

# **Lisa Holmes PhD by publication**

## **January 2016**

**Exploring needs, costs and outcomes of services provided  
to vulnerable children and their families**

## Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Policy and practice context.....	6
Wider policy and theoretical context.....	8
Methods and analysis.....	13
A standardised conceptual framework for children’s social care services.....	16
How children’s social care practitioners use their time.....	18
Unit cost estimation for children’s social care services.....	20
Next steps.....	21
References.....	23
Appendix One: Publications.....	28
Appendix Two: Supporting letters from co-authors.....	29

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## **Introduction**

This overarching chapter brings together a programme of research that commenced in 2000 and includes a series of eight publications (from 2006-2014) that have been selected to demonstrate the development of a theoretical framework and research methods to explore the relationship between the needs, costs and outcomes of child welfare services provided to vulnerable children and their families. These publications (see numbered list in Appendix One<sup>1</sup>) have also been selected to show scholarly and epistemological progression and highlight the original contribution that the research has made to child welfare and wider social policy both nationally and internationally. The progression that is specifically demonstrated in the eight publications relates to how the research has addressed key policy questions, including an insight into how children's social care services can be provided as effectively and efficiently as possible. Along with an understanding of how and when support and services are, or

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<sup>1</sup> The publications have been included following discussions with, and agreement from co-authors that Lisa Holmes has carried out a pivotal, leading role in all of the research studies that underpin the publications and has taken a substantial, or leading role in the preparation of the publications. Confirmatory letters from first named co-authors, or co-authors of publications with three or less authors have been submitted with this PhD (see Appendix 2).

can be, provided to vulnerable children and their families, in response to their specific needs and circumstances and consequently transform children's lives by improving outcomes.

The underpinning research is inter-disciplinary, cutting across aspects of social policy and the multi-faceted theoretical foundations of child welfare research, which utilise both sociological and psychological concepts (Berridge, 2007). The research also includes unit cost estimations, whereby a unit cost is defined as 'the cost of one unit of service...for instance, cost per case or cost per day' (Mogyorosy and Smith, 2005, p193). In addition to the inter-disciplinary approach, the underpinning research has evolved alongside transformations in the wider academic environment and has demonstrated impact on child welfare policy, has shown reach and the findings have informed social work practice to lead to the transformation of the lives of vulnerable children and their families.

With an overarching theme of exploring the needs, costs and outcomes of services provided to vulnerable children and their families, the research underpinning the publications can be separated into three key themes:

- 1) The development of a standardised, nationally applicable conceptual framework for children's social care services departments to follow a child's journey through the different parts of the social care system;
- 2) An exploration of how children's social care practitioners use their time and whether this should and can be reconfigured;
- 3) The application of the conceptual framework and use of social care 'time use data' to estimate unit costs for children's social care services and the development of an approach to relate these to both children's needs and their outcomes.

The intellectual and theoretical basis for each of these themes has progressed since the commencement of the research in 2000 and forms the basis of this PhD. The three key themes and the associated publications are inter-related and the progression across the publications is not necessarily linear but instead reflects a growing programme of research that has evolved to address specific policy questions and has generated a sustained research income. As such, some of the eight publications show

progression across only one of the themes, whereas others contribute scholarly advancement across two or three of the themes.

The complexity of defining, identifying and measuring outcomes for children in receipt of children's social care services is not included in this overarching chapter, but is discussed in detail in *Publications One, Three and Five*. It is also an aspect of child welfare which continues to be debated across research, policy and practice with differing perspectives about the most appropriate types of measurement along with the ongoing development of tools and indexes (see for example, Hadley Centre and Coram Voice, 2015, for a recent review).

This overarching chapter highlights how the chosen publications demonstrate the impact of the research on policy and practice, with a particular emphasis on the development of a unified, standardised approach to introduce both comparability and transparency into unit cost estimations for children's social care services. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates how the publications have informed key policy and practice debates across the children's social care sector. This chapter also outlines the legislative and policy context within which children's social care services operate in England. This is followed by a brief introduction to the methods and analysis that have been used across the research programme reported in the eight publications. The chapter then moves on to outline each of the key themes in detail, including an analysis of the original contribution that the research has made to child welfare practice and policy, with a particular focus on children's social care services.

The research, and specifically the publications that form the basis of this PhD, have had a substantial impact on child welfare policy nationally and internationally, the key impacts are summarised below:

- Inclusion of the Cost Calculator tool (introduced in *Publication One*) in an Audit Commission report as a recommended tool to explore the costs of out of authority placements for looked after children (Audit Commission, 2007);
- Inclusion of the Cost Calculator tool in national Statutory Guidance to secure sufficient accommodation for looked after children (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010);

- Use of the publications to inform sustainability debates about Evidence Based Interventions in children's social care (specifically *Publications One and Four*) ([www.evidencebasedinterventions.org.uk](http://www.evidencebasedinterventions.org.uk));
- Use of the data reported in *Publication Five* to change the government response to Lord Laming's review of child protection (2009)<sup>2</sup>;
- Use of the conceptual framework and unit costs for the *Don't Move Me Campaign* that led to a government announcement in December 2013 of an additional £40 million over three years to support care leavers until the age of 21;
- Inclusion of the Cost Calculator tool (introduced in *Publication One*) in a National Audit Office report as a recommended tool at a national level to assist the Department for Education to meet its objective of improving outcomes for looked after children and ensuring that placements and services provided to looked after children offer value for money (National Audit Office, 2014).

In addition, the various unit costs that have been calculated have been included on an annual basis, since 2004, in a national compendium of unit costs for health and social care edited and produced by the Personal Social Services Research Unit (Curtis and Burns, 2016). More recently the unit costs have also been included in a unit cost database developed by New Economy Manchester<sup>3</sup> as part of wider cost benefit analyses and public sector reform across the Greater Manchester region.

## **Policy and practice context**

In England, local authorities have a statutory duty to provide services to all children identified as being 'in need'<sup>4</sup>. Some 'children in need' receive support and services from local authority children's services departments while remaining at home with their families. Others become 'looked after' and are placed with foster carers, kinship carers or in residential provision. Looked after children are either accommodated on a

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/mar/10/child-protection-reforms-cost> for further information.

<sup>3</sup> Further information about the unit cost database and the cost benefit analysis is available: <http://www.neweconomymanchester.com/>

<sup>4</sup> The term 'in need' is defined in the Children Act (1989) as being a child or young person who is 'unlikely to achieve or maintain, or have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him/her of services by a local authority' or if his or her 'development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired without the provision of such services' or if he or she is disabled.

voluntary basis at the request of, or in agreement with their parents (section 20) or are subject to a Care Order (section 31), where the local authority has parental responsibility for that child.

Support is also offered to children and families with additional needs but who are not considered to meet the threshold for children's social care services. This support is usually provided under the auspices of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). The CAF was fully implemented across English local authorities in 2008 and was designed to support vulnerable children and families with additional needs that do not meet the threshold for more intensive interventions, such as those associated with social care or safeguarding. The CAF is underpinned by an integrated approach across agencies and was designed to promote a coordinated service provision (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009).

The latest published figures for 2014-15 indicate that there are approximately 391,000 children in need in England (Department for Education, 2015a), of these 69,540 are looked after away from home (Department for Education, 2015b). The remaining 321,460 receive services or support from children's services departments while remaining with their families. The total national expenditure on children and young people's services for the same financial year (2014-15) was £8.9 billion; with over a third of the expenditure (£3.7 billion) attributable to providing care to looked after children and around £2 billion accounting for expenditure related to safeguarding (Department for Education, 2015c).

Local authority children's services departments operate and provide services with finite resources. These resources need to be used to provide the best possible services and support to children in need and their families to ensure that children are adequately safeguarded, and to improve outcomes. Concerns about the poor outcomes of children in receipt of social care services, in particular those that become looked after, are well documented (Sinclair and Gibbs, 1998; Jackson and Thomas, 1999; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Ward, Skuse and Munro, 2005; Holder, Beecham and Knapp, 2011; Hadley Centre and Coram Voice, 2015). For example, in comparison with the general population, looked after children are more likely to be excluded from school, to be non-attenders and to leave education without qualifications, they are also more likely to be involved in criminal activity and on

leaving care, they are at greater risk of homelessness and unemployment. Recognition of these multiple disadvantages has resulted in a number of government policy initiatives since the late 1990s designed to improve the outcomes and wellbeing of children in receipt of children's social care services and more closely align them with the wider child population (Ward, 2002; McAuley and Rose, 2010).

The effective and efficient use of limited resources has become increasingly pronounced within children's social care, with a continued rise in the number of referrals over the past ten years (Department for Education, 2015a). In the late 1990s there were concerns at national and local government level about the delivery of good and effective children's services at an appropriate cost (Knapp and Lowin, 1998; Department of Health, 2001); these concerns, along with unexplained variations in the costs of providing services, led to the Department of Health commissioning a national research initiative (Costs and Effectiveness of Services for Children in Need) comprising 13 research studies that were carried out between 1999 and 2004 across England and Wales (Department of Health, 2001; Beecham and Sinclair, 2007). *Publications One, Two and Three* are outputs from one of the research studies included in this national research initiative.

The focus of all of the research underpinning this PhD are those vulnerable families who are in receipt of support or services to meet any additional needs that cannot be met by the provision of universal services. Therefore the focus of this work is on those children and families who have received support or services as part of the CAF, or those children identified as being 'in need' as defined above (Children Act, 1989).

### **Wider policy and theoretical context**

As outlined above, the research which underpins this PhD is inter-disciplinary and as such draws on different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. It encompasses aspects of social policy and unit cost estimation, with a particular focus on 'social exclusion' and 'life chances' alongside a standardised approach to unit cost estimation (Allen and Beecham, 1993) that has been used extensively across adult health and social care services. These theoretical perspectives have provided the foundation for the empirical research and in particular have informed the main analytical approaches, underpinning the three themes, which are discussed further below.

Since 1997 the UK government has expressed concern about people, who are socially excluded, which by definition includes looked after children. Broadly speaking the term 'social exclusion' is used to describe the unequal social position of some members of the population: those who have fewer resources, less access to services, lower social status and consequently occupy a disadvantaged position within society. The complexity of defining social exclusion is highlighted by Percy-Smith (2000), who argues that social exclusion needs to be considered in the context of the processes that create the problems outlined above and those in the definition offered by the Social Exclusion Unit (2004), which focuses on difficulties such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crimes and family breakdown. Percy-Smith's stance, which highlights the need to consider the processes that create the problems, underscores the research included in this submission in terms of exploring the *needs* and *circumstances* of children and families rather than exploring outcomes in isolation. As such, the longitudinal perspective and development of a standardised framework, that underpin this PhD, facilitate the consideration of the wider societal processes that create the difficulties experienced by children and young people. Furthermore, the research provides evidence to understand the longer term impact of these difficulties, along with the service response to address adverse life experiences and the outcomes that can be achieved.

During the same timeframe (since 1997), with the commencement of a new labour government, there have been contemporary debates focused on the role of children within society, with a theoretical distinction between whether children should be viewed as an 'investment for the future' (Willow, 2002, p 2-3) or as active human beings with present rights, needs and capacities. These contemporary, theoretical debates resonate with the concepts of social exclusion, detailed above, specifically the role of the state in addressing adverse circumstances and providing opportunity for children and young people to fulfil their future potential.

Hendrick (2003) highlights the necessity for child welfare theory and evidence to consider child development within the broadest context of 'wellbeing' or 'quality of life' in addition to the usual social, economic and environmental conditions. Hendrick (2003) emphasises that the concept of 'quality of life' provides a useful context within which to consider both the subjective (the individual's perception) and objective (wider societal and cultural norms) when exploring child welfare. The research and

accompanying publications underpinning this PhD encapsulate this broader context with the use of methods to collect both subjective and objective data (see below), to facilitate an understanding of needs, circumstances, the service response and the unit costs of these services along with the outcomes that can be achieved.

An emphasis has been placed on the design, execution and analysis of the underpinning research presented within this chapter, to consider children's social disadvantage prior to receipt of services and support from children's social care services to counteract the impact of earlier social disadvantage and/or previous abuse and neglect. Social disadvantage, the heterogeneity of the families in receipt of services, and the processes that create disadvantage are highlighted in *Publications One, Five and Six*.

Petrie and colleagues (2006, p5) highlight the 'vicious spirals' associated with social exclusion, in particular the complex interplay between different issues and circumstances, for example, unemployment, poor education, poverty, bad housing and addiction. The concept of 'vicious spirals' is taken further in *Publication One* and is considered within the context of service response to meet the needs of looked after children and is also discussed alongside the concept of 'virtuous circles' of needs, service response and outcomes (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008, p158).

In addition to the social exclusion experienced by children and families in receipt of services and support from children's social care, the concept of 'life chances' and how these can be improved is explored in *Publication One*. The term 'life chances' was introduced by the sociologist, Max Weber (1978, p 932) in relation to social class, status, power and opportunities for income. More recently the term has been applied to social exclusion by the government in England:

*'the government is committed to giving children in care all the same life chances any parent would give their child, and none is more important than a good education... This sets major challenges. Being separated from family and friends, changing neighbourhoods and spending time out of school are difficult experiences for any child... It is also a measurement of how society has failed these children in the past (SEU, 2003: iii).'*

Over the timeframe of the research informing this PhD, attention has remained focused on the need for new and comprehensive evidence about the effective and efficient use of children's social care resources, as well as the need for evidence to inform 'value for money' debates (HM Treasury, 2014). The scarcity of research to form the evidence base and the need for established costing methods to be applied to children's social care services have been well documented (Knapp and Lowin, 1998; Romeo et al., 2005; Beecham and Sinclair, 2007). Given that the fundamental aim of the research underpinning this PhD has been to develop a conceptual framework, along with research methods and evidence to explore the relationship between the needs, costs and outcomes of child welfare services, an underpinning theoretical economic approach has been essential.

At the outset of the underpinning research, a decision was made to utilise the approach to estimating unit costs advocated by the Personal Social Services Research Unit, at the University of Kent, namely the long-run marginal opportunity costs of services:

*'PSSRU's standard approach to costing is grounded in economic theory. We provide a close approximation of the long-run marginal opportunity cost of services: the cost of supporting one extra client, or providing one additional unit of output whilst recognising the financial implications of necessary expansion to the services (Curtis and Burns, 2016, p3).'*

Definitions of the common technical terms are provided in a recent literature review by Mogyorosy and Smith (2005). Specifically, they indicate that an opportunity cost 'measures what the service provider forgoes to when it chooses to spend money on a particular service or provide a service for a particular patient' (Mogyorosy and Smith, 2005, p191) and a marginal cost as the 'cost of producing one more unit (of service)' (ibid). A distinction between long term and short term is also provided which highlights that some cost items are usually fixed in the short term but in the long term become variable.

The long-run marginal opportunity cost approach was selected to best meet the research aims and objectives and to facilitate an examination of a complex and evolving children's social care system. To illustrate: Following a referral, if there is evidence of a need, a service response is required; as such a comparison between

service response (opportunity costs) is preferable, to facilitate an exploration of the different types of services or support that are provided. Given that children's social care services operate with finite resources, the opportunity cost approach 'emphasises that under resource scarcity all feasible alternatives should be taken into account' (Mogyorosy and Smith, 2005, p191). The applicability of marginal costs to the research underpinning this PhD can be understood by the recognition that referral rates and throughput of cases within a children's social care service are not static, as such, the use of marginal rather than average (full) costs is preferable, to provide evidence about the costs associated with the expansion of a specific part of a service to meet an increase in demand. The long-run marginal opportunity cost approach also takes the initial investment costs into account, which is essential to fully explore the costs associated with the implementation of new interventions.

An adaptation of a four stage theoretical model (Describe; Identify; Estimate; Calculate, p17), based on the work of Allen and Beecham (1993), and outlined subsequently by Beecham (2000) for the children's social care context, forms the basis of the approach to estimating the unit costs reported in this PhD. Furthermore, the use of the four stage theoretical model to estimate the unit costs for children's social care provides evidence of the applicability of the approach for the children's social care sector.

Beecham highlights the importance of a clear description of a service or support at Stage One ('Describe' stage, p20) to ensure that a cost can be included for each aspect of the service. Furthermore, an accurate description of the service or support highlights elements that may at first appear to incur no cost, for example, the use of volunteers. This costing model formed the basis on which the conceptual framework for the research included in this submission has been built; as such the four-stage model has been used systematically across all the research studies described in the publications. Using an existing, established model as the basis of how to conceptualise the provision of children's social care services has ensured a systematic approach for the development of the conceptual framework underpinning this PhD.

Given the applied focus of this research, the national policy context is also of relevance and over the time period of the research being carried out there have been a number of policy initiatives focused on improving outcomes for looked after children. From 2002-2005 *Choice Protects* sought to develop a more efficient, planned

approach to commissioning placements for looked after children to improve placement stability and outcomes (Department for Education and Skills, 2002-2005). *Every Child Matters: Caring for Children* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) was introduced to assist local authorities to explore how resources could be used efficiently across children's services to achieve better outcomes for children and young people and to support better preventative working. More recently the focus has broadened to encompass the children's social care system beyond the placement of looked after children with the comprehensive review of Child Protection in England (Munro, 2010; Munro 2011a; Munro 2011b). One of the key recommendations from the Munro review was the need for children's social care services to focus on a child's journey through the system. This chapter and the underpinning studies demonstrate the significance of the research to contribute to the wider child welfare field in the context of the Munro recommendations.

These are examples of some of the key policy initiatives, drivers and changes in legislation (encompassing both Statutory Guidance and a new Law) over recent years, and they, along with others, have prompted a pace and volume of change that have led to an increasingly complex and fluctuating landscape of provision of services to vulnerable children and their families. Most notably, change has occurred in the following areas: integration of agencies and greater choice of services and providers; increased emphasis on prevention and early intervention (Statham and Smith, 2010), and local authorities being encouraged to make considerable efficiency savings. Given the rate of policy and practice change, the need for an evidence base that considers the circumstances of children and families, in particular the processes that lead to social exclusion; how life chances can be improved in a way that uses limited resources most effectively and efficiently, the need for an evidence base to inform both child welfare policy and practice decisions is essential. The studies outlined in this PhD have contributed to the growing evidence base and the necessary impacts on policy and practice.

## **Methods and analysis**

A mixed methods approach has been adopted across all of the research studies that are reported in the eight publications. The use of a series of different methods has facilitated the inclusion of data from a range of participants to capture the complexity

of children's social care services. The primary data collection methods have been informed by comprehensive documentary analysis of national legislation and associated statutory regulations and guidance, along with analyses of both national and, where relevant, local (within local authority children's service departments participating in the research) policy and procedural documentation. Use has also been made of existing national statistical returns that are submitted on an annual basis to the Department for Education, these have included child level data focused on looked after children (SSDA 903 data return) and data about Children in Need and child protection cases (CiN Census).

The primary data collection has encompassed a range of methods to capture data about and from both practitioners and service users (children and their families). Information about individual children and families in receipt of children's social care services has been gathered from case files (both paper-based and electronic) and from interviews. Microsoft Access databases were created for the manual extraction and transfer of data from case files. These databases were developed to capture both quantitative (for example, gender, evidence of a disability) and qualitative (for example, information about ongoing life events and relationships, such as contact with birth family members) data items. The data were then imported into SPSS for analysis, which consisted of descriptive statistics detailing the demographics of the sample; the services received; cross-tabulations of ongoing support; and tests of significance between groups using non-parametric tests (Chi Squared, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis). The analysis of individual case records has ensured that the research has captured the nuanced and complexity of the needs and circumstances of the children and families in receipt of children's social care services. Furthermore, this approach has facilitated the collection of detailed outcome information, across a range of domains, for example, changes in children's emotional wellbeing and behaviour along with educational outcomes, such as school attendance and achievements.

Interviews have been conducted with children and/or their families, and also with carers for children who are looked after away from home. These face-to-face semi structured interviews were conducted to capture the views and experiences of the children, their families and carers. They have provided rich data about the involvement of service users in decision making and across the processes carried out by children's social care services professionals, as well as specific data about service receipt.

Furthermore, a flexible approach has been taken to ensure that the tools and techniques that were developed across the different studies met the needs of the children and young people in the samples.

A variety of methods including face-to-face and telephone interviews, online surveys and focus groups have been used to capture the views and experiences of the children's social care workforce. These methods have encompassed the participation of a range of practitioners including: case workers (social workers, family support workers, and supervising social workers from fostering teams); team and service managers; senior managers and directors of children's services along with administrative and support workers. Where appropriate (for example, the study to explore the use of the CAF, see *Publication Six*) data have also been captured from practitioners working across partner agencies, such as health, housing, education, police and the voluntary sector. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis to provide a systematic analysis of the transcripts and the development of a framework and categories to facilitate inter-coder testing and ensure reliability and validity (Mayring, 2000).

The methods undertaken with practitioners were also used as a means to gather *time use activity data* to form the basis of the unit cost estimations (discussed later in this chapter). This method to capture detailed *time use activity* data was based on a 'new' approach to costing services: Activity Based Costing (ABC), which is founded on the assumption that services require a particular set of activities and that these activities can vary (Mogyorosz and Smith, 2005). In contrast, traditional approaches frequently use broad averages or uniformly assign overheads, the use of this traditional approach would not facilitate an exploration of the variations evident within children's social care services or the heterogeneity of the population served.

Given the extended timeframe that this research covers, the approach and methods to gather the time use activity data have evolved over time. The importance of the quality of data and consideration of potential bias in the data are highlighted by Johnston and colleagues (1999) when calculating unit costs. As such, it has been essential to ensure that the learning from earlier studies has informed subsequent study designs (*Publication Five* provides a critical analysis of the methods used and how these have

evolved). The time use activity data were collected to ascertain the average time practitioners take to complete each of the component tasks within the processes that form the basis of the conceptual framework. Across all methods, a distinction has been made between direct client-related activity, including telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings with children and their families, and indirect client-related activity, such as liaising with social care colleagues and with other agencies, case recording and meetings. The indirect activity was further broken down to distinguish administrative tasks such as the arrangement of meetings. The breakdown of the activities in this way has facilitated an exploration of *time use activity data* to inform policy and practice debates about caseloads, workloads and the nature of social work practice with children and families. The time activity data was either manually entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet following focus groups or directly imported into Microsoft Excel from the completed online surveys. The time use data were then analysed using descriptive statistics to explore the mean, median and modal values of each of the activity figures. The data were also analysed using measures of dispersion (Kurtosis) to identify the distribution of the data and subsequently for the removal of outliers. The breakdown of the *time use activity data* into the smallest component parts, distinguishing between the different types of activity has been a main aim of the time use studies and comprises a key theme of this submission and is thus discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### **A standardised conceptual framework for children's social care services**

The conceptual framework that underpins the three key themes in this submission was first developed for looked after children and was created to provide an approach to better understand the costs of providing children's social care services, by identifying all the social care support that was provided to children and young people from the point of entry to care for the duration of their care episode. The development of the conceptual framework has also facilitated an increased understanding of the throughput of cases in receipt of support from children's social care services and in particular the processes that are carried out to: assess; plan and review; provide services and close cases. The approach was a move away from 'top down' estimations of the costs of providing care that only focus on the fees or allowances paid based on total expenditure and do not capture the complexities associated with

differences in children's needs and circumstances. As outlined earlier in this chapter, the conceptual framework adopted in all eight publications is instead based on a 'bottom up' approach, which identifies the constituent parts that form the delivery of a service and assigns a value to each of these parts (Beecham, 2000). Adopting a 'bottom up' approach provides a systematic way to include service elements that may remain hidden when using the 'top down' approaches that were commonplace across children's social care services, before the commencement of the research that underpins and is discussed in this submission.

The underpinning conceptual framework comprises several sets of processes that are carried out by children's social care departments, and partner agencies, to support children in need and their families. Initially the processes were described using national statutory requirements for children's social care services, outlined in the Core Information Requirements (Department of Health, 2001); these were then modified, standardised and finalised as part of the research studies reported in the publications. The modifications were carried out to reflect practice, based on discussions, interviews and focus groups carried out with social care practitioners (see *methods and analysis* section above). The development of the work in this systematic way, based on social work practice, has ensured that the resultant underpinning framework captures the complexity of social work. Using the generalised costing model set out by Beecham (2000) it was possible to *describe* each of these processes in a systematic manner, *identify* their component activities, and *estimate* a cost for each.

The finalised processes for looked after children were first detailed and published in *Publication One* (see Appendix One). The underpinning conceptual framework has subsequently been expanded to include the processes undertaken for other children in need, including those supported in their own families with child protection plans and disabled children in receipt of short break services (the full set of processes are described and discussed in *Publication Five*). Most recently these processes were further expanded to include the activities associated with supporting vulnerable children and families in receipt of an assessment under the CAF. As part of this research, the processes were extended to capture the activities carried out by agencies other than within children's social care services to support families in receipt of a CAF. These partner agencies include the health visiting service, schools and special educational needs co-ordinators, along with housing departments and the

voluntary sector. These processes - capturing the activities carried out by the range of agencies - are detailed in *Publication Six*.

The development of a conceptual framework to identify all the processes that are carried out to support vulnerable children and families, across a range of child welfare systems (looked after children; children in need; child protection; short break services and the CAF), and all the activities associated with the processes, including key factors that result in variations in activities, introduce comparability and transparency into cost comparisons. As such, the underpinning conceptual approach ensures that the same elements are being included in the framework to facilitate comparisons between local authority areas, for children and families with different needs and between different service providers. The approach also facilitates an exploration of longitudinal costs and with improved child level data has the potential to contribute to cost effectiveness studies in the future (see *Publications One, Five and Six* for further discussion about the availability and use of child level data).

In addition to the development of the conceptual framework for vulnerable children and families in England, the research described and discussed in *Publication Seven* explores the relevance and feasibility of the framework to child welfare services in the United States. The expansion of the conceptual framework to encompass broader service areas in England and the adaptation for the US child welfare system highlight how the research has progressed since the commencement of the first study in 2000 and demonstrates the international impact of the research. This progression is discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter. A particular emphasis is placed on how the methods and key findings outlined in the eight PhD publications have continued to inform the originality and advancement of the work.

### **How children's social care practitioners use their time**

In recent years, substantial concerns have been raised about the bureaucratisation of social work, resulting in a children's social care workforce that is spending increasing proportions of time carrying out administrative, desk-based tasks and consequently has less time available for direct working with children and their families (Garrett, 1999; Audit Commission, 2002; Garrett, 2003; Munro, 2004; Herbert, 2004; Statham and Cameron, 2006; Munro, 2011a). Amid the concerns about the bureaucratisation of

social work some reports suggest that social workers spend as much as 80% of their time carrying out administrative activities (Herbert, 2004; White et al., 2010).

A number of reasons have been cited for the reduction in direct working with children and families. These include increased media attention and a negative representation of children's social care following high profile child deaths, for example Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Department for Education, 2010a and Department for Education, 2010b) and the subsequent reviews of child protection and safeguarding arrangements in England (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2010, Munro 2011a, Munro 2011b). In addition, well intentioned attempts to improve social work practice through the introduction of targets and performance indicators have led to a focus on auditing cases, requiring front line workers to record substantial amounts of data both for National Statistical Returns (as required by legislation) and to ensure their own professional accountability (Burton and van den Broek, 2008; Munro, 2010; Munro, 2011a; Gillingham, 2012). This has been compounded by criticisms of the electronic recording systems through which such targets are evidenced. The design of electronic recording systems, which also serve as daily case records for frontline workers, have been widely criticised as not being fit for purpose and increasing the time required to update case records (Bell et al., 2007; Seneviratna, 2007; Holmes et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2007; Broadhurst et al., 2010).

There is a substantive and growing evidence base regarding the factors that have led to the bureaucratisation of social work. However, studies that consider and analyse how social workers spend their time and methods for capturing their activities and tasks have been limited (Statham and Cameron, 2006). Furthermore, the broad brush estimation outlined above - that 80% of social worker time is spent on administrative activities - does not account for the complexity of social work practice. The studies reported in this chapter have progressed knowledge and understanding about how social workers spend their time.

Analysis of the time use data has provided evidence about the complexity of social work practice and the impact of practice issues on time use, workloads and capacity. For example, *Publication Eight* includes an analysis of time use activity data gathered following the introduction of a new national electronic recording system (Integrated Children's System). This paper was published following a request by policy makers at

the Department for Education to inform national policy about how social workers spend their time, and particularly the proportion of time social workers spend on direct work with families compared to administrative activities. Furthermore, the studies have facilitated an exploration of some of the 'hidden costs' of service provision such as decision making panels for the placement of looked after children (see *Publication One*) and the different referral and assessment routes through which families with disabled children access short break services (see *Publication Five* and also Holmes, McDermid and Sempik, 2010).

### **Unit cost estimation for children's social care services**

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the unit costs that have been estimated for all of the studies reported in the eight publications have been calculated using a 'bottom up' method. Over the course of the research programme, unit costs have been calculated for all parts of the overarching conceptual framework and include variations in unit costs to account for the specific needs and circumstances of children and their families - for example, the service response and support offered is higher for adolescents with emotional and behavioural difficulties than for children for whom there are no identified additional needs (see *Publication One* for a full analysis of the categorisation of children by needs). Variations in unit costs have also been calculated and reported for different placement types and according to local area policies and procedures, for example the use of decision making panels within some local authority children's services departments.

During the early years of the research it became evident that to enable the analysis of the complex interplay between the needs and circumstances of children, the services and support they receive and the outcomes achieved, it was necessary to develop a purpose designed analytical tool – The Cost Calculator for Children's Services (CCfCS). Within the tool, the unit costs of children's social care processes are brought together with data concerning placement or service fees and allowances, management and capital expenditure along with routinely collected data on children's needs, characteristics and placements/services to estimate the costs of providing support and services for a given time period. A full description of the development of the tool is included in *Publication One*. Further information about the Cost Calculator and current developments are available at [www.ccfcs.org.uk](http://www.ccfcs.org.uk).

A figure outlining all of the different component inputs and associated types of analysis is included in *Publication Seven*.

The estimations included in the Cost Calculator tool take into account diversity in children's needs, placement type and local authority procedures. This approach allows children to be grouped by type of placement and also according to their needs and outcomes. Different care pathways can be observed and the way in which costs accrue over time can be examined. As reported in *Publications One through to Six* it is possible to compare these cost patterns for children with particular characteristics or who achieve specific outcomes. Comparison of costs in this way, by taking into account the complexity of patterns of services or support can then inform strategic planning and commissioning decisions. For example, the findings outlined in *Publication Four* have informed sustainability debates and decisions about the continuation of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care both at a national policy level and within local authority children's services departments.

The findings reported in *Publication Five* have also contributed to ongoing debates around thresholds for interventions, and in particular for referral to children's social care services. In 2010, Brookes identified an increase in referrals to children's social care, and the resultant pressures on the workloads and capacity of children's social workers, a finding that is supported by the research reported in *Publications Five and Eight*. Furthermore, these publications indicate that in recent years there has been concern about when to refer to children's social care – *Publication Five* includes an illustrative timeline for an individual child who had multiple referrals to children's social care before she was deemed to meet the threshold for social care intervention.

## **Next steps**

This chapter has brought together the key components of a 15 year programme of research encompassing a series of interlinked research studies. Moving forward the overall objective of the research programme is to develop the conceptual framework and associated CCfCS tool to incorporate unit costs for all services that vulnerable children and families receive within specific time frames. These will include the unit costs of services provided by a range of agencies so that eventually it will be possible to estimate the costs to the public purse of providing services to children and families with a range of needs and to explore how these might be better configured to improve

outcomes. Understanding the complex interplay between the services and support provided by a range of agencies, the costs of providing these and the outcomes that are achieved, will help to further inform policy debates and in particular the development of early intervention strategies.

A common theme running throughout the publications is the nature and availability of child level data, particularly outcome data. If the systematic recording of child level data were to improve in the future this would facilitate the progression of the research from a cost consequence approach to the use of cost effectiveness studies for children's social care. The overall research programme has also been designed to clarify how costs are shared between agencies and introduce transparency into the joint commissioning of services for children with complex needs (see *Publications Five and Six for further discussion*).

The ongoing research is moving towards the accomplishment of meeting this overall objective. A four year evaluation of the introduction of social pedagogy into UK foster care (Head, Heart, Hands) is exploring the potential costs avoided of the impact of improved relationships between looked after children and their foster carers, for example, retention of foster carers, resulting in lower marketing budgets for the recruitment of new foster carers (McDermid et al., 2016). Furthermore, a number of evaluations that are being carried out as part of the Department for Education's Innovation Programme<sup>5</sup> are making use of the conceptual framework and CCfCS tool. As an illustrative example, child level data about adolescents on the edge of care is brought together from a range of agencies, including children's social care, the police and youth offending teams to explore the cost effectiveness of a new programme of support being offered in North Yorkshire.

The international aspect of the research is also continuing with the development of a pilot Cost Calculator tool for looked after children in Scotland and a series of studies in the US which are utilising the conceptual framework and time use study methods for evaluations of child welfare services across Michigan, Tennessee and New York.

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<sup>5</sup> The Department for Education (DfE) launched the Innovation Programme in October 2013 to act as a catalyst for developing more effective ways of supporting vulnerable children. The programme seeks to support the development, testing and sharing of effective ways of supporting children who need help from children's social care services. Fifty three projects have been commissioned, exploring new and effective ways of working with vulnerable children, their carers, and in developing and re-thinking the social care workforce.

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## Appendix One: Publications

- 1) Ward, H., **Holmes, L.** and Soper, J. (2008) *Costs and Consequences of Placing Children in Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- 2) Ward, H. and **Holmes, L.** (2008) Calculating the costs of local authority care for children with contrasting needs. *Journal of Child and Family Social Work*, 13 (1), 80-90.
- 3) **Holmes, L.** and Ward, H. (2006) Costs and Outcomes for Looked after Children, in J. Barber, P. Dudding, and R. Flynn (eds) *Promoting Resilient Development in Children Receiving Care*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- 4) **Holmes, L.**, Ward, H. and McDermid, S. (2012) Calculating and comparing the costs of multidimensional treatment foster care in English local authorities, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 2141-2146.
- 5) **Holmes, L.** and McDermid, S. (2012) *Understanding costs and outcomes in child welfare services*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- 6) **Holmes, L.**, McDermid, S., Padley, M. and Soper, J. (2012) *Exploration of the Costs and Outcomes of the Common Assessment Framework*. London: Department for Education.
- 7) **Holmes, L.**, Landsverk, J., Ward, H., Rolls-Reutz, J., Saldana, L. and Chamberlain, P. (2014) Workload and Cost Calculator Methods for Estimating Casework Time in Child Welfare Services: A Cross-National Comparison, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 39, 169-176.
- 8) **Holmes, L.** and McDermid, S. (2013) How social workers spend their time in frontline children's social care in England, *Journal of Children's Services*, 8 (2) 123-134.

## Appendix Two: Supporting letters from co-authors

Centre for Child and Family Research,  
Room U224, Brockington Extension,  
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Tel: +44 (0)1509 228366



21 September 2015

Dear Sir/Madam,

I can confirm that Lisa Holmes has played a major role in the research programme on Costs and Outcomes of Children's Services since its inception. None of the publications from this project would have been possible without her input. She also played a major part in producing the following publications:

Ward, H., **Holmes, L.** and Soper, J. (2008) *Costs and Consequences of Placing Children in Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

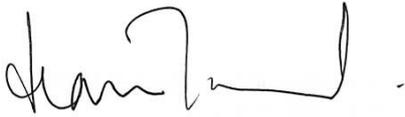
Ward, H. and **Holmes, L.** (2008) Calculating the costs of local authority care for children with contrasting needs. *Journal of Child and Family Social Work*, 13 (1), 80-90.

She also led the research and took the lead role in writing the following publications:

**Holmes, L.** and Ward, H. (2006) Costs and Outcomes for Looked after Children, in J. Barber, P. Dudding, and R. Flynn (eds) *Promoting Resilient Development in Children Receiving Care*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

**Holmes, L.,** Ward, H. and McDermid, S. (2012) Calculating and comparing the costs of multidimensional treatment foster care in English local authorities, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 2141-2146.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Harriet Ward', followed by a small horizontal line and a period.

Harriet Ward, PhD

Professor of Child and Family Research

Loughborough University

Centre for Child and Family Research,  
Room U224, Brockington Extension,  
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Tel: +44 (0) 1509 228366



25<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Dear Sir/Madam,

I can confirm that Lisa Holmes was the lead author on the following publications:

**Holmes, L.,** Ward, H. and McDermid, S. (2012) Calculating and comparing the costs of multidimensional treatment foster care in English local authorities, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 2141-2146.

**Holmes, L.** and McDermid, S. (2012) *Understanding costs and outcomes in child welfare services*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

**Holmes, L.,** McDermid, S., Padley, M. and Soper, J. (2012) *Exploration of the Costs and Outcomes of the Common Assessment Framework*. London: Department for Education.

**Holmes, L.,** and McDermid, S. (2013) How social workers spend their time in frontline children's social care in England, *Journal of Children's Services*, 8 (2) 123-134.

As lead author Lisa had overall responsibility for preparing the final draft for submission and overseeing the reviewing process through to final publication.

Since 2001 Lisa has played a pivotal role in the development of the bottom up costing methodology, which includes the collection and analysis of time use for frontline social care staff. This methodology underpins the above publications.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Samantha'.

Samantha McDermid  
Senior Research Associate  
Centre for Child and Family Research  
Loughborough University  
LE11 3TU

251 Station Road  
Sutton Coldfield  
B73 5LH

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2015

Dear Sir/Madam,

Lisa Holmes' Publications

I write to confirm that Lisa Holmes had a very substantial role in researching and writing the book:

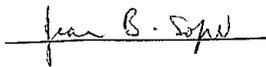
Ward, H., **Holmes, L.** and Soper, J. (2008) *Costs and Consequences of Placing Children in Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

She was the lead author on the following publication:

**Holmes, L.**, McDermid, S., Padley, M. and Soper, J. (2012) *Exploration of the Costs and Outcomes of the Common Assessment Framework*. London: Department for Education

As such Lisa had overall responsibility for planning and organising the research, preparing the final draft for submission and overseeing the reviewing process through to final publication.

Yours sincerely,



Jean B. Soper