

## Taking a strengths-based approach to social work and social care: *A literature review*

### Plain English summary of research findings

#### **What the research is about.**

A new approach to providing social work and social care services to people has been developed called a 'strengths' or 'asset' based approach. This means looking at what resources, skills or interests ('strengths' or 'assets') people have that they can draw on that might be used to help, rather than focusing immediately on what they are lacking, or need, in the first instance (which is called a 'deficit' approach). Another way of putting it is asking people 'what's strong' rather than 'what's wrong' at the outset, so that people can feel empowered and encouraged in making decisions about what they need.

Examples of peoples 'strengths' or 'assets' include personal resources (such as friends and family that may help them), social networks (such as a book club), or community resources (such as a library, community centre, or a gym) that can be used to enable people to live the best life that they can.

#### **Why is the research important?**

A number of different ways of delivering this approach have been developed. These include: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD); Knowledge, Values, Ethics, Theory and Skills (KVETS); Local Area Coordination and the 'Three Conversations' model. However it

is not known whether and how they work, or which one works best for whom and in what circumstances.

The results from this work provide some early insight into the impact of using a strength-based approach in social work and social care provision. It helps social care commissioners (people who are responsible for services that the local authority provide), people who access services, and their carers to make sense of the current thinking around using strengths-based approaches.

### **What we did.**

We wanted to examine: the goals of a strengths based approach; the challenges of implementation (alongside potential facilitators); identify the (potential) benefits for users and some key learning from using a strengths-based approach. To do this we conducted a literature review – a search for all literature with particular relevance on what we were looking for. We then examined these documents with particular questions in mind. These were:

1. What is a strengths-based approach?
2. How does the evidence support the use of strengths-based approaches?
3. What are the challenges or criticisms of using a strengths-based approach?
4. What kind of cultural or system changes are linked with successfully implementing a strengths-based approach?
5. How does the Care Act 2014 impact on the use of strengths-based approaches?
6. How can we evaluate the efficacy of using strengths-based approaches?

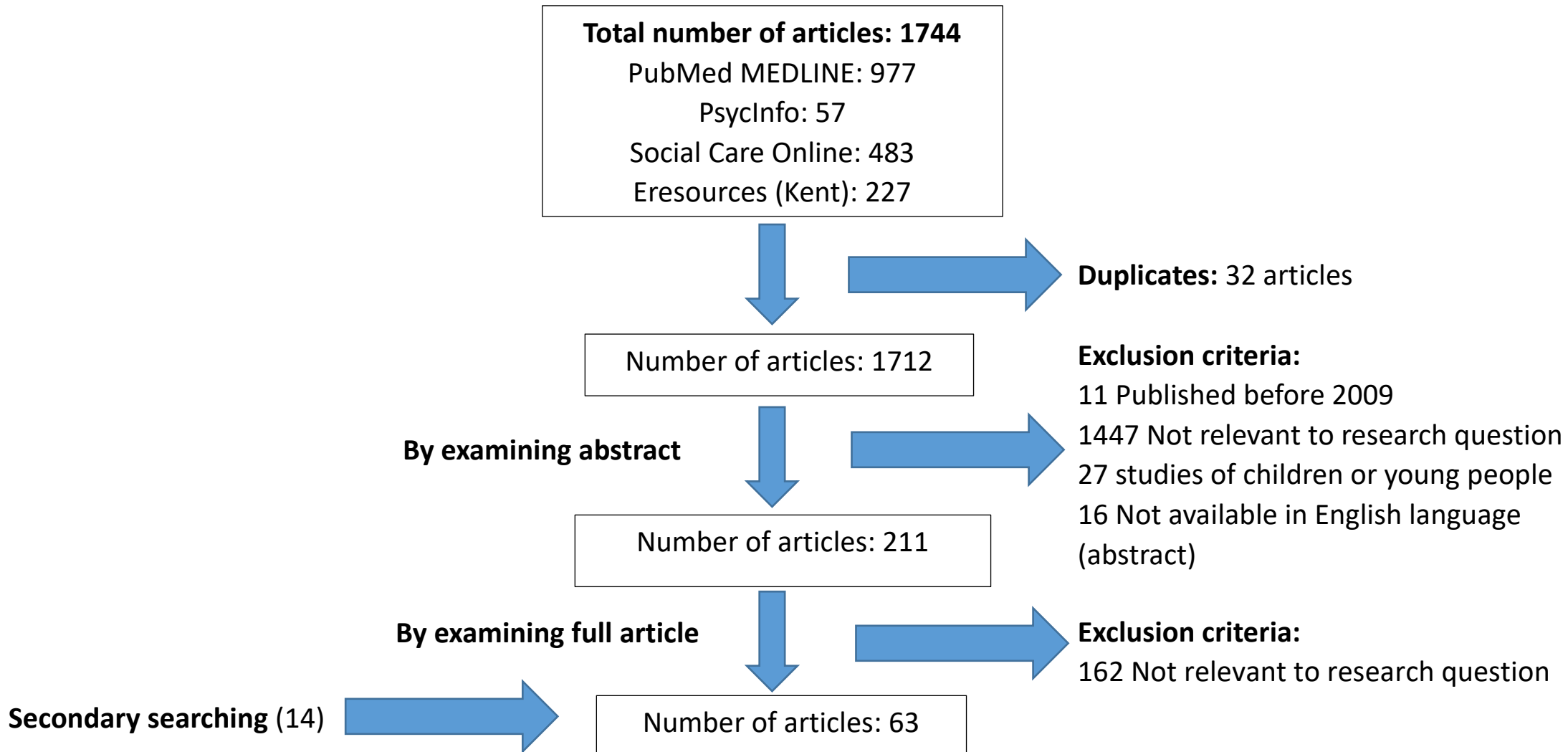
### **Public Advisors.**

Two public involvement and engagement advisors were involved and helped us throughout the review. They looked at and commented on the review itself as well as advising on alternative sources for relevant documents.

### **What we found out.**

In our search we identified a total of 1744 articles that could be relevant. From these 211 articles were deemed to be potentially relevant to the research questions and were reviewed in full. On review of the full text, a further 162 were rejected based on our inclusion/exclusion criteria. A further 14 articles were included based on secondary searches carried out. A total of 63 articles were, therefore, included in this review. You can see the results of the search in figure 1 on the next page.

**Figure 1. Outcomes of the literature search**



A summary of all the articles is provided in the full report and can be found by clicking the link here: [Publication details | PSSRU](#). This summary includes both supporters and critics of the strengths-based approach.

We found that while strengths-based approaches are popular among policy makers and practitioners, evidence for how beneficial they are for people that access services is limited at the moment. There are still questions about: their definition (how they are distinct from other approaches, and how they should be thought of as a 'concept'); their effectiveness and feasibility (including how they fit with local authority eligibility thresholds); and how they should/can be evaluated. We conclude that specific research needs to be done to evaluate the precise nature of strengths-based approaches in social work and social care and their impact on people's quality of life and well-being.

### **What the findings mean.**

The review has brought evidence together and extended our understanding about strengths-based approaches in social work and social care for adults. It will help us to plan further research and develop models of evaluation. It will help policy makers, commissioners, practitioners, carers and people who access services understand the current thinking about strengths-based approaches in social work and social care. The findings have been shared with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and submitted for publication in a peer reviewed journal.