and matching intervention style to offender characteristics

Pro-social modeling (PSM) – exemplifying pro-social behaviour, challenging anti-social statements and behaviour and reinforcing (e.g. through praise) pro-social statements and behaviour

Background

The SEED (Skills for Effective Engagement, and Development) pilots were conducted between Spring 2011 and Spring 2012. Their purpose was to develop and test out a practice skills model based on the best international evidence about the impact of effective engagement with offenders on reducing reoffending. The model consists of core training followed by quarterly follow up training that teams of practitioners (offender managers) attend together with their team manager Senior Probation Officer (SPO), and continuous professional development (CPD) to support learning. The aim of the model is to bring about cultural change to enable professional practice and a focus on quality outcomes. SEED has now been brought together with a piloted model for reflective supervision to produce the SEEDS model (Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision). This is an integrated organisational and practice model intended to bring about the consistent application of evidence in day to day work with offenders. SEEDS is a non-mandatory approach that has been adopted by almost all probation trusts.

Format of training

A three day core training event in March to April 2011 was followed by three quarterly one day events over the following year. Each event was run by a National Offender Management Service (NOMS) trainer and a local trainer. The events included components on relationship building (RB), pro-social modelling (PSM), motivational interviewing (MI), risk need and responsivity (RNR), cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT) and structuring sessions, and inputs on supervision, desistance research and sharing resources. At a final half day event in February 2012 participants discussed their experiences of SEED and planning for the future.

Approach

This was action research, in which the researchers attended each training event, as far as possible, and all those participating in the training were asked to fill in anonymous questionnaires, which asked about each element of the event, as well as the extent to which participants had used the elements during the previous three months. Trainers developed their next training session from reactions to the last one (including from reading the questionnaires), so questionnaires could not be piloted. The questionnaires also covered the extent to which participants felt they were supported by their managers and the Trust, and reactions to the CPD component of the model since the last training event. This included offender managers' meeting regularly to discuss cases (action learning sets) and observations of one-to-one meetings by managers. Most questions used closed responses (often scales, such as 'very useful' to 'not at all useful'), but there was also opportunity for participants to comment through the inclusion of open-ended questions.

Two teams of practitioners from each of the three trusts attended the training together with their SPO. There was little change in team leader during the course of the pilot. Evaluation forms were completed by almost all participants; just over 300 questionnaires were completed in total over the course of the year (73 questionnaires at the core training, and 63, 60, 52 and 53 respectively at the 3 follow up training sessions and final session). The results presented from these questionnaires reflect practitioners' views – assessing the impact upon outcomes is the subject of further research.

Results

Overall reactions to training

Participants' reactions to the usefulness of the training were very favourable throughout. The majority of participants felt SEED had improved the way supervision sessions had gone; they were doing more structured, better quality work. Many felt their time was more focused. However, particularly in the early stages, many felt preparation and follow-up actions were taking longer and time pressures made it difficult to adapt to a different way of working. Further training was considered important to keep SEED on the agenda.

Using the SEED model in one-to-one supervision was discussed at the final follow-up training event. Participants identified a number of strengths. SEED was seen as providing more structure without being overly prescriptive. It was seen as responsive to offenders' needs, allowing offender inclusivity and

supervision to be tailored to individuals. Participants thought it empowered offenders in having ownership of change, with a shared understanding of goals and a stronger professional relationship. According to the practitioners, training had increased and refreshed skills, promoted reflective practice and helped to identify strengths and weaknesses leading to practice development. It also encouraged team building and the sharing of resources, promoting innovation.

Overall ratings of the training were very positive with the final event producing the most positive ratings and the second follow-up the least positive (**Table 1**).

Table 1 Overall reactions to the training

Question	Training Event				
	Core	First follow-up	Second follow-up	Third follow-up	Fourth follow-up
Overall, how useful did you find the SEED training? <i>Mean ratings (1=Very useful 5 = Not at all useful)</i>	1.9 (n=72)	2.0 (n=62)	2.4 (n=58)	2.0 (n=51)	1.7 (n=45)
To what extent has the SEED training (overall) covered what you wanted it to cover? <i>Mean rating (1 = Covered all I wanted, 5 = Didn't meet my expectations)</i>					1.8 (n=51)

Participants were invited to comment on the extent to which SEED training had covered what they wanted it to cover, and the overwhelming majority were very positive:

Training exceeded my expectations as a PSO... many aspects of the training have widened my skills and knowledge.

Reinforced the vocational element of the job without minimising the need to confront/challenge and assess risk. Allowed more focused work through resource pack.

Some people wanted more:

I would have liked more on practice models and their theoretical underpinnings. Particularly the ones that are new to me.

A few people would have liked more time to put the learning into practice:

I haven't been given sufficient space to digest the information and put it all into practice. The model is all brilliant and effective but, in order to follow all of it, we as practitioners need to be given time to reflect, for action learning sets and to plan.

Views on usefulness of specific SEED elements

All the material included in the training was seen as interesting and relevant by most participants. Almost everyone saw all the components as very or quite useful, with one or more element within each component being rated as very useful by a substantial majority of participants. Most people also reported at the first follow up event that they had been able to use most material at least some of the time. **Table 2** compares what people said at the core training with how they saw material three months later. At the initial training, people felt structuring was the element they were most likely to use in practice. CBT was also found very useful: at the initial training 92% thought they would be very likely to use in their practice; three months later around half said they used it pretty much all of the time and a quarter saw it as an additional tool for relevant cases. Similar positive patterns were found with RNR, MI, PSM and RB.

At the final training event, structuring was considered the most useful element of SEED, and CBT the least, relative to other parts of the model. Building effective relationships was ranked as the second most useful element, followed by MI and RNR, PSM and then Socratic questioning.

Table 2 Usefulness of skills after core training and at first follow up event (according to case managers)

Question	SEED components					Structuring
	RB	PSM	MI	RNR	CBT	
At core training:						
How relevant do you think it will be to your practice?						
Very	84.6%	89.2%	86.2%	72.3%	92.3%	83.1%
Quite	10.8%	9.2%	13.8%	26.2%	7.7%	15.4%
Not very	4.6%	0%	0%	1.5%	0%	0%
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.5%
Missing	0%	1.5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	(n=65)	(n=65)	(n=65)	(n=65)	(n=65)	(n=65)
At 1st quarterly follow-up:						
I use it/the material is relevant pretty much all of the time	70.4%	83.6%	54.5%	47.3%	49.1%	81.8%
It's useful in some cases	18.5%	9.1%	29.1%	29.1%	24.5%	10.9%
It's an additional tool I would only use with relevant cases	9.3%	7.3%	16.4%	21.8%	26.4%	7.3%
	(n=54)	(n=55)	(n=55)	(n=55)	(n=53)	(n=55)

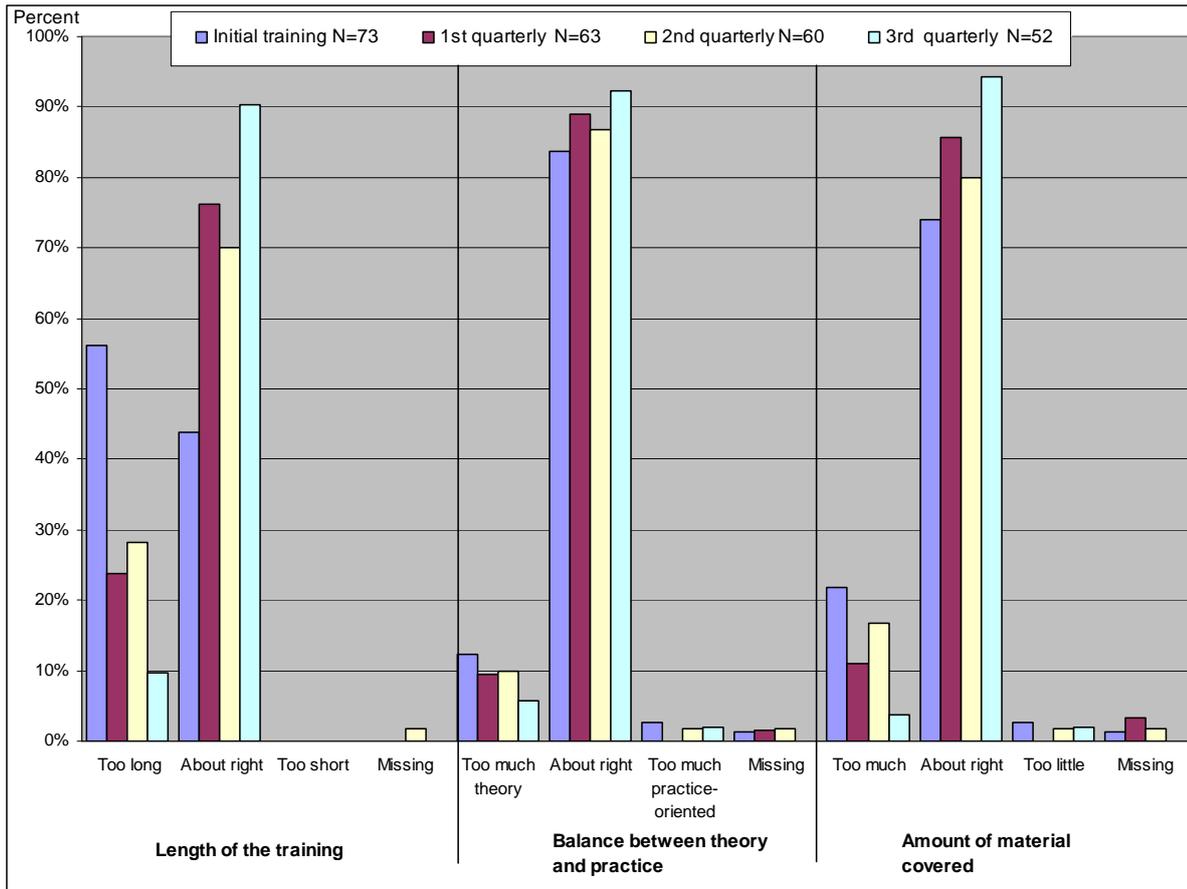
Views on format of the training

At each training event participants were asked about the length of the training, the balance between theory and practice and the amount of material covered (**Figure 1**).

Three-quarters of the participants or more felt the amount of material covered at each event was about right. The majority of people (84% or more) felt that the balance between theory and practice was about right. Very few people felt the training was too practice orientated. A small proportion felt there was too much theory. Although just over half found the core training too long, most approved of the amount of material covered and the balance between theory and practice in the core training. Ratings of how well diversity issues were integrated were generally towards the 'very well' end of the scale, and were consistent across events.

The third follow-up training day was the same length as the first two but people seemed to find it particularly well balanced. This may have been because of the specific material covered at this event. It may also have been that by this point people were really starting to appreciate using SEED in their work.

Figure 1 Format of the training

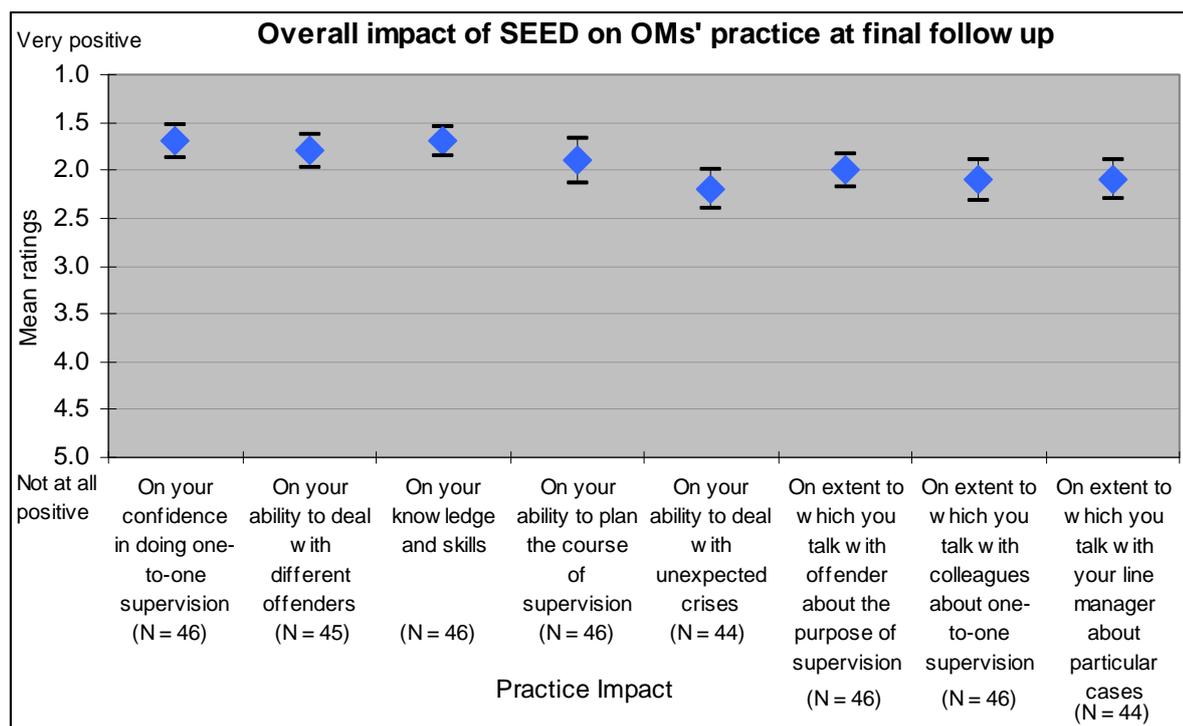


Views on impact of using SEED

At the second follow up event nearly four-fifths (78%) of practitioners currently supervising offenders thought SEED had improved the way sessions had gone. Nearly half (49%) thought service users had found the change in their practice helpful, while 13% thought service users found it challenging and 9% had received comments on a change. Just over a third (36%) had not received any comment or feedback from service users.

This view was confirmed at the final follow-up (**Figure 2**); practitioners thought SEED had a positive (or very positive) impact on their practice, and 87% thought it very important to their practice to continue to use the model. When it came to talking to line managers and colleagues, views were a little less positive with 64% and 67% respectively rating the impact at one or two on the scale (one being very positive).

Figure 2 Perceived overall impact of SEED on OMs' practice (at final follow-up)



Practitioners were asked about the impact of SEED on their working practices. When asked about the length of supervision appointments with offenders, 85% of participants indicated that an average appointment time was 30 minutes or less. Almost all (98%) said they could vary the appointment time, so the average time, though a function of caseload, also related to choices OMs made between prioritising contact time with offenders, paperwork and planning.

At the final session, 70% of practitioners saw their time as more focussed; three-quarters mostly or always had a plan for supervision sessions (Table 3). Few worried about being taken off course by unexpected events (such as crises in offenders' lives). However, over three quarters would have liked more time to plan. This comment typified views:

My sessions are better time managed, more focused and more productive. It also promotes thinking about the individual, their learning style and what materials would be most engaging. More planning time would assist this further.

None of the participants suggested that they wanted to spend less time planning supervision. Some suggested that high caseloads impeded their ability to find the time to do more planning. However, many saw themselves as planning and deriving real benefits. Over 90% were also finding some space to reflect back on a session afterwards.

Table 3 Perceived impact on OMs' planning at final follow up

Effect of SEED on OMs' workload	% of responses (n=47)
Impact on length of one-to-one supervisions?	
It's had no effect	6.4
I spend longer now on one-to-one supervision	23.4
I spend less time now	0.0
My time is more focused	59.6
My time is more focused but also indicated spends more time now	10.6

Effect of SEED on OMs' workload	% of responses (n=47)
Do you worry if you are taken off course by unexpected events?	
Always	2.1
Mostly	6.4
Occasionally	31.9
No	59.6
Are you able to find space to reflect back on a session afterwards?	
Always	4.3
Mostly	40.4
Occasionally	46.8
No	8.5

Support for using SEED

Participants were also asked about action learning sets (ALS), observation and the support received from their managers and colleagues for using SEED. There was considerable commitment to CPD during the pilots and people saw themselves as gaining real benefits. They also valued the support they received.

ALS were prioritised and took place: by the second follow-up training almost everyone had taken part in further action learning sets since the first, and they were rated as very or quite helpful by almost everyone. One-to-one supervision of offenders is necessarily quite 'hidden' work, done by the supervisor and offender by themselves. Staff valued being able to discuss cases with their team and manager. By the second follow-up training, though, a few more people were rating them as quite stressful (16%). Comments indicated that this was more to do with the difficulties of getting everyone together and fitting them in people's diaries, than actually taking part in them. This may explain why about one-fifth (18%) were not very keen for action learning sets to continue at that stage, though by the final follow up over 90% saw their use as very or quite important.

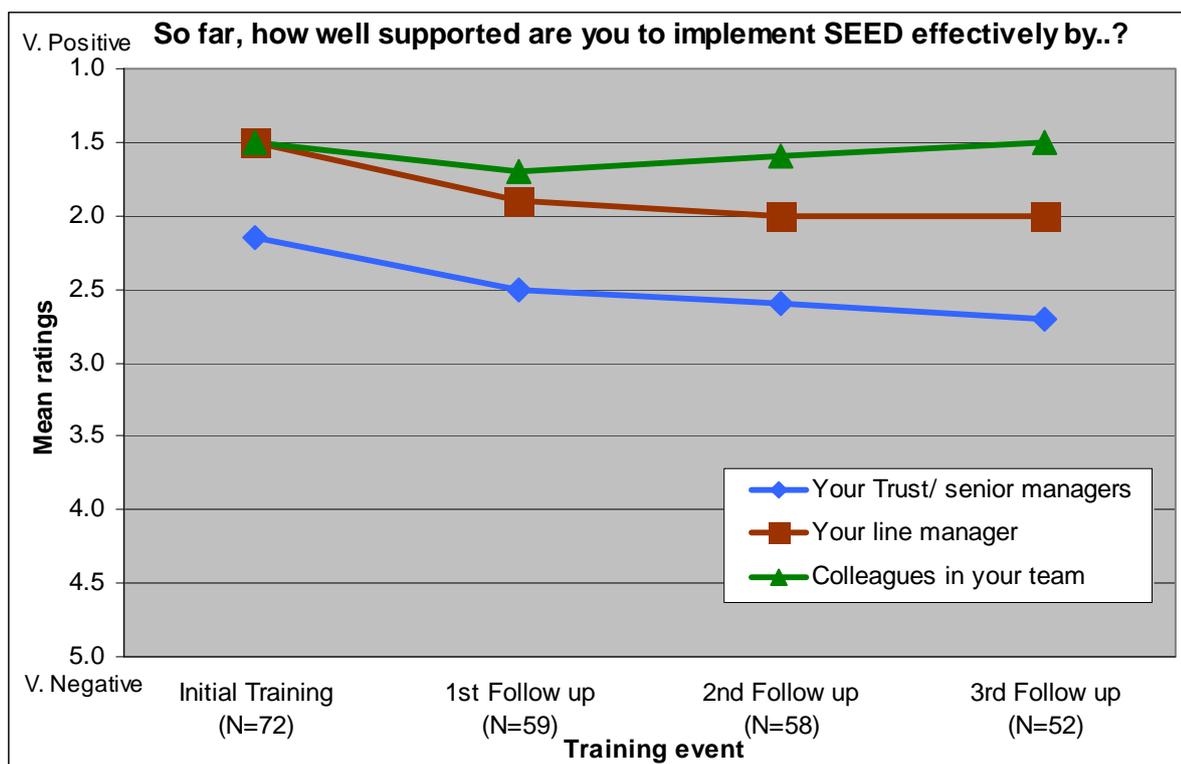
At the final follow up event, people identified a number of strengths in ALS: they saw ALS as encouraging reflective practice, and giving an opportunity for people to learn from others with differing levels of experience. They were seen as providing an opportunity to address unconscious bias, and a safe space to question risk management and could also highlight risk issues. Practitioners found the discussions empowering, affirming and confidence building, and saw them as helping to reduce pressure on SPOs. They were considered helpful in developing team working and cohesion, and encouraging communication. Areas for development mainly related to ensuring they were prioritised and took place, whether through prescription or being scheduled around team meetings.

Practitioners were enthusiastic about observation, and at the final training two-thirds (66%) saw it as very important and 31% saw it as quite important for this to continue. In discussion, the following strengths were identified: supported personal development, providing the opportunity to put into practice comments from the feedback, making people aware of their development needs and keeping people focused. Observation validated work, improved confidence and motivation; for some, the experience strengthened the team's confidence in the SPO and affirmed the SPO's belief in the team. It was seen as useful for the SPO to see problematic cases.

Areas for development and suggestions for senior managers were: to allay people's anxieties about having their practice observed; for practitioners to have confidence in the observation and feedback process and for SPOs to have more training on giving feedback. In addition, it was considered important for feedback to be immediate and for SPOs to observe a range of cases so OMs could not cherry pick and could build on the observations.

Participants were positive about the support they received, and perceived more support from closer colleagues (**Figure 3**). The overall ratings for support from team colleagues were statistically significantly better than for line management support; the latter were also significantly better than the ratings for Trusts and senior managers. Mean ratings of the support received from colleagues were very similar to expectations (initial core training), whereas ratings deteriorated for support from line managers and senior leaders. Those that commented on this during follow up sessions referred to time pressures, workload and a lack of workload relief as well as resources; there were also comments about problems caused by staff movement.

Figure 3 Perceived support from colleagues and managers



At the final event, participants clearly valued the involvement of senior managers. Further training was thought important by almost everyone, and the following comment summed up people’s views:

I think the follow-up training throughout the year has been really vital. It helps keep focus and fresh in mind. It is also good to mix with colleagues and reflect and discuss practice/techniques. I think we need further condensed/shortened sessions in future to keep SEED at the forefront of our practice.

Conclusions

The focus of SEED is on one-to-one supervision, enabling good practice and encouraging desistance in offenders. What is clear from this evaluation of the reactions of OMs (and SPOs) is that the cultural shift embodied in the SEED model was welcomed. Its focus on offender supervision, on work *with* offenders, on work *by* offenders within the supervisory context, and on developing practice skills in OMs were all seen as positive.

The majority of participants felt SEED had improved supervision sessions. They felt they were doing more structured, better quality work. Structuring received the highest rankings in terms of its usefulness for practice, followed by relationship building, but all elements were seen as useful and different practitioners rated different elements as useful. Many felt their time was more focused but, particularly in the early stages, some felt preparation and follow-up actions were taking longer and time pressures made it difficult to adapt to a different way of working. Further training was considered to be important to keep SEED on the agenda.