

## **SYMPOSIUM: Randomised controlled trials in social work**

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In the context of demands from policy makers and commissioners for services to demonstrate their effectiveness, there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) as a source of evidence. But RCTs in social work present considerable methodological and ethical challenges and in some countries they have rarely been undertaken.

This symposium will consider the practical and ethical dimensions of designing and implementing an RCT with reference to four current research projects. The presentations will highlight the researchers' experiences at different stages of the process, from developing a well-defined intervention in preparation for a trial, through to follow-up of families who have already been randomised. Issues considered will include theory development; the feasibility, acceptability and ethics of using different control groups ('services as usual', alternative interventions, waiting list); the practicalities of randomisation; selling the trial to service organisations and practitioners; and the views of service users and carers. Rather than debating epistemology or the pros and cons of RCTs in the abstract, this symposium will explore the tribulations of setting up and running a trial – and the solutions which the presenters have found so far.

The symposium will start with a brief introduction setting out the different stages of trial development and implementation, rather than assuming the audience is already familiar with these. Four short presentations will then cover trials in different settings (statutory and voluntary sector) with different units of randomisation (social work team; individual service user; family) and with different social problem focus (mental ill health in adults, substance misuse in young people and child maltreatment). An expert discussant from Australia will then respond to the presentations. The four trials featured in the symposium are taking place in the UK, but the methodological issues to be discussed are internationally relevant.

**Keywords:** Randomised controlled trials, Research ethics, Evaluation research, Knowledge production.