



Centre for Research on the
Child and Family

University of East Anglia



Championing Children and Young People in England

Office of the Children's Commissioner:

'Don't make assumptions'

Children's and young people's views of the
child protection system and messages for change

March 2011



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Foreword by the Children's Commissioner

"I don't like people looking down on me and I don't like people looking up at me like I'm an adult. I like people talking to me for my age."

"Kids aren't as naïve as you think. I think the reason that people don't listen to kids is that they're kids."

"You've got to trust [the social worker] and she's got to trust you. Otherwise there's no point."

Children who become involved with the child protection system are among the most vulnerable in our society, and great care and sensitivity is needed in enabling their concerns to be expressed. We commissioned this research from the University of East Anglia so that a better understanding could be gained of the child's experience of the child protection process. It will provide further evidence for the major review of child protection currently being led by Professor Eileen Munro. Our overall and long term intention is to contribute to improvements in access to and quality of help and support for children and young people who have experienced abuse or neglect.

We accept and support all the messages from this research and propose them as recommendations for action in respect of policy, service provision and practice.

Listening to the views of children and striving to understand their experience are both fundamental to ensuring that their rights to protection, support and participation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are fully realised. We would encourage professionals to grasp this and act on it so that children feel heard and are able to engage in the process of protection. Such understanding is also vital to the assessment which is made of their needs.

When children become subject to child protection procedures, they are dealing both with the consequences of the abuse or neglect which has led to this intervention and with the impact of the intervention itself. We wanted to learn more about the ways in which children cope, what helped and what was difficult for them, how much they understood and felt involved in the process, and we wanted to enable them to contribute to proposals for improvements in the system of protection. The researchers were able to speak with children and young people for whom the protection process is ongoing, and so learn about their experience. We believe that the study we are now publishing conveys the perspectives of children and young people very clearly and that the suggestions they have made have great import for proposed improvements.

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The research was developed in discussion with the young people's policy group at Voice and their contribution is gratefully acknowledged. Young people have been involved throughout this project: in the research advisory group, as consultants piloting the research materials and as young researchers. Through these means we have tried to stay close to the perspectives of children and young people with relevant experience throughout the process of this research.

We are most grateful to the researchers at the University of East Anglia for their faithful relaying of the words of the children and young people who spoke with them and for their helpful analysis of the messages from this study. Their approach to this study has been innovative in many respects and shows great sensitivity to the needs of the children and young people. We also echo their thanks to the members of the research advisory group, the young researchers, the staff in the local authorities and the families of the children and young people who were involved.

We must join them in thanking above all the children and young people who took part and who were prepared to share their experiences. We now have a duty to ensure that we do our part by making sure that policy makers, service providers and professional helpers listen to their messages and act upon them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ME Atkinson', with a long, sweeping flourish at the end.

Dr Maggie Atkinson
Children's Commissioner for England

March 2011

About the Office of the Children's Commissioner



The Office of the Children's Commissioner is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underpins and frames all of our work.

The Children's Commissioner has a duty to promote the views and interests of all children in England, in particular those whose voices are least likely to be heard, to the people who make decisions about their lives. She also has a duty to speak on behalf of all children in the UK on non-devolved issues which include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales. One of the Children's Commissioner's key functions is encouraging organisations that provide services for children always to operate from the child's perspective.

Under the Children Act 2004 the Children's Commissioner is required both to publish what she finds from talking and listening to children and young people, and to draw national policymakers' and agencies' attention to the particular circumstances of a child or small group of children which should inform both policy and practice.

As the Office of the Children's Commissioner, it is our statutory duty to highlight where we believe vulnerable children are not being treated appropriately and in line with duties established under international and domestic legislation.

Executive summary

The aim of this research, commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner and carried out by a team from the University of East Anglia, was to seek children and young people's views of the child protection system and to consider how those views might contribute to improving responses to abuse and neglect. It aimed to gather the views of children and young people living with their parents, who all had a child protection plan in place. The research is timely as it comes during a period when the child protection system in England is being reviewed. We hope that the findings will be of interest to children and families involved in child protection, as well as to professionals working with children and to policy makers.

Background

National and international legislation and guidance and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) spell out the importance of involving children in decision-making. The framework for involving children in the child protection process is laid out in national guidance in Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government 2010), which suggests that local protocols should be put in place to involve children in the child protection process. The guidance is underpinned by the exhortation to keep the child in focus. The Children Act 2004 created the post of the Children's Commissioner, part of whose remit is to ensure that services consider children's views.

Methods

The study was qualitative and exploratory. Interviews and a day workshop allowed the children to expand on areas of personal interest which they thought were important. We were interested in the sense that the children and young people made of the systems designed to protect them, and the extent to which they considered them helpful. The study took place between September 2010 and February 2011 and was conducted in collaboration with one local authority and one London borough.

- A total of 26 children were interviewed, from 18 families (13 girls and 13 boys). Their ages ranged from six to 17 years, with a fairly even mix of older and younger children. The mean age of the girls was slightly older than the boys.
- Just over three quarters of the children were white British. Those from minority ethnic groups included Asian/Asian British, black British Caribbean and black British African children, as well as two children who were of mixed heritage.
- Three of the 26 children had a learning disability or learning needs (mild or moderate learning difficulties or a statement of special educational needs).
- The children were all living at home with at least one parent. All had a child protection plan at the time of interview.

Findings

What is the child's perception of risk?

We did not use the language of 'risk', but asked children about what worries they had or what might make them feel a certain way, such as angry, sad or shocked. The children said many things about the issues that concerned them. Children involved in the child protection process are likely to have talked to a range of professionals and their talk may have had profound consequences for their families, sometimes unexpected by the child. They may have good cause not to share their worries and concerns. Despite these complexities the children shared a great deal about their lives, the challenges in their families and their worries.

- Children talked about aspects of themselves or their own behaviour that worried them. The degree to which they took responsibility for what was happening in their families and the way they often attributed problems to their own behaviours was striking.
- Many of the children worried about their siblings – some felt burdened by responsibility for them. Others worried about their welfare, about being hurt physically by them and about hurting them in turn. Many children worried about being separated from siblings in the care system, whether this was something they had experienced or something they feared might happen.
- Bullying was mentioned as a concern by half of the children.
- Many of the children had witnessed violence towards their mothers or experienced violence themselves.
- Some young people felt that there was not much to do in the local area and that they were harassed by police.

Implications for practice

Children and young people were not only worried about the things that happen in their families, but also in the community and at school. What concerned them might not coincide with the concerns that brought the family to professionals' attention. Professionals need to be attuned to the child's world, to pay attention not only to what the child says, but in some cases to what they are not saying and in all cases to how they behave. Professionals need to be aware that children may take responsibility for problems within their families, thinking that they are at fault and that it is their responsibility to sort things out.

Starting with the child's views of their worries and concerns will help social workers and other professionals to form an effective alliance with the child. The social worker may then be able to help the child to see that the problems in the family are not their fault and that they are not responsible for putting them right. The child's view of the family situation may provide the professional with a different insight into the dynamics within the family. Whilst professionals should not lose their focus on parental maltreatment they should listen carefully to the child and include a broader focus on what he or she finds harmful in their work.

What helps the child to feel safe?

Children talked about how they managed some of the things that worried them. Whilst few used the language of 'feeling safe' many described what they did to manage their worries and had a range of strategies, including talking to a trusted professional.

- All but two of the children had someone they could confide in or from whom they sought help. The most common source of support was friends or family.
- Children confided in a range of professionals and nearly all the children could identify a professional who had helped them.
- Children talked of their own behaviours that could be seen as a response to challenging circumstances, and in a few cases specifically said that they were drinking or self-harming as a way of managing other anxieties.

Implications for practice

Children and young people had strategies for managing their worries. They sought help from friends or family. Professionals should be aware that children get support not only from their immediate family but from extended family and friends of the family. It is important to find out who in the child's network might be a source of support by letting the child take the lead in describing who is most important to them.

The children and young people talked not just about their worries but about what options they had for sorting them out. The strategies some children adopted, such as fighting back against bullies, shutting down emotionally, missing school to avoid trouble or trying to intervene in domestic violence might be harmful for the child. It is important for professionals to be aware of the child's view of what might help, to support the child to strengthen existing positive strategies and to help the child develop alternatives where their existing strategies are harmful.

The children and young people talked about a range of professionals who they could talk to about their worries. The older young people were more likely than younger children to name a range of professionals involved with their families. Younger children were more

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reliant upon their social workers. Children and young people appreciated workers who would listen carefully before coming to a judgement or offering advice. Young people did not want to hand over their worries to a professional to sort out, rather they wanted to share them and work on a way forward with a trusted adult. This allows the young person to maintain a sense of control. For social workers this is a difficult balance to achieve, since at times social workers need to take action which children and young people do not agree with in order to protect them.

What is the child's view of professional concerns about the family?

Young people varied in their awareness of the professional concerns. Where children did not give an account of this, the interviewer did not push them to do so. Some children and young people disagreed with what they understood to be the professional view of their situation.

- A minority of the children and young people thought that professional concerns were mistaken or unfounded, and these tended to be younger children.
- Some of the young people agreed that there had been a reason for professionals to be involved with their families but thought that the concerns were now in the past.
- There was a tendency for the children and young people to disagree with professionals' views of their parents. They were more likely to acknowledge problems with their own behaviours.
- Two young people thought that there was cause for concern in their families which professionals overlooked.

Implications for practice

Children and young people gave their opinions about what they took to be the professional concerns. Children as young as seven described why they thought social workers were visiting their families, and what they thought about it. It was clear from the children and young people's accounts that there was often disagreement with what they took to be the professionals' concerns.

There are many reasons why children might disagree with professionals' views. They might not have a clear understanding of the concerns due to their age and cognitive capacities, or because they have not been given an age appropriate explanation. Children and young people who have suffered abuse and neglect are likely to have negative feelings about themselves and to shoulder a burden of responsibility for the problems in their families. At the same time they can feel a complex mixture of feelings, including loyalty to their parents. If there is hostility between the parent and the social

worker, the child may align themselves with the parent. This is very difficult territory for the social worker, who must attempt to maintain a trusting relationship with both the parents and the child, whilst being honest about their concerns.

Sometimes a disparity between the child's view and the social worker's view of the situation will be inevitable. It is important that where children and social workers have different views of the situation, the child feels that their voice has been heard and the social worker remains open to hearing the child's view of the situation.

What is the child's understanding of the child protection system?

Children were asked what they knew about formal child protection procedures and those with a greater awareness of the system were asked in more detail about their understanding, for example if they saw social work reports, or had experiences of court. The children's understanding of child protection was rated into three categories: minimal, partial and clear understanding. The children's understanding was age-related, with most of those having a clear understanding being in the older age group. The majority of the children were categorised as having a partial understanding.

- Children with a partial understanding of child protection sometimes had a detailed account of part of the process, and had some overview of the system but could not give a coherent full account. They often relied on parents and siblings for information.
- Some of the children whose families were involved in court proceedings had a better understanding of the court process than they did of other aspects of child protection.
- Children with a clear understanding were older and all of them had attended a child protection meeting.

Implications for practice

The vast majority of the children and young people had some understanding of the child protection system, even those under the age of 10. How much information it is appropriate for a young child to have about the formal child protection system is a difficult judgement for professionals and parents to make. Some parents and practitioners may not explain aspects of the system to the child, with the intention of protecting them from a process that they feel the child is too young to understand. However, the children did have information about the process and they tried to piece it together to make sense of it.

It is important that when social workers decide what information is appropriate to share with the child that they take into account, not only the child's age and understanding,

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but also the dynamics within the family. In some cases the parents or older siblings provided information to the child anyway. This might make a child feel alienated from the social worker if they feel that they have not been fully informed.

The fact that children knew more about the court process than other aspects of the child protection system suggests differences in practice between childcare social workers and children's guardians. It is important that the child does get an age appropriate explanation from the social worker. If a child sits outside meetings and sees their parents emerge angry and upset, but does not really know what is happening or who is there, they may become more reluctant to confide in the social worker about their worries and concerns.

How much does the child participate in the child protection process?

- Twelve out of nineteen children who answered said that the social worker saw them on their own. Older children were more likely than younger children to be seen alone.
- Some of the children had trusting relationships with their social workers and said that it was important to be honest or nothing would change.
- Some of the children reported having minimal relationships with social workers, seeing them rarely or only at meetings.
- Some of the children found it difficult to talk to their social workers because they felt pressured by the social worker asking questions, or said that the social worker twisted what they said.
- Few children saw reports or assessments and it was rare for the young person to have a chance to discuss reports with the social worker.
- Ten of the children attended meetings. Some of those who did not go wanted to attend. Only a small minority of children were aware of different ways in which their views could be given to the meeting. Most of the children who attended meetings found them difficult. Although eight young people said they spoke at a meeting, only two felt even partly listened to and some reported being asked awkward questions which were difficult to answer in front of their parents.
- Only five children of the 19 who answered had seen their child protection plans.

Implications for practice

The importance of the relationship with the social worker was apparent in the children's and young people's accounts. Young people who had a trusting relationship with the social worker felt that they were part of making positive changes happen in their

families. By contrast, children and young people did not appreciate social workers whom they only saw at meetings and who they felt did not really know them.

Children did not want to be bombarded with questions, but to be seen as a whole person. Social workers do have to ask children difficult questions in child protection investigations, and at times these have to be asked when the social worker and the child are relative strangers. It is highly skilled and sensitive work to avoid the child feeling that the sole interest of the social worker is to get information from them. Children who feel pressurised, or that their words are twisted, may not continue to talk to social workers about what worries them.

There is a danger that attendance at child protection meetings might be harmful to young people if it is not managed sensitively. For attendance to be experienced positively, young people need to be prepared beforehand and supported during the meeting, and to be given feedback afterwards. Professionals need to think carefully about what it is like for the young person to be at the meeting, and the likely emotional impact. Children and young people need information about the meetings and about the range of ways in which their views could be represented in order to make an informed choice about whether or not they wish to attend.

What is the child's experience of child protection intervention?

The children and young people were asked whether things had changed in their families since social workers had been involved and what had been helpful and unhelpful. Many children spoke about the effects of being involved with child protection on themselves and their families.

- A few children recalled being part of a child protection investigation. The sensitivity of the professionals involved made a difference to how difficult the experience was for the young people.
- Many children could identify something helpful that their social worker had done for them. They talked of practical help, improvements in their family relationships, liaison with schools and talking through their problems.
- A few young people talked about advantages of having a child protection plan, linking it with extra help at school or getting priority for services.
- Many children also spoke of negative aspects of having social work involvement. These included intrusion, increased stress within the family, and having to deal with stigma.
- Many children presented a mixed picture and were able to think of something helpful and something unhelpful about the services they received.

Implications for practice

Children and young people were able to identify positive things about having a social worker, and described concrete changes in their families which had made things better. Alongside this, many children also described aspects of being involved with the child protection process which they found problematic. There is a tension between young people's views that child protection intervention helps them to live a 'normal' life by compensating for the difficulties in their family, and the view that the child protection process is intrusive and prevents young people from living a 'normal' life because the child and family is monitored and controlled, the system creates additional stresses within the family and the child feels stigmatised.

It is important that children and young people feel that child protection can benefit their families. The social worker should discuss the plan with the child to help them to see the efforts being made to help the family and encourage them to give their reaction and input to the plan. This may help to show them that they are not to blame and are not responsible for sorting out the problems in the family. The social worker should ask children and young people what they find helpful and unhelpful about the services the family receives.

Social workers can try to minimise, although they may not be able to eliminate, the aspects of the child protection process that the child experiences negatively. If the child has a trusting relationship with the social worker, this will encourage them to tell the social worker when tensions are increasing within the family, or why they are feeling monitored and controlled. The social worker can then explain the purpose of particular provisions and reconsider them if appropriate. Social workers should also be sensitive about the stigma the child may feel and be careful about sharing information appropriately and how they manage visits to the child, whether at school, home or in the community.

Messages from this research

Messages for policy makers:

- To form relationships with children social workers need to be knowledgeable about child development and the impact of abuse and maltreatment. They need to have good skills in communicating with children, based in this knowledge. This should be an important focus of social work training and continuing professional development.
- Guidance on good practice needs to be easily accessible and its importance to the quality of practice and professional development promoted.
- Local authorities should have a forum where children who are receiving services but are not in care could contribute their views of the child protection process and

have an impact on service development. This could operate on a similar model to children in care councils.

Messages for managers and service providers:

- Local authorities should recognise the importance of the child's relationship with the social worker and organise the work so that social workers can get to know children, and are not viewed as remote but powerful figures.
- Where there are particularly difficult dynamics between professionals and parents, managers should consider providing a separate worker for the child.
- Guidance on good practice should be promoted so that workers think about how best to involve each individual child.

Messages for practitioners:

- Try to make sense of the child's view of the situation and include a focus in the work on what he or she finds harmful. Be aware of the strategies that the child has developed to deal with their worries and the problems in the family.
- Consider who might be a trusted adult for the child and how this adult might continue to be involved in supporting them.
- Maintain an openness to the child's view of the situation. Where there is a difference between the child's and the social worker's views, make sure that the child's views are represented and the social worker's position is explained to the child.
- Understand the importance of the child's relationship with their social worker.
- Make sure that the child is seen on his or her own.
- Be aware that the child has a view about the child protection process as well as about the problems within the family. Think about the sense that the child makes of the social work intervention and check what they find helpful and unhelpful.
- Make sure that the child is given information about the child protection process that is appropriate to his or her needs. In assessing this, and their involvement, take account of the dynamics within the family as well as his or her age and understanding.
- Ensure that the child has an appropriately worded copy of the child protection plan and that this is discussed with the child and incorporates their input. Consider how best to explain the plan to a young child.
- Be mindful of the existing guidance on involving children and young people in the child protection process and think about how best to involve each individual child. Include the child in these discussions.

Messages from children and young people for social workers and other professionals

In the interviews and in the workshop the children and young people offered thoughts about what they would change about child protection and what would help them to feel safer. These ideas are reported in their own eloquent words:

- “Check back with the family before putting things in the report, get the family view.”
- “Don’t be overly negative. Focus on the good bits as well as the not so good.”
- “Do the best you can, don’t just go into a family and back out and not actually try and help them.”
- “Listen to what children have got to say and work with them.”
- “Only help children when they want it and really need it.”
- “Make sure children have someone outside the family to talk to.”
- “I don’t like people looking down on me and I don’t like people looking up at me like I’m an adult. I like people talking to me for my age.”
- “Take what the young people say seriously.”
- “I’d like to be less kept in the dark, explain things a bit more.”
- “Be nice and don’t involve your personal life. Have a general chat about stuff before going into heavy questions.”
- “Give children your mobile number so they can text. They might not always want to have someone talk back to them straight away.”
- “Let me have a diary that only the social worker and I can see. Every time the social worker visits she could look through my diary and see what we did.”
- “Kids aren’t as naïve as you think. I think the reason that people don’t listen to kids is that they’re kids.”
- “Don’t make assumptions about my thoughts and feelings.”
- “Be lenient with children, let them do things, but be there for them and let them know you’re there.”
- “Make appointments that fit the young person’s schedule as well as the professional’s.”
- “Don’t keep bringing up things from the past that we want to forget about.”
- “Don’t ask for police checks on friends when you want to stay overnight – it’s embarrassing.”
- “Don’t get too involved – let the family try to solve itself.”

Messages from children and young people about the system and other support needs

- “Social workers should not change so often.”
- “Police, police, police – to help in a crisis.”
- “Look out for children who are slipping through the system. Social workers should really look into the cases that matter so that children don’t get hurt.”
- “I think that five times a year police should come and speak to school about problems like when people are bullying other people.”
- “Get some help for my mum because she needs to talk about things as well.”
- “Make the [court] system move faster.”
- “Get the family out on trips.”
- “There should be more information about issues that affect parents like alcohol abuse.”
- “Provide vouchers for families so that people don’t spend the money on drink or cigarettes.”
- “More advocates – someone to speak with you and for you.”
- “More support for young people who run away from home – somewhere safe to stay, with a games room, a chill out room, a private room and a medical room.”

1. Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner as part of its commitment to gaining the views and experiences of children and young people, particularly those whose voices are least well heard. Among these are children and young people who have experience of the child protection system.

The research took place in a very tight time frame between September 2010 and February 2011. The particular focus of this project was on developing a children's and young people's perspective on the experience of abuse and on seeking and using help and support. The study considers how the children's views might contribute to improving responses to abuse and neglect. The research is timely as it comes during a period when the child protection system in England is being reviewed. We hope that the findings will be of interest to children and families involved in child protection as well as to professionals working with children and to policy makers.

2. Context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines a series of rights affecting children. Key rights include those concerning the child's right to protection, and the right to participation. Article 3 emphasises that the best interests of the child should be primary and that governments should act to ensure the child is adequately protected and cared for. Article 12 enshrines the child's right to express his or her views in all matters affecting the child, his or her wishes being given due weight in accordance with age and maturity.

The child protection system in England is governed by the Children Act 1989. Section 47 of the Act imposes a duty on local authorities to investigate where there is reasonable cause to suggest a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. It is necessary for courts to take account of children's wishes and feelings, in the light of their age and understanding, when making decisions concerning their welfare. The framework for involving children in the child protection process is laid out in national guidance in Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government 2010), which suggests that local protocols should be put in place to involve children in the child protection process. The guidance is underpinned by the exhortation to keep the child in focus, and this is detailed as follows:

- Developing a direct relationship with the child
- Obtaining information from the child about his or her situation or needs
- Eliciting the child's wishes and feelings – about their situation now as well as plans and hopes for the future
- Providing children with honest and accurate information about the current situation, as seen by professionals, and future possible actions and interventions
- Involving the child in key decision-making
- Providing appropriate information to the child about his or her right to protection and assistance
- Inviting children to make recommendations about the services and assistance that they need and/or that are available to them
- Ensuring children have access to independent advice and support to be able to express their views and influence decision-making
- The importance of eliciting and responding to the views and experiences of children is a defining feature of staff recruitment, professional supervision, performance management and the organisation's broader aims and development. (HM Government 2010, para 1.18)

There is detailed guidance about the process for involving children in the child protection process at various stages, stressing the importance of seeing children on their own where appropriate to ascertain their wishes and feelings from the time of the first assessment (HM Government 2010). Children are viewed as a key source of information in a child protection investigation, however, it is recognised that “children may need time and more than one opportunity in order to develop sufficient trust to communicate any concerns they may have” (HM Government 2010: para 5.66). Enquiries should minimise distress to the child. The local authority should take into account the child’s wishes and feelings when deciding on the provision of services.

If a child protection conference is held, the local authority should provide information to the child and invite the child to attend, subject to consideration of his or her age and understanding. The child should be invited to bring a friend or advocate to support him or her in the meeting. For those children who do not attend, a local authority children’s social care professional should represent their views to the meeting. Care must be taken in involving family members in the meetings, recognising that they may not wish to speak in front of each other. The child should be prepared before the meeting by seeing and discussing the social work report and during the meeting he or she should be assisted to put their points across. The minutes of the meeting should be sent to all who attended (except parts of the conference from which they were excluded). Where a child protection plan is deemed necessary it should be explained to and agreed with the child. The child should receive a copy of the plan written at a level appropriate to his or her age and understanding. (HM Government 2010).

There are tensions in the legislation and guidance governing child protection. Fox Harding identified a number of potentially conflicting perspectives in child care law including emphasis on state paternalism, parental rights and children’s rights (Fox Harding 1991). State paternalism emphasizes the child’s right to protection and care. The parental rights approach emphasises the importance of keeping the family intact wherever possible. A children’s rights perspective stresses the child’s autonomy and right to be included in decision-making processes. These perspectives can be seen in tension in the child protection system, with state paternalism necessitating intervention in the family where the child is thought to be at risk, and with parental and children’s rights potentially in conflict. Government guidance suggests that children should be involved in the child protection system. However, children and young people’s involvement will be dependent upon professional and parental gatekeepers whose decisions will be in part based on how they resolve the above tensions.

It can be very difficult for young people to talk to professionals about their worries and concerns. Research on children experiencing maltreatment has found that they are most likely to talk about their worries to friends, parents and siblings (Featherstone 2004). As they grew older they were more likely to turn to peers. Young people talked of barriers to telling, including: absence of a confidant, fear of consequences, a sense of

futility, fear of getting someone into trouble and not having any control over the consequences of telling, and the stigma of being involved with formal agencies (Featherstone 2004:3).

Other research has found that boys are much less likely than girls to confide in anyone about their problems (Butler and Williamson 1994, ChildLine 2003). Children can be concerned about talking to adults for fear of the consequences (Butler and Williamson 1994, Brandon et al 1998). Tucker (2010) found that young people experienced difficulties when they reported abuse to those who worked with them. Among other reasons, young people felt that they were not believed because they or their families had already been labelled as troublesome. Another theme was that young people felt practitioners did not want to take the risk of believing them.

Children and young people who are involved with children's services emphasise the importance of the relationships they have with social workers. Research by the Office of the Children's Commissioner interviewed fifteen children and young people with experience of safeguarding and the care system. The children and young people did not only want to feel protected by children's services, they also needed to feel cared about (11 MILLION 2009). A survey of children's views about social workers found that children appreciated social workers who were available and responsive and would act on the child's concerns (Morgan 2006). Brandon and colleagues interviewed twenty-nine children in the child protection system to gain their views about helping professionals and other sources of support (Brandon et al 1999). They found that social workers and teachers were seen by children to be the most helpful professionals. The children did not like to be reminded of abuse and wanted to do ordinary things and discuss other issues with their social workers.

The extent to which children and young people are involved in social work processes has been the focus of some research, although little work has focussed on their experience of the child protection process. Sinclair's study of children's participation found that children interpreted 'being safe' and 'protection' very differently, words used interchangeably in government documentation. She noted that establishing understanding between children and professionals needs careful negotiating and checking back by professionals (Sinclair 2004). Reviews of case files and assessments found that children's views were partially represented (Parton et al 1997). A review of advocacy services across Wales (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2003) found that many advocacy services were targeted on looked after children rather than those involved in child protection.

Shemmings (1996) and Thoburn et al (1995) reported positive findings about children and young people feeling involved in their child protection procedures. Schofield and Thoburn (1996) argued for an integrated approach where the child's rights are considered alongside, and not as competing with, the child's welfare. Involving children in child protection can be empowering for a group of young people who in many aspects

Office of the Children's Commissioner: 'Don't make assumptions': Children's and young people's views of the child protection system and messages for change

of their lives have been particularly powerless (Schofield and Thoburn 1996). The importance of a relationship with a trusted adult has been argued to be crucial to maximising young people's participation (Schofield and Thoburn 1996, Bell 2002). Schofield suggests that an understanding of child development and of the impact of maltreatment and loss should be viewed as an essential part of working in a participatory way to involve the child in decision-making (Schofield 2005).

Research by Cossar and Long (2008) looked at young people's experiences of the child protection system. They found that young people's knowledge of the system was largely dependent on whether they had attended the child protection conference. Those who did not attend had little understanding of the child protection system. Young people who did attend found the meeting difficult but felt that they had to attend in order to get information. Children and young people made strategic decisions about the information that they shared with professionals. Whilst some young people felt that the child protection plan had helped them and their family, many were unsure of what was in the plan to protect them. A key finding was that young people had to be involved throughout the child protection process in order to be in a position to make informed choices; without this, their attendance at the conference meant little, a conclusion also drawn in research by Barford and Wattam (1991). A recent study of the views of eleven children involved in the child protection system in Scotland found that children did not know what to expect before the investigation began, and that they appreciated being informed and involved from an early stage. Most of the children reported that the support provided to them had a positive impact on their lives (Woolfson et al 2009).

Children's and young people's rights to protection, and to have a say in decisions affecting them, are reflected in current legislation and guidance. Children who have been maltreated are extremely vulnerable. Talking about their worries can be difficult and studies suggest that children are concerned about the consequences of telling. For those children who are involved in the child protection system there is evidence to suggest that the quality of their relationships with professionals is important. Studies of participation in the child protection process suggest that participation can be empowering. However, it is important that practitioners think carefully about how to involve children at every stage of the process to allow them to make informed choices about their involvement. Social workers must have a commitment to involving children and young people, and a sound knowledge of child development and the effects of maltreatment. Only then can they work with the individual child to ensure that the child's involvement is a positive experience.

3. Methods

Research questions

The aim of the research was to seek children and young people's views of the child protection system and to consider how those views might contribute to improving responses to abuse and neglect. It aimed to gather the views of children and young people living at home, who all had a child protection plan in place. The specific research questions we sought to address were as follows:

- What is the child's perception of risk?
- What helps the child feel safe?
- What is the child's view of the professional concerns about the family?
- What is the child's understanding of the child protection system?
- How much does the child participate in the child protection process?
- What is the child's experience of intervention?
- From the child's perspective how might child protection be improved?

Our methodological approach

The study was qualitative and exploratory. It aimed to contribute to the development of understanding of children's and young people's views and experiences of the child protection system. A qualitative approach was chosen as research on children's perspectives on child protection is scant. This approach also allowed the children to expand on areas of personal interest to them which they thought important. We sought the views of children and young people, and not of their parents or professionals involved with them. We did not have access to case files or to any other professional account of involvement. Our interest was in the sense that the children and young people made of the systems designed to protect them and on the extent to which they considered them helpful.

The study was conducted in collaboration with one local authority and one London borough. Methods of data collection included individual activity-based interviews carried out by adult researchers and one workshop run by a combination of adult and young researchers. The whole project was overseen by an advisory group led by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, which included young people who provided valuable insights at the design, data collection and analysis stages of the research. In addition, the team consulted with a group of young people in one of the participating authorities about the design of the recruitment materials. Workshop materials and methods were

developed in collaboration with the young researchers who delivered the workshop alongside adult researchers.

Prior to the beginning of the study, ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of East Anglia's School of Social Work and Psychology Ethics Committee. The individual authorities then gave their approval. This process involved an initial discussion and the completion of formal research governance procedures with one local authority, and detailed discussion with the other including a visit to the agency and submission of a written proposal.

Recruiting children and young people into the study

We sought to recruit children and young people between the ages of five and eighteen who had been the subject of a child protection plan in the preceding 12 months and who were not currently in public care. The two participating agencies drew up a list of children and young people fitting these criteria and the flyer and covering letter for the child was sent in a letter addressed to the parent. Follow-up phone calls were made by local authority workers who passed on the names of children and families who were willing to take part in the research to the research team. The follow-up phone call was crucial as the vast majority of participants were recruited at this stage. Further information about recruiting children and young people to the study can be found in appendix one.

The children and young people who took part in the research

- Twenty-six children took part in the research, from 18 families. Thirteen of the children were girls (50%) and 13 were boys (50%).
- The age range was from six to 17 (mean 11.5). Twelve of the children were aged 11 or under and 14 children were aged 12 or over. The mean age of the girls (12 years four months) was greater than that of the boys (10 and a half).
- Just over three-quarters of the children were white British (77%, 20 children). Twenty-three per cent (six children) were from minority ethnic groups. Among them two were of Asian/Asian British heritage, one was black British Caribbean, one black British African and two were of mixed heritage.
- Of the 26 children one child had moderate learning difficulties, and one had mild learning difficulties. One other child had a statement of special educational needs for emotional and behavioural difficulties and speech and language difficulties.
- All the children had a child protection plan at the time of interview, although some of the children may also have had child protection plans in the past. All were living with at least one parent.

- The categories of the children’s plans were as follows: emotional abuse 15, neglect 7, physical abuse 3, sexual abuse 1.
- The duration of the most recent plan was known. The mean duration of the current child protection plan was 13 months (range 1–23 months).

Data Collection

Interviews

Activity-based interviews were carried out by adult researchers with all 26 children. The interviewer took a ‘treasure chest’ box to the interview which included a number of materials. Activities included:

- The child created a sticker-based map of the people that were important to them.
- An ‘emotions’ glove puppet was used to find out whether the child could identify emotions and to get their ideas about why each puppet might be feeling a particular way.
- A set of ‘worry people’ (handmade dolls from Guatemala) was used to find out what worries the child might have and how they managed their worries.
- There was a set of ‘helping people’ cards, which included labelled picture cards of professionals that might visit children or whom children might go to visit. These included a social worker, teacher, doctor, nurse, police, therapist, respite carer, children’s guardian and family support worker. Extra blank cards were provided for other professionals a child might see. Each child chose the cards relevant to them and then picked the professionals in the order they wanted to talk about them. This allowed the children to direct the interview to some extent and also provided a visual prompt as to how long was left.
- The children and young people were given the chance to write a ‘message in a bottle’ about what they would like to change.

Using the activities, the interview covered a range of areas: what worries the children had; who were in their support networks and to whom they turned for help; how aware the children were of professional concerns about the family and what they thought about them; what they knew about child protection and how much they were involved in the child protection process; what they thought of the professional help their families were receiving and what they thought could be done differently or better.

Initially the intention was to use more activities with the younger children and a semi-structured interview schedule with young people older than twelve. However, after piloting the materials with the advisory group and a group of young people involved with child protection, the strong recommendation was to make a range of activities available to all

young people. The researchers therefore took the whole box to each interview and allowed the children to guide them. Generally the younger children did all the activities with the exception of the message in a bottle, whilst young people over twelve used the worry people, the helping people cards, and the message in a bottle.

Interviews were carried out in the home in all but one case, in which the interview took place in a local community centre. All the children and parents filled out a consent form before the interview started. Most of the children were interviewed on their own, two were accompanied by a parent. Several of the interviews were interrupted by other children, parents, and in one case the electricity being switched off. Consent from children was viewed as an ongoing issue and interviewers were sensitive to body language and other suggestions that a child might be bored, distressed or had had enough. In addition the children were provided with a 'stop/go' card which they could use to show that they did not want to answer a particular question or wanted to stop completely. Several made use of this card either to stop particular questions or activities or to hold and fiddle with as they talked. Children were given a set of worry people and a certificate to thank them for taking part.

Workshop

A day workshop was held at an outdoor centre. Six of the young people who were interviewed in one of the local authorities attended this workshop, ranging in age from nine to fifteen. Three were boys and three were girls.

The day was run by a combination of two adult researchers, two participation workers from the local authority and two young researchers. The aim of the day was for young people to meet as a group to think about how to make child protection better for young people. A planning session was held between adult and young researchers to organise activities for the day. The young researchers had personal experience of the care system and were experienced in working with young people and training groups of adults. They were forthright in giving their views about what would work or not in the workshop and made suggestions about materials and the plan for the day.

Morgan et al (2002) comment that a key task for facilitators of focus groups is to balance directing the group with encouraging free discussion. This is further complicated by the fact that young people may view adults as authority figures. In the present research the power imbalance was altered by having a combination of peer and adult facilitators for the workshop. Some activities were run by young researchers and others by adult researchers. It was important to have breaks and build in games interspersed with more analytical and emotive activities (Morgan et al 2002). Adults participated alongside young people in the games and at the beginning of the day all the activities were run by the young researchers. The group first came up with ground rules for the day including:

- there's no such thing as a silly question

- have fun
- don't be scared to say what you want to say
- have your own opinion
- listen to each other
- keep things private
- friendship
- be respectful.

This established the tone for the day. The presence of practitioners was also very important as they were extremely experienced and skilled in facilitating groups of young people, had worked with the young researchers over a period of years and had established and supportive relationships with them.

During the afternoon staff from the outdoor centre ran a session of archery and climbing for the young people whilst the researchers recapped and made notes about the morning's activities. Some of the young people attending the day chose to leave the climbing and archery and re-join the researchers helping with note taking and generating further discussion. The research activities included a group discussion about what was good and bad about child protection run by young researchers, and young people discussing a case vignette created by adult researchers drawing upon issues raised by an initial analysis of the interview material. The day ended with the young people creating postcards for the Children's Commissioner with messages they wanted to send about child protection. All the young people attending received a £20 voucher in recognition of their time and effort. The young researchers received an hourly rate of pay and were able to use their contributions towards accreditation for an OCN qualification.

In planning the workshop session there was concern that children should not feel pressured to share personal experiences that might be painful or difficult to share. The focus instead was on professionals and systems. However, over the course of the day the group did in fact share personal information and the feedback suggested that this process was experienced as beneficial, for one young person at least challenging the isolation that she sometimes felt. A 'graffiti wall' was available throughout the day and used to gather feedback at the end. Comments from the young people were positive including:

"Intreeging and very fun."

"I really enjoyed today because we met new people and done lots of fun stuff."

“KI chillin with new people, speaking about things, who know how it feels – cheers.”

The participation workers were available to provide support after the workshop if required. All the young people who came to the workshop were asked if they were interested in joining an ongoing consultation and support group run by the local authority and several said they were interested.

Data analysis

All the interviews were different in terms of process and content. Young people elected to take part in different activities and engaged to varying extents. Interview data and workshop material were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998). All of the interviews and some of the workshop discussions were recorded and then transcribed. In addition to the interview transcript researchers wrote notes about their visit to each child. These might include notes about the introductory discussions with the parent, interruptions and relevant facts about the household. These contributed to thinking about the complexity of children’s situations, for example one parent told the interviewer in front of several children “my children don’t talk to social workers” during the introductory discussions.

To assist in the development of themes a qualitative data analysis software package was used (NVivo 8). A coding guide was developed drawing on existing literature on participation (Shier 2001, Thoburn 1995, Thomas 2000) and on themes arising from a detailed consideration of two of the interviews. Interviews were then coded by one of three researchers. From each interview and the research notes for the visit a detailed summary was constructed allowing further analysis of key themes and preserving a sense of the complexity of each child’s situation. Themes were then arranged according to the research questions. In addition, some basic facts, such as how many children had seen their child protection plan, were gathered from the interviews and these were entered on SPSS. Themes from the workshop were written up and arranged according to the research questions.

Where we have used quotes or described families we have changed children’s names and in some cases other details that might enable families to be identified. We have not necessarily used the same names for children throughout the report. We have quoted all 26 of the children but used over 90 different names. This is to make it harder to identify individual children and their families.

4. Findings

We have arranged the findings under the headings of the research questions and report the children's views on each in turn.

4.1 What is the child's perception of risk?

Introduction

All the children who took part in the research had a child protection plan. This indicates that there were serious professional concerns about their wellbeing and that they were felt to be either suffering from or at risk of significant harm. In addition, professionals had felt it necessary to work with their families under section 47 of the Children Act, (i.e. using an element of coercion rather than working under the more partnership-based principles of the section 17 family support provisions). This suggests that their family circumstances, or the dynamics between their families and professionals, were particularly challenging. However, this is the language of adult professionals and does not necessarily reflect the way in which children perceive their lives.

In the interviews and workshop researchers did not use the language of 'risk', but asked about what worries the children had or what might make a child feel a certain way, such as angry, sad or shocked. The children said many things about the issues that concerned them in the course of the interviews, which to varying degrees might overlap with an adult or professional view of risk. So for example one 13-year-old talked of his worries, one of which was not being picked for the football team, whilst the last worry mentioned was going into care and not seeing his siblings until he was eighteen. Children's worries involved everyday squabbles with siblings and worries about exams and peer pressure as well as the kinds of events or concerns that might bring them to the attention of child protection services.

Children also talked about events which the interviewer might perceive as worrying, but recounted them in a matter of fact way, and they might crop up in the interview as an aside rather than in response to a question about worries. One 11-year-old talked of being shut in a cupboard, but this was mentioned in passing, not as something that she was subjectively worried about. There may be differences between adults' and children's perceptions of risk and harm (Butler and Williamson 1994).

However, it was also essential to pay attention to the subtlety of the children's interviews and to take into account what they said and their behaviour across the whole interview. Whilst a child might not appear concerned about a particular issue, what they said in answer to a particular question might be misleading if taken at face

value. For example, a child of seven talked being sexually abused and then not believed initially when she told what was happening. In the interview she was reluctant to accept the gift of the worry people because another child might deserve them more. She seemed keen to please. A court case was ongoing in which she said that where she would live was in dispute. It seemed unlikely that her comment “just happy to be anywhere” and accompanying smile expressed her full range of feelings about where she should live. Children who have experienced maltreatment may find it difficult to recognise and regulate their own emotions, as well as having difficulty in verbalising them. Their behaviours too may be difficult to read because they have developed them as a survival strategy (Howe 2005, Schofield and Beek 2006, Brandon et al 1998).

In addition, children might have had mixed feelings, and experienced conflicting loyalties. There is no reason to suppose that they would be able to articulate this in a one-off interview with a strange researcher. Children involved in the child protection process are likely to have talked to a range of professionals and their talk may have had profound consequences for their families, sometimes unexpected by the child. They may have good cause not to share their worries and concerns.

Despite these complexities the children taking part shared a great deal about their lives, the challenges in their families and their worries.

Findings

The children expressed a range of difficult circumstances which they faced. These included problems which focused on their parents and family such as domestic violence, violence outside the family, drug and alcohol misuse, depression, housing difficulties and financial difficulties. Other issues focused on the child themselves and included problems with peers, bullying, mental health and anger management, alcohol misuse, violence from boyfriends, being a young carer, frequent school moves, being excluded from school, violence between siblings, arguments within the family, sexual abuse and physical injuries. Teenagers talked of police surveillance and lack of community facilities. In the workshop all the children and young people agreed that the aspect of a complex scenario that would be most difficult for a child to talk about was being hungry. The range of difficulties in the children’s accounts reflect those associated with the impact of child maltreatment (PreVail 2010, cited in the Munro Review 2011). Some children’s accounts suggested that the problems were related to a specific issue. Other children appeared to be dealing with multiple complex issues over long periods of time. The following examples provide an insight into the challenges facing particular children.

Stacey, aged 16

Stacey lives with her mother and her younger sister, aged 12. Stacey described being sexually abused by members of her extended family as a young child. She eventually told someone. The perpetrator was prosecuted but not convicted. Stacey tried to commit suicide at the age of 13. Stacey and her family eventually moved across the country into a refuge, which Stacey found difficult, falling out with the other young people there. Shortly afterwards her father died. Currently Stacey and her family are living in housing association accommodation. She self-harms, binge drinks at times and suffers from depression. Stacey has been excluded from school. Stacey says she has problems managing her anger and getting on with other young people. Stacey has had a child protection plan in her current local authority for eleven months under the category of emotional abuse.

Thomas, aged nine

Thomas lives with his mum and two brothers. Social workers became involved with his family when allegations were made that his mother's partner was looking at 'stuff' on the internet that he should not. The police became involved and his mum split up with her boyfriend who left their home. Thomas is pleased that his mother's ex-boyfriend is no longer at their house. He also says that social workers think that his mother is not looking after him properly but Thomas does not agree with this. Thomas has been the subject of a child protection plan for ten months under the category of neglect.

A number of themes emerged from the interviews and will now be outlined.

Taking responsibility

It was striking the degree to which children took responsibility for the problems in their families. A girl of seven, under the category of neglect, talked about needing to keep her room tidy and worried about it not being painted. Many children talked about their own behaviours/qualities as both something they worried about and as the prime reason for others' concerns. One boy talked about his anger "*punching, lashing out, punching things*" and worried that he would end up being arrested. A girl, aged 13, worried about how she would turn out, "*everyone says I'm going to end up in prison.*" One boy took responsibility for his mother's reactions,

“I don’t really feel like I’m at risk, it’s just my behaviour really, like I don’t really feel like I’m in a risky environment or nothing it’s just that the things I might say just only to my mum because I might be disrespectful to her, might trigger things off.”

Sol, aged 14

Several children referred to themselves as having “*anger management*” problems, with a child of nine using that terminology and saying it was hard for people to help them at first “*because we didn’t really know what was wrong with us or whatever.*” In his case and certain others it seemed that labels originally given by others were being incorporated into the children’s self-concepts”

“I’ve got behaviour problems because I’ve got ODD and HEHE.”

Sam, aged 10

A second set of children recognised that there were difficulties with others in their family but took responsibility for their parents in various ways. For one child accounting for his bruises was an additional worry since he knew it had consequences for his mum:

“Well my mum can get into trouble from like all these bruises from Jane [his sister] but Jane don’t really admit it, but I don’t really know how I got, I don’t know, I got a bruise on my face and I don’t know where it is but my mum said she could get in trouble because she don’t know who done it.”

Freddie, aged 10

Another child tried to comfort his mother when she was attacked:

“...and she was crying behind the TV and I comed to her”

Michael, aged six

Two of the older teenage girls were very concerned about their mothers who suffered mental health problems, one of whom said “*when mum’s upset, then I’m upset.*”

Sibling issues

Many children spoke of the responsibilities they had for siblings. For one young person looking after her sister was not particularly viewed as a burden and she was part of a young carers group which she enjoyed. However, for others caring for siblings was a strain. One young person aged 16 commented,

“I had to grow up since the age of 12 being the parent for this family. They saw me as functioning fine ... They saw me as working and coping, working fine. They just ignored me completely.”

Although professionals had been involved with his family for a number of years, he felt strongly that his own needs had been overlooked, because, on the surface he was doing well. Eventually the pressure became too much for him,

“Basically things just built up and built up, my younger sister ... was doing stuff I weren't happy about and I got pee'd off and it was on the park just out the front there that she basically pushed me to the limit and I ended up hitting her and I ended up getting arrested and it was supposed to go to court and they were going to send me down but fortunately she didn't want that to happen... and now I have been given a final warning and I've still got a chance of losing my job if anything else goes wrong but I ended up in a police station cell and everything even though I'm the one in this family that don't go towards that.”

Simon, aged 16

In three families there seemed to be a risk of significant violence between siblings, which went beyond the sibling squabbles reported by other children. One 12-year-old girl spoke of her half-sister attacking her on the way home from school in front of her friends. Another girl aged fourteen had lived in terror of her brother who could be extremely violent. She talked of him being *“too dangerous to live with”* and of having padlocks on her bedroom door. Although her brother had eventually been taken into care she said that she had flashbacks and was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the violence. Siblings had complex relationships. One boy, aged eight placed his sister on his sticker chart first, when asked about people who were important to him. However, the first worry that he spoke about was that his sister would hurt him.

Many of the children interviewed worried about their siblings' welfare and sometimes about their behaviour. Seven children expressed concern about being separated from siblings and this was particularly so where they had experience of being separated in the care system, or thought that they might go into care. Older siblings sometimes had more information than their younger siblings. One fifteen year old told the interviewer of the prospective placement plan for his siblings, which involved them being separated. He feared that he would not see them again until he was eighteen and described his feelings *“a bit nuts at the minute and a bit scared and that”*. His younger sibling, aged eight, did not mention any prospect of going into care although he knew that his parents sometimes went to court. Some older siblings not only had more insight into the family circumstances, they also had more of an insight into the consequences of younger siblings' actions. A young person who had spent time in care in the past felt that they had gone into care because of the consequences of her brother's actions:

“Jimmy ran away, like if Jimmy wouldn’t have ran away we would have been alright, I’m not blaming Jimmy but we would have been alright, my mum wouldn’t have been arrested but anyway we went into care.”

Sarah, aged 15

Bullying/peer problems

Half of the young people spoke about bullying or problems with peers. This was a significant concern and one boy talked of having to change school because of bullying. In one family bullying was the main worry that both siblings talked about. One described her situation as follows,

“I get hurt lots of times and I have bruises and cuts and scabs but I don’t really want that to happen anymore. Hello you dork ha ha I’ll say that to all of them. I don’t really want to have nightmares anymore because it’s really scary. Hello dork, I want to sad face to turn into a happy face all the time.”

Abbey, aged nine

Some children talked about the consequences for them when they retaliated to being bullied. One child intervened to protect a sibling whilst others reacted to teasing directed at them.

“When he said something about my brother, he started on my brother, I started kicking him and that and I just flipped and punched him right in the face”

Ok and what was it he said about your brother?

“All different things swearing at him and calling him stinky, go have a bath”

Paul, aged 13

For some children it may be that the bullying was directly linked to the reasons that they had a child protection plan. In the example above the bullying seemed related to the child’s hygiene and child’s plan was under the category of neglect. In other cases children talked about being bullied or retaliating to bullies more generally. Whilst bullying is a significant issue for children (NSPCC 2011) it may be that children who have experienced abuse or neglect are more likely to be targeted and to have fewer resources to deal with it.

Violence

Witnessing violence towards their mothers was a feature of several children’s lives. They spoke of violence either in the past or currently. Sometimes the violence was from a neighbour or someone outside the house and at other times from their mother’s partner. This was the case for three of the younger boys. One struggled to understand why anyone should attack his mother,

“why did they beated mum up, why did they beat you up mum?”

David, aged six

Two boys tried to take action to protect their mothers:

“Steven was doing something to my mum and my mum was shouting ‘that’s my neck, that’s my neck’.....I was kicking their door, punching their door, I was shouting, I was crying, didn’t know what to do.”

Alex, aged six

“I ran down the road, because ...whoever my mum was fighting was next door. No one was coming after me so I ran down the road because I was scared that my mum would get hurt so I really wanted to call the police or something.”

Brandon, aged nine

Two of the young women talked about domestic violence between their mothers and their mothers’ partners and both by the age of sixteen had themselves experienced violence from their own boyfriends.

“I was with a boy and he was twenty and he just erm strangled me and was quite violent and we were in a sexual relationship and I had the police round because of that.”

Ruth, aged 14

Community resources

Four young people commented that it was difficult for them when they were outside of their houses with their friends in the local community. Some talked about having nowhere to go apart from parks aimed at small children that were not really suitable for teenagers. The four young people said that they were often moved on by the police and at times felt harassed for merely being outside. Paula, aged fifteen, found the police helpful when they intervened in her family but did not appreciate her contact with them in the community. She commented,

“I just don’t like them [the police], like if you’re walking down the street and there’s a load of you they’ll just stop you for no reason and it’s like you know we’re not doing anything, we’re just going out.”

Summary

- Children talked about a range of problems and worries they experienced. All of the children were living with a range of problems that affected them at home, school, with their peers and in the community.
- Children talked about aspects of themselves or their own behaviour that they were worried about. They took responsibility for what was happening in their families and often attributed problems to their own behaviours.

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- Many children worried about their siblings – some felt burdened by responsibility for them. Others worried about their welfare, about being hurt physically by them and about hurting them in turn. Many children worried about being separated from siblings in the care system, whether this was something they had experienced or something they feared might happen.
- Bullying was mentioned as a concern by half of the children.
- Many children had witnessed violence towards their mothers or experienced violence themselves.
- Some young people felt that there was not much to do in the local area and that they were harassed by police.

Implications for practice

Children and young people are not only worried about the things that happen in their families but also in the community and at school. What concerns them in their families may not coincide with the concerns that have brought the family to the professionals' attention. Children may talk in a matter of fact way about situations of abuse and neglect because that is what they view as normal. Alternatively they may avoid topics that the social worker wants to focus on because they are painful to acknowledge or because they are concerned about the consequences of telling.

Professionals working with children and young people who are at risk need to be attuned to the child's world, to pay attention not only to what the child says, but in some cases to what they are not saying and in all cases to how they behave. Professionals need to be aware that children may take responsibility for problems within their families, thinking that they are at fault and that it is their responsibility to sort things out. If the child then comes into care they may carry this burden of responsibility with them, thinking that they came into care because of something that they did or omitted to do.

Starting with the child's views of their worries and concerns will help social workers and other professionals to form an effective alliance with the child. The social worker may then be able to help the child to see that the problems in the family are not their fault and that they are not responsible for putting them right. The child's view of the family situation may provide the professional with a different insight into the dynamics within the family. Whilst professionals should not lose their focus on parental maltreatment they should listen carefully to the child and include a broader focus on what he or she finds harmful in their work.

Message for practitioners:

- Try to make sense of the child's view of the situation and include a focus in the work on what he or she finds harmful.

4.2 What helps the child feel safe?

Introduction

Children talked about how they managed some of the things that worried them. During the interviews when children described a worry they were asked who they could talk to about it and how they managed it. Whilst few used the language of 'feeling safe' many described what they did to manage their worries and what the children said about this is reported in the following section. Children had a range of strategies which might be viewed as more or less helpful. This section includes strategies which might be regarded as positive, such as talking to a trusted professional, but also other cognitive and behavioural strategies which in some cases might be viewed as harmful to the young person.

Friends and family

Most of the children were able to talk to someone about their worries and, as one might expect, this would vary according to the type of concern and the context. Most of the children were able to name several people they could talk to although they might pick and choose to whom they talked about particular issues carefully. By far the most common source of support was family or friends and nineteen of the children talked about someone in their family network or friendship group whom they could confide in or who could help out in times of difficulty. The majority of the children identified a friend who helped them and almost half identified a family member other than their parents. Whilst many children turned to their parents, few seemed solely to rely upon them.

Family members included not only parents but also siblings and extended family. Two siblings named an aunt who both children could talk to about family worries. The aunt was heavily involved in the family, on one occasion calling the police when the young person lost his temper with a friend. Another young person talked about his adult brothers as people who would give him sound advice, and another boy talked about his older sister's boyfriend as someone he could turn to. Girls were more likely than boys to confide in a close friend. Kate aged fourteen said that, *"I would usually prefer to talk to a friend rather than talk to a therapist, because they understand it a little bit better."* However, one young person said that friends could not fully understand,

"They don't really have the same background as me so they don't know."

Sophie, aged 13

Neighbours were talked about by two children and both became involved because of violent arguments in the children's households. The first, Jason, a boy of eight, spoke about his neighbour calling the police when there was a violent argument between his

mum and stepfather. The neighbour came into their house and stayed until the police came. Jason said he would also ask this neighbour for practical help, such as if his bike was broken. The second neighbour was spoken about by a 14-year-old girl, Sally, who was injured in an argument at home. She ran out of the house to her neighbour's next door. Her neighbour went into the house and got her little sister out. The neighbour helped her to calm down and the neighbour's daughter took her to hospital and stayed with her whilst she was examined. The neighbour cared for her little sister whilst she was away and offered her a bed for the night.

Professionals

Most of the children were involved with a network of professionals and all thought that they had a social worker although three did not know, or could not remember, his or her name. Thirteen of the children and young people described a good relationship with their social workers, whilst six did not and would not confide in them at all. The difficulties in confiding in social workers will be discussed further in section five. Five children gave a mixed response.

The younger children who got on well with their social workers often described them as 'kind' or 'really nice'. Isobel aged 10 said that her social worker, *"lets me speak when I want to say something."* Young people particularly appreciated social workers who were good at listening and who listened carefully before coming to any judgement or offering advice. Carol, aged 12 described her social worker as *"a good listener... she just listens and tries not to get the words muddled around."*

Another young person felt that he could talk over the good and bad aspects of his life with his social worker. **Paul, aged 17**, explained,

"I can chat to him, like about what I'm not happy about, what I am happy about, what I want to change for the future, how I can get things sorted for the future."

Although six of the children did not have good relationships with their social workers, most identified professionals they found helpful. Twenty-four out of 26 children mentioned a professional who had helped them. Five children said that they could talk to teachers about problems at home. Other professionals that children could confide in included a multi-systemic therapist, a pastoral support worker at school, a substance misuse worker, a counsellor, a psychiatrist and a youth worker. Young people aged twelve or over were more likely to have a wider range workers involved with them, for example counsellors, substance misuse workers or youth workers, than children under twelve who were more likely to be reliant on the social worker. Shola, aged 13, appreciated his youth worker, whom he thought was straight with him and saw the positives as well as pointing out problems,

“he tells me what’s bad, he’ll tell me what’s good, he’ll tell me what I’m doing bad and what I’m doing good, but the other guy that I had he just really had a bad point of view.”

Police were identified as helpful in times of crisis. Jason, aged eight, whose neighbour had contacted the police during a violent argument, talked about their role, *“they just came and sorted it out and then we went to bed.”* Two children had called the police or sought them during violent incidents. A sibling group of three appreciated the police role in making sure that their mother’s boyfriend left their household.

Cognitive and behavioural strategies

Some young people talked about how they managed worries and had developed strategies either on their own, or with help from professionals. For example Christian aged eight, who had been sexually abused said that he had, over time, stopped thinking about his abuser so much and that his mum and social worker had helped by suggesting he take down posters in his room that the perpetrator had given to him. Some children talked about fighting back against bullies, or trying to keep out of trouble. Some of the young people tried to protect their parents from violence or phoned the police in a crisis. Another young person **Callum, aged 17**, said that he managed his worries by compartmentalising his life and keeping things in separate spheres,

“I keep my family life, my social life, and my work life totally separate... because that’s just the way I work, because if I start bringing my family life into my social life it complicates things with my social life and people ask me questions, it’s the same with my work if I start with my family life and put it into my work life that complicates things as well in many ways.”

There were only two children out of 26 who lacked someone to confide in, in contrast to the findings from an earlier study (Butler and Williamson, 1994) which found that many of the children interviewed had no one to talk to about their worries. An eight-year-old boy said that he did not have any worries and if he did he would not talk to anyone about them. A girl of thirteen said that she did not like to talk about problems because she did not really trust anyone.

Two young people explicitly talked about how they used harmful strategies to manage their worries, although many more described behaviours such as anger and violence, depression and self-harm, that might be viewed as a response to their challenging circumstances. The two that specifically explained their behaviours as ways of managing other problems were teenage girls. One described how the substance misuse service had helped her to understand why she was drinking heavily:

“They had the doctor come in to me and he went in a way drink isn’t a good thing, but for you it was the right thing at the time coz how you felt because in a way it was medicine for you.”

Catherine, aged 14

Another described how she used self-harm to manage her worries,

“A couple of weeks ago I cut myself, but you could see where I was doing it I wasn’t doing it to kill myself I was doing it to like, because my friend was like threatening to hit me and that, so to take the pain away from losing my friends I had to do something to hurt myself.”

Carol, aged 14

Summary

- Most of the children had people they could confide in about their worries or from whom they sought help.
- The most common source of support was friends or family.
- Children confided in a range of professionals and nearly all the children could identify a professional who had helped them.
- Children talked of their own behaviours that could be seen as a response to challenging circumstances, and in a few cases specifically said that they were drinking or self-harming as a way of managing other worries.

Implications for practice

Children and young people have strategies for managing their worries. They may seek help from friends or family. Professionals should be aware that children get support not only from their immediate family but from extended family and friends of the family. It is important to find out who in the child’s network might be a source of support by letting the child take the lead in describing who is most important to them.

The children and young people talked not just about their worries but about what options they had for sorting them out. The strategies some children adopted, such as fighting back against bullies, shutting down emotionally, missing school to avoid trouble or trying to intervene in domestic violence might be harmful for the child. It is important for professionals to be aware of the child’s view of what might help, to support the child to strengthen existing positive strategies and help the child to develop alternatives where their existing strategies are harmful.

The children and young people talked about a range of professionals that they could talk to about their worries. The older young people were more likely than younger children to name a range of professionals involved with their families. Younger children

were more reliant upon their social workers. Children and young people appreciated workers who would listen carefully before coming to a judgement or offering advice. Young people did not want to hand over their worries to a professional to sort out, rather they wanted to share them and work on a way forward with a trusted adult. This allows the young person to maintain a sense of control. For social workers this is a difficult balance to achieve, since at times social workers need to take actions which children and young people do not agree with in order to protect them.

Messages for practitioners:

- Be aware of the strategies that the child has developed to deal with their worries and the problems in the family.
- Consider who might be a trusted adult for the child and how they might continue to be involved in their support.

4.3 What is the child's view of the professional concerns about their family?

Introduction

In addition to the children's accounts of their worries we were interested to find out why they thought professionals were concerned about their families and the extent to which they agreed with those concerns. The research team did not have access to a professional view of the concerns about the family apart from the minimal information that each child had a child protection plan and the category of the plan. However, the children and young people talked about what they thought professionals were concerned about and gave their own reactions. Where children did not give an account the interviewer did not push them to do so. The children and young people's responses are explored below.

Minimal awareness

In two cases the child seemed to be relatively unaware of professional concerns, or at least it was not mentioned in the interview. In one of these cases, a girl aged seven said that workers come to visit the house to see if it was tidy. She did not relate this to any wider concerns about her family circumstances. In the second case another girl aged seven did not express any awareness of why the social worker was visiting the family.

Disagreement with concerns

Some children felt that professional concerns were misplaced or no longer relevant. John, aged eight, felt that the concerns were stupid, and said that the doctor had tried to blame his mum when his toddler brother was burnt after picking up some hair straighteners. He knew his mum was really upset and angry and talked of the 'stupid doctor' who had got children's services involved. Joshua, aged 10, thought that he was involved with social workers because of a misunderstanding. His older sister had made some allegations about his parents that he said were untrue. A girl of 13 said that social workers tried to blame her dad and thought that he was hiding stuff. She said that they did not understand he did international work and it made her angry.

Partial agreement

Some young people agreed that there had been reason for concern but thought that the issue was now resolved. They disagreed therefore with their current involvement in the child protection system. One 15-year-old had a young baby and both she and her daughter had child protection plans. She felt that involvement had been useful in the past. She was living with her mother and children's services had been useful in helping

the family eject an alleged sex offender who had moved in with the family. They also offered practical support with her baby. However, she now viewed their intervention as intrusive and felt that professionals had a distorted view of her family. She would like them to:

“not like make out we’re a bad family, make out there’s always something wrong when there isn’t you know. Just like pick out the positive bits and not all the negative bits all the time because there’s no negative things, they just try and make the tiniest little thing that probably every family does or has done and they just pick on us, so I just don’t like it.”

Anna, aged 15

Another young person, where the professional concerns seemed to be focused on his dad, acknowledged that there was reason for concern in the past but said,

“They just seem to have thought my dad’s going to relapse which I don’t think is going to happen, nobody thinks it’s going to happen, they just think it is which is a bit stupid.”

Paul, aged 14

Some other young people recognised that there were difficulties in the family but thought that the social workers misread the situation. **Rachel, aged 14**, disagreed with the reason her younger brother had a plan:

“Matthew got put on because I’m a danger to Matthew, because I had a drink problem ... Because I use drink as a way to get out of my problems like calm myself down have a drink and all that ... like they were worried I’d do something round Matthew and stuff like that.”

And how did you feel about that?

“Annoyed because I don’t drink round the house.”

Disagreement with professional view of parenting

A few young people, particularly girls, said that social workers misinterpreted relationships within their families. In particular they rejected what they perceived to be the social work view of their mothers. One young person commented,

“I honestly think because I’m so close to my mum yeah, and I say I’m close to my mum, that they think that my mum’s shouting at me saying ‘say this to your social workers so you don’t get...’ And we’re struggling to make them not think that.”

Emma, aged 14

A 15-year-old rejected what she saw as the social work view that she was taking an inappropriate amount of responsibility for her younger brothers:

“They say ‘oh it seems that you have more control over the boys than what your mum does’ and I said ‘no my mum does more for them boys than I will’”

Janie, aged 15

Sarah, aged 12, said of police:

“They wanted to make sure that like my mum wasn’t doing child abuse which obviously she isn’t because my mum isn’t that type of person, she doesn’t believe in abuse.”

Some of the children partly acknowledged professional concerns and it seemed more common to acknowledge concerns that focused on themselves, than to acknowledge concerns relating to parenting. For example, one young person readily acknowledged her own difficulties with anger, self-harm and depression. However when talking about her mother and the category of her plan, which was emotional abuse, she explained

“emotional abuse is where they’re like putting you down, calling you fat and ugly and not being there for you”

And what do you think about that?

“[mum] doesn’t do that though, yeah she puts me down sometimes she tells me the truth by putting me down if you get me”.

Rachel, aged 16

Professionals underestimate the risk

Two young people disagreed with the professional concerns because they felt that professionals were not seeing important aspects of their circumstances. The first was a young person of seventeen. His view was that sometimes children slipped through the net even when social workers were involved with their families. No one had noticed he was struggling because, superficially, he seemed as though he was coping. He made reference to the case of Peter Connolly.

“Like two years ago you have the baby P case and I found that quite upsetting because the baby got failed. Basically social was there but they failed it, I find quite a lot of the time through them cases the person there needs more help than someone else.”

Charlie, aged 17

The second young person acknowledged that the difficulties in his family were recognised by professionals but felt that he was being held responsible. He hinted that he could not control his mother's reactions.

And are there other things in your life that people aren't concerned about that you think they should be concerned about?

"Yeah how my mum acts sometimes, she might act with behaviour and they think I trigger it off, but I don't think that the things that I say exactly, what's the word, a need for my mum to get triggered off, it's just sometimes, most times."

And you think people don't get that?

"No they think I'm bad all the time."

Sol, aged 13

Summary

- The children and young people varied in their awareness of the professional concerns.
- A minority of the children and young people thought that professional concerns were mistaken or unfounded and these tended to be younger children.
- Some young people agreed that there had been a reason for professionals to be involved with their families but felt that the concerns were now in the past.
- There was a tendency for the children and young people to disagree particularly with professionals' views of their parents. They were more likely to acknowledge problems with their own behaviours.
- Two young people thought that there was cause for concern in their families which professionals overlooked.

Implications for practice

Children and young people gave their opinions about what they took to be the professional concerns. Children as young as seven described why they thought social workers were visiting their families, and what they thought about it. It was clear from the children and young people's accounts that there was often disagreement with what they took to be the professionals' concerns. There are many reasons why the children might disagree with professionals' views. They might not have a clear understanding due to their age and cognitive capacities, or because they have not been given an age appropriate explanation. Children and young people who have suffered abuse and neglect are likely to have negative feelings about themselves and to shoulder a burden of responsibility for the problems in their families. At the same time they can feel a

complex mixture of feelings, including loyalty to their parents, who are their main attachment figures (Schofield 2005).

If there is hostility between the parent and the social worker, the child may align themselves with the parent. This is very difficult territory for the social worker, who must attempt to maintain a trusting relationship with both the parents and the child whilst being honest about their concerns. Sometimes a disparity between the child's view and the social worker's view of the situation will be inevitable. It is important that where children and social workers have different views of the situation the child feels that their voice has been heard and the social worker remains open to hearing the child's view of the situation. It was not always the case that the child aligned themselves with the parent against the professionals' views. There were a few cases where young people said that they thought that the social workers underestimated the risk in their families but it was difficult for the young people to talk to the social worker about this.

Messages for practitioners:

- Maintain an openness to the child's view of the situation. Where there is a difference between the child's and the social worker's views, make sure that the child's views are represented and the social worker's position is explained to the child.
- Understand the importance of the child's relationship with their social worker.
- Make sure that the child is seen on his or her own.

Messages for managers and service providers:

- Where there are particularly difficult dynamics between professionals and parents, managers should consider providing a separate worker for the child.

4.4 What is the child's understanding of the child protection system?

Introduction

Children and young people were asked what they knew about formal child protection procedures. They were asked if their social workers wrote anything down and whether they saw it and knew what happened to it. They were asked if they went to any meetings about their families and whether the meetings had a particular name. They were asked if their parents went to any meetings. Children were asked if they had heard of a child protection conference and a child protection plan. Those who had heard of it were asked what they thought it was. It was important for the interviewer to be sensitive to the child's level of awareness to avoid children feeling pressurised or thinking they had got a question wrong. Young people with a greater awareness of the system, often older ones, were asked if they saw social work reports. One of the 'helping people' cards was a children's guardian and this led to a discussion with some children about court. For other young people it was discarded without comment as it was not relevant to their situation.

Findings

Most of the children and young people had heard of a child protection conference. Sixteen out of 23 who answered the question said that they had heard of it. The younger age group were less likely than the older age group to have heard of it (56% of children under 12 and 79% of young people aged 12 and over). In addition, understanding of the meeting was age-related. It was judged by the interviewers that 78% of the younger group did not understand what these meetings were about, whilst only a quarter of the older age group lacked this understanding. Twelve children had heard of a child protection plan, while ten had not (the answer was not known for four children). The older children were far more likely to have heard of a plan – 11 of the 14 in this age group, while only one child under 12 appeared to have heard of a plan. The interviewers judged that only five children overall had a good understanding of what a plan was, with a further two having a partial understanding. The girls were both more likely to have heard of a plan and more likely to be judged to have an accurate understanding, although as the girls were on average older than the boys, this may be partly an effect of age.

The children's understanding of the child protection system was rated into three categories:

Minimal awareness: Children in this category talked about their social workers visiting and might be aware that they wrote things down, but they did not have any awareness of the social worker's role outside of their visits to them. They did not go to meetings. If they knew that their parents went to meetings they showed no understanding of the purpose of the meetings.

Partial awareness – piecing together the jigsaw: Children in this category had a partial understanding of the child protection process. They might have detailed knowledge of an aspect of the child protection system or know that their parents were in court, but be unsure why. They might be aware of potential consequences without fully understanding the processes leading up to them. They seemed to be trying to piece together bits of information and did not give a coherent account. They might get information from family members rather than professionals. Some children who had inaccurate information were included in this category.

Clear understanding: Children and young people in this category were able to give a clear account of the child protection process. They understood the purpose of meetings and could give a reasonable description of a child protection plan. They might have a reasonable understanding of the categories.

Table 1: Children’s understanding of the child protection process in relation to age

	Minimal	Partial	Clear
Under 10	2	7	0
11-13	0	6	1
14-16	0	1	7
Total	2	14	8

*It was impossible to rate two of the interviews as the child did not engage with that part of the interview. These were children aged 10 and 17.

Table one shows the numbers of children in each category by age. As one might expect, the younger children were less likely to have a clear understanding of the child protection system and in the 14-17-year-old category all but one young person had a clear understanding. The one young person in the 14-17 age group classified with partial understanding had learning difficulties. The largest category was children who had a partial understanding of child protection. The categories will be explored further using the qualitative data.

Minimal understanding

One of the two children in this group was nine and spoke with high regard for his social worker whom he trusted and felt was helping him. He knew his social worker wrote things down but did not know what she did with it. He thought things were getting better in his family since she came to visit. He had not heard of a child protection plan and did not know whether his mum and dad went to any meetings. The other child was a six-year-old who went along to meetings with his mum but played in another room. He had filled out a leaflet with his social worker about his wishes and feelings but did not really know what it was for.

Partial understanding

This category covered a range of understanding about the process. For example a boy age seven had little idea about social work involvement although his father told the interviewer that care proceedings were underway. He thought that social workers came round to check his room was tidy and said that this was what they specifically asked him about. However, he had heard of a guardian and thought his mum and dad had one. He later said that they each had their own solicitor that they saw separately. He did not know exactly what it was for but knew that court was involved. He had not heard of a child protection conference or a plan.

A young person aged thirteen said that his social worker was '*threatening*' to take the kids away. He said that "*if he finds out we've been beaten up and all that then he will*". He understood something of the guardian's role and saw him regularly at school. However, he was unclear whether the guardian was to help him or his parents. He said his parents were going to court once a month at the moment and gave a detailed account of how his siblings were going to be placed if they went into care. However, he had not heard of a child protection conference and did not know about a child protection plan. Most of his knowledge was about the legal process.

Some young people gained knowledge from parents or older siblings. For example a boy aged ten knew about the child protection meetings because his older sister attended. His view was that lies were told about his family at these meetings and he wanted to go to them. He did think that having a social worker helped him to feel safe. He knew the social worker wrote reports but did not get to see them. He and his brother said they had been told that if they went into care they might be forced to eat glass. Neither of the boys said that they had seen the leaflets about child protection aimed at children provided by the local authority.

Ben, aged ten, talked about his name being on the 'list', which he described as "*it's a list where people they don't think are quite safe names go on it*". He said he felt sad about his name being on it. He knew his name had gone on it when he was at school. His mum and dad told him about what the list was. He said he sometimes went to child protection meetings and sat outside with his mum while his dad went in. He did not know what it was about but found it "*a bit scary*" and they could be outside of them for about an hour. No one told him what happened in the meetings. He said he was not allowed to know, "*if mum and dad tell us then [the social worker] will take us and put us into care*". He had not asked the social worker if this was true. He had not seen the leaflets nor heard of a child protection plan.

Maggie, aged 13, had some understanding of the process. She understood why her younger brother had gone into foster care, after suffering broken bones. She understood that there was a court process underway and that the reason for it was to make a decision about whether her brother should be allowed to come home. She had

been taken to visit the courtroom by her guardian, *“I was supposed to have talked to the judge but he was busy”*. She attended her child protection conference but referred to her plan as a *“child protection overtake”* and thought that it was something the teacher dealt with. She seemed not to link it with what was happening with her brother.

It was apparent in this group that although children and young people were not able to give a coherent account, they did have some information and were actively trying to make sense of it. What they did know had an emotional impact. Some children picked up on tension and felt scared but not quite sure what was going on. Some thought the individual social worker might take them away from their parents. Where information from professionals seemed to be lacking they relied upon information from older siblings or parents which might not be accurate. Most of the children in this group had not seen the information leaflets provided by the local authorities aimed at children and young people. Where families were involved in the court process children seemed to have more information about court than they did about other aspects of child protection. Several of the children said that they wanted more information or to attend the meetings.

Clear understanding

The young people in this group were older. Most of the young people had been given a leaflet by their social workers and had received an explanation of the process from their social workers. All of them had attended a child protection meeting and could give a coherent explanation of the purpose, mentioning that a range of professionals attended to discuss their welfare. Naheed, aged 15, described a child protection conference,

“It’s a meeting of your parents, social workers, head of social thing and teachers and it’s like a collaboration to see if you still require the child protection and what needs to be done to make sure that everything’s ok yeah.”

Young people in this category were aware that reports were written by social workers and some had read them. Some young people talked about the category of the plan and gave their opinions as to whether it was justified in their case.

Most of the young people in this group had heard of a child protection plan and had some idea what it was, often mentioning specific provisions on their own plans, such as getting extra time in exams, or having to attend health care check-ups. One young person was not exactly sure what it was, although she had a good understanding of the rest of the process and attended her meetings. She thought the plan might be attached to the minutes of the meeting. Michelle, aged 14, described her plan:

“It’s a plan of your life like what happens in it and how they are going to help you, like a meeting, appointments and stuff.”

Another young person described the plan as follows:

“Well basically it’s all in the name child protection plan, it’s like a plan that is given to kids that are at home [when] it’s not good, it feels like it’s affecting them somehow like mentally, physically.”

Mukul, aged 15

Summary

- The children’s understanding of child protection was rated into three categories, minimal, partial and clear understanding.
- The children’s understanding was age-related, with most of those having a clear understanding being in the older age group. The majority of the children were categorised as having a partial understanding.
- Children with a partial understanding of child protection sometimes had a detailed account of part of the process. They had some overview of the system but could not give a coherent account. They often relied on parents and siblings for information.
- Some of the children whose families were involved in court proceedings had a better understanding of the court process than they did of other aspects of child protection.
- Children with a clear understanding were older and all of them had attended a child protection meeting.

Implications for practice

The vast majority of the children and young people had some understanding of the child protection system, even those under the age of 10. How much information it is appropriate for a young child to have about the formal child protection system is a difficult judgement for professionals and parents to make. Some parents and practitioners may not explain aspects of the system to the child with the intention of protecting them from a process they feel that they are too young to understand. However, the children did have information about the process and they tried to piece it together to make sense of it. It is important that when social workers decide what information is appropriate to share with the child they take into account not only the child’s age and understanding, but also the dynamics within the family. In some cases the parents or older siblings provided information to the child anyway. This might make a child feel alienated from the social worker if they feel that they have been kept in the dark. The fact that children knew more about the court process than other aspects of the child protection system suggests differences in practice between childcare social workers and children’s guardians. It is important that the child does receive an age appropriate explanation from the social worker. If a child sits outside meetings and sees her parents emerge angry and upset but does not really know what is happening or who

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is there, she may become more reluctant to confide in the social worker about her worries and concerns.

Messages for practitioners:

- Be aware that the child has a view about the child protection process as well as about the problems within the family.
- Think about the sense that the child makes of the social work intervention and check what they find helpful and unhelpful.

4.5 How much does the child participate in the child protection process?

Introduction

Children and young people were asked to talk about several issues related to how much they participated in the child protection process (Thoburn et al 1995). We asked about which professionals they felt they could trust and confide in, particularly about their relationship with their social workers. We were interested in whether they felt listened to, whether the social workers explained things well and whether they felt they could ask questions. We wanted to know if the child was seen on their own or always with siblings or other members of the family. We asked whether children saw reports and whether they were given the leaflets written specifically for children in their local authorities. We asked the children and young people to describe meetings that they attended. The picture that emerged was complex. Rating an individual child in terms of a ladder of participation would be difficult as Thomas (2000) argued when studying looked after children. Would a child who did not really know what a child protection conference was about but attended and felt confident to speak in it rank more highly than a child who made an informed decision to go but then did not speak? Rather than ranking individual children we describe their experiences of different elements of participation.

Children's relationships with their social worker

We consider children's relationships with their social worker as part of participation because if children are not able to be honest with their social worker about their wishes and feelings then it will be more difficult for their voices to be heard in the child protection process. Children gave a range of views. Most of the children were able to discriminate between social workers and could tell us what they liked and did not like about particular workers. Of 17 who answered the question 16 young people knew how to get in touch with their social worker, and seven of these had their social worker's telephone number. Twelve out of 19 who answered said that they saw the social worker on their own. Older children were more likely than younger children to be seen on their own (three quarters of those aged 12 and over, compared with less than half of those aged 11 and under).

Positive and trusting relationship with social worker

Some of the children had trusting relationships with their current social worker and felt that the social worker was working with them. One young person talked about the importance of the relationship being based on honesty and trust:

“Because if you're not honest with her she can't really help you and like it'll make things harder, if you lie about something it will make things harder, because she does try and help you with it and if it's not the truth and that it's not going to make

things any easier and she won't trust you either, because you've got to trust her and she's got to trust you. Otherwise there's no point."

Louise, aged 15

Another young person, **Jake, aged 15**, commented:

"When [the social worker] comes I tell her, she knows I would tell her, with us three I would tell her everything that happens truthfully. I tell her because if I don't tell her what's happening then things don't change."

These young people believed that social workers could help them and their families. Another young person described how he felt expressing his view made a difference to what happened. He would put his ideas to the social worker and:

"He'll research it, come back to me with ideas and if I like the idea we'll put them to the test... like if I was going to get the others together a bit more, work as a function, work as a family, then he'll come up with like take them out for a day out, and like I done that this Wednesday, we went out for a day, he took us out."

Simon aged 17

These trusting relationships had sometimes been established over a short period of time, and the social workers had succeeded in overcoming the young person's previous negative experiences of workers.

Minimal relationship

In a few cases the children's descriptions suggested that they did not have a relationship with their social worker, who was seen as a remote figure who got in contact with their parents occasionally. These children did not see the social worker on their own. In one case a seven-year-old girl did not have another professional she could talk to and appeared relatively isolated. In another case the family was receiving intensive support through multi-systemic therapy (MST). The social worker appeared distant, visiting once every few months and was mainly encountered at meetings. The young person had a good relationship with her MST worker with whom she had one-to-one sessions every week, but knew this was on a time-limited basis. A third young person said that she rarely saw her social worker and when she did, *"she's always late and she's always busy"*. She said that she mostly saw her at meetings and never saw her on her own. Another young person said that she had two social workers and distinguished between them, one whom she saw regularly, whom the interviewer felt was possibly a family support worker, and the other, *"the social worker that decides everything... she doesn't really work with me much."* Many young people were put off by changes in social worker, especially when they were not warned that their worker was leaving:

“You get to know them and then they just walk out without telling you. You get someone else walk into your house and you’re like who are you?”

Vicky, aged 13

Factors affecting the relationship between children and social workers

- **Child felt pressured**

For some children their social worker was viewed as someone who came round and asked them questions, not as someone to whom they could talk about their worries. For example one seven year old girl thought her social worker was kind because he let her do drawings but did not like his ‘*too hard questions*’. Others talked of social workers visiting regularly and asking questions but said that they did not confide in their social workers. Several children mentioned unannounced visits, which were universally disliked. Amy, aged 13 commented,

“It’s annoying because like, if I’m having a good day then it’s just like, because I know it’s going to be the same old questions, is your dad still taking the stuff, and has he ever hit you it’s just like shut up.”

Joe aged nine did not like talking to his social worker and said that she never brought any games with her. He felt that the social worker tried to take over his mum’s role, she

“Always tried to tell me what to do because she can’t really do that, that’s my mum’s job and I don’t listen to her.”

A sibling group of three said that they did not like being reminded of difficult experiences that were now in the past. They felt that the social worker dwelt too much on problems and negatives and did not see the good things in their family.

- **Twisting our words**

A theme expressed by seven young people that put them off speaking to their social workers was the view that the social worker misrepresented what they said. Sometimes this would be done in reports, and sometimes verbally. A young person commented of her previous social worker,

“The one before, if we told him anything he’d like change it around and apparently he wasn’t even a proper social worker he was like training to be, so they gave us someone who was not even qualified and he was like twisting things and that’s why we got put on child protection.”

Lisa, aged 15

Another young person talked about her social worker twisting information that came to her from the police, *“I tell her what’s what and she twists it round so it sounds like I done it”*. She talked about her social worker taking *“everything out of context”* and writing an inaccurate report.

A third young person gave an example of her social worker misrepresenting her in her view. She preferred her police video interview to talking to the social worker because there was an independent record and she felt her words could not be distorted as happened with her social worker,

“Well, like when I say something, she’d try and twist it around so make it sound like stuff going on.... like make them look better and us look worse.”

Sadie, aged 12

She gave an example of being with her three-year-old brother in the front room whilst her mother was talking to her grandfather in the kitchen. She said that the social worker had used this to argue that she was being left taking full responsibility for her little brother when actually she was not.

A variation on this theme of words being twisted was that professionals had exaggerated the situation. A 14-year-old girl felt that social workers had not made an accurate assessment of her family, although her words also suggest some ambivalence about her situation,

“I’d just be fine as long as they wouldn’t over exaggerate things, things that can’t be helped.”

Menna, aged 14

- **Confidentiality**

Two children expressed concern about what happened to the information when they spoke to their social workers. Jenny, aged 13, said that her social worker did listen to her but then told everyone what she said, then added, *“oh well, he has to tell people”*. Another young person, Becky, aged 14, confided in her social worker and support worker to an extent but said that she had to be careful about what she said,

“The only people I really talk to is my social worker and my support worker. Really it’s just them two that I’ve got to watch what I say around.”

Few other children mentioned confidentiality and those who did for the most part accepted that social workers shared information at times about them and their families. What was important to them was that information was shared appropriately and not *‘blabbed’* to others who did not need to know.

The child protection system

• Reports and assessments

We asked children if they were aware of reports being written about their families and if the report contained the child's view. Several of the younger children knew that the social worker wrote things down but were unsure what happened after that. Jamie, aged eleven, said that she would like to see what the social worker wrote down *"because then we'll know what she's writing and if we get nervous about whether she'll say something bad"*. Some children knew about the reports but said that they did not have a chance to see them, or correct them. Of 18 children who talked about reports and assessments six said that they saw all or part of them and 12 said that they did not. All the children who had seen a report were in the 12-17 age group. Dominic, aged 10, did not see the reports but had heard about them from other family members. He believed,

"They just put it in the report and they don't even tell our family what they're going to write, so that's what I don't really like about the social."

Only three young people talked about discussing reports with social workers before meetings. Sally, aged fifteen, said that her social worker showed her the report before a meeting and went through it with her. Sometimes she would change her report once Sally had given her opinion. If she did not change it she would explain her reasons to Sally.

• Meetings

Of the 20 children who spoke about meetings, 11 said that they were invited to go to a meeting, whilst nine said that they were not. Tracey, aged 12, gave her reason for deciding to go:

"Because like otherwise they would be making decisions about me ... so I thought if I went, because of it's me so I can just say what I want."

Steven, aged 14, decided that he did not want to go to his meeting, *"because I find it hard to keep still and keep my anger nice and calm"*. He said the social worker had not offered to write his views down or asked him about them. Another boy, Dominic, aged 10, said that he did not want to go but he had a view about how meetings should be conducted. Dominic heard about the meetings from his older sister and his mum and said,

"I wouldn't really like to go to the meetings but I would like them at the meetings to say nice things. I would like them to say nice things instead of nasty things and things that ain't true."

There was confusion for one young person who turned up to a meeting with her boyfriend concerning their baby son who was a week old.

"[the social worker] said yeah you two are invited to come along.... When we got there they said you can't come in because you weren't expected and I said that [the social worker] told us that we can go in and they said you can't come in you've got to wait outside. And I was like 'why tell us we can come then?'"

Katy, aged 15

Some of the children who had not been invited wanted to go. **Natalie, aged 10**, said that she did not think her social worker would say what she wanted to say at the meeting. She said,

"I think it should be if people are over the age of nine should be allowed to go to meetings but people younger should be looked after by a special person."

A **13-year-old boy, Nile**, did not attend his meetings but thought that by age 11 he would have been mature enough to handle it. He would like to attend the meetings because:

"I think having your say is good because they can see what I think of it, what the subject is, I think you'd be prepared."

It was not apparent from the interviews that many children realised the choices open to them to have their views expressed at a meeting – for example via the social worker, by a meeting with the chairperson, through a consultation leaflet or by attending. Four of the five children who were aware of this choice were girls, aged 12 and over. Of 17 children who responded, seven recalled having been given a leaflet about the conference, whilst ten said that they had not seen it before. One of the agencies taking part provided a leaflet which combined information with a section which the child could fill in to give their views. All five of the children who had seen the leaflet in this local authority filled it in.

A few children felt that their views could be represented at the meeting in their absence. Ali, aged 15, found a previous social worker *"really helpful because she wrote stuff down that I actually did say and read it back to me and said it at the meetings"*. Another girl, Gina, aged 13, did not attend the meeting but the chairperson came to her house to visit beforehand. Her role was to see:

"if we wanted anything saying what would we want saying in the meeting and they are saying about what they are going to discuss and if we want to say anything about what they are discussing and they write it down."

Although Gina thought the chairperson was “*alright*” and listened to her she would have preferred to attend the meeting herself.

- **Attending meetings**

The 10 children who recalled attending a meeting comprised eight girls and two boys, and ranged in age from nine years to 15 years (seven of them were aged 14 or 15). Of those children who were invited eight had attended a child protection conference and two talked about a core group meeting. Two of these ten also spoke about attending a family group meeting.

Table two indicates some of the young people’s experiences of this process and, while the views of only a relatively small number of children are represented, these children rarely felt able to participate by asking questions or being listened to, and in general were dissatisfied with their level of participation. This is despite the fact that six out of the 10 recalled having spoken at the meeting, and six children said that they were supported by a family member, a friend, or by a teacher or advocate (one mention of each of the latter two).

Table 2: Children’s experiences of attending a child protection or core group meeting

	Yes	Partly	No	Number of known replies (out of 10)
Did the child speak?	6	-	2	8
Did the child feel able to ask questions?	2	-	3	5
Did the child feel listened to at the meeting?	0	2	6	8
Did anyone support the child at the meeting?	6	-	0	6
Was the child satisfied with the level of participation at the meeting?	1	2	5	8

- **Preparation**

Although some of the children had seen leaflets providing information before the meeting or spoken to their social workers and found it helpful others did not feel well prepared. Lisa, aged 14, was not prepared for the number of professionals attending her child protection conference, “*well it was a bit weird, I didn’t expect them all to be at*

the meeting". Lisa saw the social work report just before the meeting and knew that all the professionals had copies of it. She read it quickly and did not agree with parts of it. However, she felt unable to say this during the meeting because, *"it would just be a bit random because I thought there was no point and it's already typed up and stuff."*

Another young person was worried about being taken into care and thought that it might happen at the meeting. She had not seen the leaflet until the interview,

"no one explained to me like it says in here [the leaflet] 'can conference take me away from my parents?' and I've been told that that was going to happen by people, like people I didn't know, just thinking and worrying about it."

Naomi, age 14

- **Support at the meeting**

Most of the children who said that they were supported at the meeting said that they were supported by a family member. Three of the children encountered some difficulties in getting a family member whom they felt was supportive into the meeting. Tracey, aged 12, was upset that her granddad was not allowed into the meeting,

"My granddad was there because he normally comes but the social workers said that he's not supposed to be there and that he wasn't invited and that he had to leave so then we just all went in."

Nicola, aged 13, felt that her uncle was unwelcome at core group:

"I've been taking my uncle to the core group – I'd rather go with someone from my family and my parents usually can't go. But they got angry and didn't like who I brought. I could tell they didn't want him there because of the way they looked at him. They wanted me to bring the headmaster instead but I wanted someone from my family."

Although six of the children said they had support at the meeting, only two of those were supported by professionals. Katy, aged 15, spoke positively about her advocate:

"My advocate comes a couple of days before ... when she comes round I'll tell her what to say at the meeting and she'll write it down and she'll say it the way I put it and erm she's really good."

- **Speaking at meetings**

Two of the youngest children who attended their meetings had a partial understanding of the process. However, both felt able to speak at the meeting. Carl, aged nine, said he had been asked about his feelings at the meeting and felt happy to speak. He said his experiences of being part of his school council helped as he was used to speaking at meetings.

Another young person, **Steph, aged 14** said that the chairperson had encouraged her to give her views to the meeting:

“The chairlady, she was like the boss of the whole thing she was like, she said if I wanted to contribute to anything and that if I had views then say them”.

However, although six of the ten children who attended did speak at their meetings, only two felt they were even partly listened to. The interviews suggested the ways in which children’s voices were marginalised. A young person aged 15 was frustrated because:

“Every time I went to speak, someone interrupted me and that really annoyed me so I was like right I’m going, I’ve got to get to school.”

Heather, aged 15

Another young person seemed resigned to a passive response to the meetings,

“you just sit there and agree with everything, don’t really say much but I think it’s a bit of a waste of time.”

Alison, aged 15

Laura, aged 12, had to be assertive at the meeting to make sure that her voice was heard, *“well seeing as they just all carried on talking I just went, ‘can I please ask...’”* Another young person said that having an advocate was really helpful.

Some of the young people spoke about how difficult it could be to be honest at the meeting, particularly when asked ‘awkward’ questions in front of their parents. They had to think carefully about how to answer. **Zoe, aged 15**, was angry to be asked whether her mum was a good mum, *“I felt I had to say she was”*. Another young person, Lucy, 14, said:

“I didn’t lie but there was a sense of awkwardness when you know you should say something but you don’t want to say it in front of certain people.”

A third young person, **Gemma, 13**, was asked whether she thought her dad was an alcoholic. Her dad was angry and offered to leave the room so that she could answer. They also asked her difficult questions about her mum. Gemma commented:

“I think it can be a bit, the questions that they ask, well if I answer them then I am going to like upset you know my mum”.

- **Decision-making**

Few young people spoke about the decision-making aspect of the meeting. Two who did felt they were a lone voice opposing the plan. Maggie, aged 13, explained how there had been a vote at her meeting:

“It was like pretty big words so I asked what they were... and then we all went round the table and it was like a vote whether I should still have a child protection overtake or whether I shouldn’t and I think I was the only, I can’t remember whether mum said yes or no but I was the first person who said erm no I shouldn’t have one but everyone voted yes.”

Sarah, aged 15, described how she did not feel at all involved with the decision-making, *“no they do all the decisions, if they say something we’ve got to basically follow it”*. She felt her family had to follow the rules but were not involved in making them. She said that at the meetings professionals would *“pick at”* her and the rest of her family, focusing on the negatives and not really giving them sufficient credit when they had done well.

- **The emotional impact of meetings**

Four of the young people who attended meetings spoke of the emotional impact of attending. Gemma described her meetings as *“nerve-wracking”* and said that she felt *‘lairy’* when she listened to her younger sibling’s teacher giving her opinion about her although she had never previously met her. Another young person who attended meetings with her mother said:

“It’s upsetting because me and mum we both have depression right and we go to these meetings and whenever we come back we’re either really angry or really upset at what they’ve said.”

Fiona, aged 14

Attendance at a core group was difficult for another young person:

“I did go once but it was awful...they were just all talking and I didn’t understand what they were saying. It was about me. I didn’t really enjoy it that much.”

Despite this experience, Penny said that she would like to attend if it was done differently, *“if they asked me what I thought instead of just talking over each other and shouting at each other.”*

- **Feedback**

Of those children who were aware of meetings, whether or not they attended, the outcome was explained to the child in six cases, and a further eight said that it had not been explained. Four children recalled having seen the minutes of the child protection conference. Natalie, aged 15, commented on inaccuracies in the minutes such as getting her mum’s name wrong, *“just little things that niggle people don’t they”*. Of the 19 children who answered, only five children said that they had seen their child protection plan whilst fourteen said they had not.

- **Family group meetings**

Only two of the young people talked about going to a family group meeting and they had differing opinions about it. The first young person thought it was largely redundant. In fact, she preferred the child protection conference because it gave her family a chance to hear what professionals thought and have their say. The family group meeting

“was a bit harder because at least we knew what people were saying and that in child protection, and like we got to agree and disagree to be on it or not, but the family support thing didn’t do anything for us it was four hours wasted, because we already knew what the family could do for us, we know they’re just round the corner and they’re already doing it even before the meeting so that was pointless.”

Leah, aged 15

By contrast the other young person who had gone to a family group meeting found it productive:

“we had like people that were close to me and my family and we made a plan out of that and it made us sort of come together because sometimes we don’t get on.”

Sabina, aged 14

Summary

- Twelve out of nineteen children who answered said that the social worker saw them on their own and older children were more likely than younger children to be seen alone.
- Some children had trusting relationships with their social workers and said that it was important to be honest or nothing would change.
- Some children reported having minimal relationship with social workers, seeing them rarely or only at meetings.
- Some children found it difficult to talk to their social workers because they felt pressured by the social worker asking questions, or said that the social worker twisted what they said.
- Few children saw reports or assessments and it was rare for the young person to have a chance to discuss the report with the social worker.
- Ten of the children attended meetings. Some of those who did not go wanted to attend. Only a small minority of children were aware of different ways their views could be given to the meeting.

- Most of the children who attended the meetings found them difficult. Although six of the young people said they spoke at the meeting, only two felt even partly listened to. Four young people reported being asked awkward questions which were difficult to answer in front of their parents. Few young people spoke about decision-making at the meeting.
- Only five children of the 19 who answered had seen their child protection plans.

Implications for practice

The importance of the relationship with the social worker was apparent in the children's and young people's accounts. Young people who had a trusting relationship with the social worker felt that they were part of making positive changes happen in their families. By contrast, children and young people did not appreciate social workers whom they only saw at meetings and who they felt did not really know them. It was concerning that seven of the children said that they did not see social workers on their own and that this was more likely for younger children. Younger children were also less likely to name other professionals they could talk to about their worries and less likely to be involved in meetings about the family.

It is crucial that children who have a child protection plan are seen on their own by social workers, unless there is a specific reason not to do so, such as specialist communication needs. Seeing the child is a prerequisite for finding out the child's views. Children were also sensitive to the communication skills of the social worker. They did not want to be bombarded with questions, but to be seen as a whole person. Social workers do have to ask children difficult questions in child protection investigations, and at times these have to be asked when the social worker and the child are relative strangers. This is highly skilled and sensitive work to avoid the child feeling that the sole interest of the social worker is to get information from them. Children who feel pressurised or that their words are twisted may not continue to talk to social workers about what worries them.

There is detailed guidance about involving children in the child protection process and it appears that this is not always being followed. Only three young people talked about discussing social work reports and assessments with their workers. Good practice involves making sure that the child's view is recorded accurately and sharing this with the child. Sharing reports or assessments allows an opportunity for discussion, particularly important if the social worker and the child disagree about the problems in the family or what is to be done. Where this happened it was appreciated by the young person and the process of handling the disagreement reaffirmed the trusting relationship between the social worker and the young person. All children and young people should have an age appropriate version of their plan, and should meet with the

social worker to discuss it. Where young people had seen a copy of the plan they were more likely to have a concrete understanding of the measures in place to protect them. Discussing the plan with the child could help the child to see that other people share the responsibility for keeping them safe and reduce the likelihood of the child thinking the situation is their fault.

Several young people attended meetings but only two felt even partly listened to. There is a danger that attendance at child protection meetings might be harmful to young people if it is not managed sensitively, for example if young people are put on the spot and asked awkward questions about their parents. This is not to argue that young people should not attend meetings. However, for their participation to be meaningful, they need to be prepared beforehand, supported during the meeting and given feedback afterwards. Professionals need to think carefully about what it is like for the young person to be at the meeting, the likely emotional impact and how the young person's involvement is best managed to make it a positive experience. This needs to be discussed with the young person beforehand so that they can make an informed choice about attending. Children and young people need information about the meetings and about the range of ways that their views could be represented in order to make an informed choice about whether or not they wish to attend.

Messages for policy makers:

- Guidance on good practice needs to be easily accessible and its importance to the quality of practice and professional development promoted.

Messages for managers and service providers:

- Local authorities should recognise the importance of the child's relationship with the social worker and how this contributes to the engagement in the process of help. They should organise the work so that social workers can get to know children, and are not viewed as remote but powerful figures.
- Guidance on good practice should be promoted so that workers think about how best to involve each individual child.

Messages for practitioners:

- Make sure that the child is given information about the child protection process that is appropriate to his or her needs. In assessing this, and their involvement, take account of the dynamics within the family as well as his or her age and understanding.

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- Ensure that the child has an appropriately worded copy of the child protection plan and that this is discussed with the child and incorporates their input. Consider how best to explain the plan to a young child.
- Be mindful of the existing guidance on involving children and young people in the child protection process and think about how best to involve each individual child. Include the child in these discussions.

4.6 What is the child's experience of intervention?

Introduction

The children and young people were asked whether things had changed in their families since social workers were involved. They were asked what had been helpful and unhelpful. They talked about the services they received and how individual professionals had helped them. They gave examples of things that their social workers had done which were helpful. When children talked about the things that had changed for their families it is possible that they were talking about services they could have accessed without having a child protection plan. However, for these children what was helpful or unhelpful coincided with their involvement with the child protection system. A few of the children spoke about stages of the child protection investigation, such as having a video interview with police. Many children spoke about the effects of being involved with child protection on themselves and their families.

Findings

- **Child protection investigation**

A few of the children talked about a child protection investigation and recalled having a video interview with the police or undergoing a medical examination. Experiences of the police were mixed. Emma, aged 14, who had been physically assaulted, could remember the name of the police officer who dealt with the case who she referred to as "my officer". The police officer explained why she thought Emma should do an interview and gave her a choice,

"She was quite like supportive and she asked me if I want to take it further and stuff and she said 'what I'm going to, if you would let me, can I take an interview and stuff because, you can't let someone, I want you to grow up knowing that assaults like this can't just happen and like they get away with it'".

However, another young person, Michelle, aged 14, who had been interviewed twice by police, found it frightening and felt compelled to take part.

"That was a really bad experience because I found that at that time when I first done it I was really young and they were asking me questions, which obviously have to be quite like big-ish questions, but I felt like as if they were like angry with me the tone of their voice and that, and the second time I said I don't want to do one of them because I've had like bad experiences with them before and they were like you've got to do it, you've got to do it, because, or you'll have to appear in court."

Michelle managed to tell the police officers how scared she was feeling before the second interview and she said that it then improved, because they were nicer to her.

In the above cases a similar procedure was experienced differently due to the sensitivity of the professionals. One young person received a strong message that what had happened was not acceptable and was given a choice, whilst the other young person felt pressurised.

Only one young person talked about having a medical examination. This happened in a crisis. Emily, aged 14, fled from her home to her neighbour's after being hurt in an argument. The neighbour's daughter took her to hospital where she was examined by a doctor. She said she had to wait around a bit and did not have the chance to talk to a social worker that evening. The doctor asked where it hurt and examined her. Emily did not like her,

*“Because she had to examine me which meant I had to take all like my top and everything and she leaves the f***ing door open while I was getting changed. Hello? She was rude.”*

- **The benefits of having a social worker**

The children and young people were also asked to talk generally about whether things were better or worse since social workers became involved with their families. Many of the young people identified something that had changed for the better. Some children linked these changes specifically to things that their social worker did for them. Just over three quarters (19 out of 25 who could be coded) could think of an example of a social worker helping. In particular, the older children could recall an example (13 out of 14 young people over 12). Of the younger children, six could think of an example whilst five could not.

Case study – Lara, aged 15

Lara has had her current social worker for a couple of months and says that she has a good relationship with her. *“I tell her my problems and that and she'll try and sort them out and sometimes she has lended like my mum money before to help out and then she's trying to get us to do these projects and stuff.”* The social worker also spoke to Lara's boyfriend when Lara was having some problems with him. Lara appreciated that she spoke to each member of the family individually, but also together as a family so that *“you get to see people's points of view and stuff”*. The social worker offered practical support, cash assistance and arranged things for the children to do. Lara was staying away from school because she was getting bullied. Her social worker rang up the school and sorted it out, explaining that Lara had a reason for her non-attendance so that she did not get into trouble. She tried to sort out transport to school in the rural area where Lara lives. Lara gave an example of the way in which her social worker was persistent, advocating for services on her

behalf, “she’ll like make phone calls or speak to her boss she’ll do everything she can to try and solve the problems and that and um, then she’ll phone us up and tell us what’s been said and what she’s going to do and if they refuse anything or anything like that she’ll keep going at them”. Lara said that sometimes the social worker got called away to emergencies, but overall she saw her enough. Lara’s social worker showed her reports, and asked for her opinion and made sure that it was written down. After speaking with Lara she might change her report or would explain to Lara why she was not going to change it. She encouraged Lara to attend her meetings, although Lara felt that it was a bit of a waste of time being there.

Commentary:

- Lara has a positive and trusting relationship with her social worker.
- She can identify a number of specific ways in which the social worker has helped both her and her family.
- Lara feels that her social worker is advocating for services on her behalf.
- Lara is involved in the child protection process and her social worker shares assessments and reports with her. Where there are disagreements between Lara and the social worker these are openly discussed.

Other children gave examples of changes that had improved things in their families. Christian, aged eight, talked of how his social worker had helped him after he was sexually abused by suggesting that he get rid of presents the perpetrator had bought him, “*they helped me to get used to it and not to think about [him] so much*”. Another young person appreciated having a social worker to help mediate between her and her parents:

“Sometimes you don’t want to say some things to your parents. They do it for you so they do it in a nicer way and they know what to say.”

Ellie, aged 13

Some children talked of concrete changes in their family since social workers were involved. Two brothers appreciated the vouchers their family received that allowed them to go on family days out. They had never been on holiday and the family struggled financially. Ten year old Alex said that since he’d had a social worker the family was doing more together, his dad played with him and they ate all dinner together. An eight year old boy Andrew spoke very positively of his time living in a refuge, appreciating that there were lots of children to play with and the art room was open all the time.

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Lynda said that having a plan had meant that she got help in getting a new psychiatrist. Another young person, aged fifteen, said that the social worker rang up his school and he got more time in exams. He explained the difference having a child protection plan made to him,

“It gives you a bit of priority and gives you, it compensates the fact that, whatever happens at home, it compensates the outside stuff like you can live a normal life.”

Jay, aged 15

- **Unhelpful aspects of having social worker**

Just over two thirds of children (17 out of 24 who answered) could think of something which had been unhelpful about having a social worker, and again the older children were more likely to give an example (13 out of 14). Many of the children could recall both something helpful and something unhelpful and it was the exception for a child to be either completely damning of social work involvement and the formal child protection process or to say that there was nothing unhelpful about having social work involvement. Some children spoke about things that were unhelpful about having a social worker, focusing their comments on the individual worker. Other children were clear that the formal child protection system had added stress and pressure to their family situation.

- **Intrusion**

Four of the children mentioned that it was not helpful when their social workers visited them at school, although a few liked missing lessons, and one thought that it depended on whether the particular lesson they were missing was fun. Some young people commented that other students asked where they were going or thought that they were in trouble because of their behaviour. The older young people in particular thought it was unhelpful to be pulled out of lessons as they entered their GCSE studies, “*year nine, yeah whatever, but not now with GCSEs coming up*’ Tara, 15. One young person did not like having to see the school nurse, she said that she ‘*keeps on going on about my weight... It’s not relevant.*’ Lorna, aged 13.

A strong theme for young people was that the child protection process was controlling and they felt criticised and personally monitored. Hannah thought that as soon as she stepped out of the house everything she did would be reported to the “*head of social work*”. She explained,

“You can’t live a normal life ... because as soon as I’ve walked out the door pretty much everyone knows I’ve walked out the door ... pretty much everything I do when I walk out the house gets like repeated through to someone and gets reported back to social services and I’m like how the hell?”

Hannah, aged 13

Faith, aged 15, had longstanding involvement with children's services and was very aware of professional categories. She gave an example of the difference she perceived between having a child protection plan and receiving services as a "child in need",

"They help you but in some other ways they don't because like if you're on the plan you like, you gotta ask, you gotta tell them like if you want to go stay at your friends., you've gotta tell them the name and they've got to be checked out by the police... They're a lot more lenient on child in need."

These young people felt that rules were imposed on them and they were not involved in making the rules. Although they often recognised that there were problems in their families, the professional response seemed to them not to be matched to their needs.

"I just think it's absolutely stupid that... I dunno it's just social like they're always round, they're always coming round and it's like we have to revolve all that we do around them and I just don't like it. It's horrible."

Jenny, aged 14

- **Increased tension in the family**

Several of the children commented that having social workers had increased the pressures in the family. They sometimes gave concrete examples of how the situation had been made worse. Liz, aged 13, said that her sister had attacked her on the way home from school because of family arguments, which she said had been made worse by social work involvement. She said, *"I don't think my sister would have attacked me if they [the social workers] hadn't been involved."*

Four of the young people, from two families, had experienced multi-systemic therapy, an intensive family intervention. One sibling group spoke very positively about it. However, the other sibling pair felt strongly that it had increased the risk from their brother.

"Sometimes they'd come in and like do something that upsets Chris and as soon as they're gone he's still kicking off and we would have to call the police."

Jess, aged 13

Her older brother Steve explained how he felt professionals had tried to help but ended up making the situation worse. He felt that they underestimated the risk from Chris. In his view the professional attempts to change Chris' behaviour resulted in Steve having to pick up the pieces as things deteriorated in his family.

"Well they came in and said, for me it was really hard because I didn't want to work with them, and they said 'yeah we're going to be here, we're going to stay we're going to make things better', and in the end and I turned around to them and said , 'no because you guys come and go easy yeah'. Basically at the end of

it they went, because like I said, they come and go. They couldn't do it anymore because they started with improving the behaviour of my older brother but in the long term I had to deal with more stuff - my mum's head being smashed in, she's in hospital, my dad's gone away and I'm left to deal with [Chris] and stuff so I'm not really bothered about them."

Steve, aged 17

Many of the children, across the age range, were very aware that the child protection process was stressful for their parents. Sometimes they talked about the concrete effects on their family. Peter, aged nine, said that he did not talk to his social worker, *"because she's supposed to be helping us get better and she's putting more stress on mum."*

Young people could identify that having a child protection plan and following all the actions in the plan, was stressful for their parents. **Michael, aged 15**, commented,

"It's like my dad he's more stressed as well because of everything that's happening because there's a lot going on. It's hard for my mum to balance her life with all the things they tell her to do."

Another girl, Lara, said that the child protection meetings were very hard for her mum and *"when mum's upset then I'm upset"*. She said her mum needed more help in her own right.

Case study

Jason, aged seven, has a child protection plan under the category of emotional abuse. His mother was clear before the interview began that she was very angry about social services intervention. She was in the process of making a formal complaint. It appeared that the relationship between the social workers and the parents had broken down. Jason was taken to meetings which he sat outside whilst his mum went in. He could not identify any way in which social workers were helping his family. He said that he did not like the social worker because 'when mum's talking she interrupts'. He said that things had not got better since having a social worker because 'we keep getting into arguments... Mum and dad shout at us'. He wanted there to be less shouting in his family. Jason said he always talked to the social worker with mummy and daddy, never on his own. He did not identify any other professionals whom he talked to about his family. He did talk about several friends at school and friends of the family whom he could talk to about worries.

Commentary

Certain factors about Jason's account of his situation make him appear vulnerable and make it unlikely that his wishes and feelings are taken into account.

- A minimal relationship with the social worker who did not see him on his own.
- An adversarial relationship between parents and the social workers.
- He did not see any positive changes in the family but could identify things that had got worse, making it unlikely that he would talk to a social worker.
- He had a minimal understanding of child protection, but identified that it was stressing his mum and dad.
- He did not talk to any other professional about his family.

Changing views

A few of the older young people suggested that their understanding of social work intervention had changed over time, sometimes because they had matured, and in one case because the young person had originally disagreed with the professional view of her circumstances, but had come to agree that she was at risk and that her family needed support. **Rachel, aged 14**, commented on the first meeting she had been to:

“well the first time I thought, you know, I dunno why I’m having this meeting for, because obviously we was on Mark’s side because obviously we believed him at the time.”

She had come to agree that Mark, her mother's partner, was a risk to their family and appreciated the help of the police in getting him to move out of the family home, although she was by no means uncritical of other aspects of the social work intervention.

Another young person talked of how his view of social workers had changed as he grew older and looked back at previous social workers,

“Like a couple of years ago I wouldn’t have known how important a social worker is and stuff – other ones could have been good.”

Naheed, aged 15

Stigma

Several of the children were very careful whom they told about having a social worker or about having a child protection plan. Some children talked about wanting to have a 'normal' life. Having a social worker seemed to draw attention to the fact that they did

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not. Nicky 14, said that she would only tell her closest friends about social services, and sometimes told other people that a worker who took her to a youth group was her older sister because, *'they'll think I'm weird. Basically because they've all got proper families'*. She also told other people at school that she had been to the doctors when she got back from her child protection meeting.

Other children were concerned about other people's reactions. Erica, aged 11, explained that, although her closest friend knew, she could not risk people at school finding out that she had a social worker,

"Well like erm, because of like once when I was little because my nan is in prison for something that she didn't do but they think that she did erm I like told this girl and she went spreading it round the school and lots of people made fun at me and stuff so I just thought that if that happens with this situation, this situation's probably going to hurt a lot more."

Some of the boys said that they would not tell anyone. George, aged nine, explained because it was *"family business"* and *"they'd probably go telling the whole school"*. Tony, aged 15, said *"I like to keep it private"*.

Two young people were aware of a stigma attached to being involved with mental health services. They resisted being labelled. Sue, aged 14, hated being described as *"mentally ill"*. Another young person, Caroline, aged 14, talked with her support worker about a referral to an adolescent mental health service,

"Yeah, she told me what it stood for and she saw my face when she said that mental thing, it's not just mental people that go there."

Summary

- A few children recalled being part of a child protection investigation. The sensitivity of the professionals involved made a difference to how difficult the experience was for the young people.
- Many children could identify something helpful that their social worker had done for them. They talked of practical help, improvements in their family relationships, liaison with schools and talking through their problems.
- A few young people identified advantages of having a child protection plan, linking it with extra help at school or getting priority for services.
- Many children also identified negative aspects of having social work involvement. These included intrusion, increased stress within the family, and having to deal with stigma.
- Many children presented a mixed picture and were able to think of something helpful and something unhelpful about the services they received.

Implications for practice

Children and young people were able to identify positive things about having a social worker and described concrete changes in their families which had made things better. Alongside this many children could also describe aspects of being involved with the child protection process which they found problematic. There is a tension between young people's views that child protection intervention helps young people to live a 'normal' life by compensating for the difficulties in the family, and the view that the child protection process is intrusive and prevents young people from living a 'normal' life because the child and family is monitored and controlled, the system itself creates additional stresses within the family and the child feels stigmatised. It is important that children and young people feel that child protection can benefit their families. The social worker could discuss the plan with the child to help them to see the efforts being made to help the family and encourage them to give their reaction and input to the plan. The social worker should ask children and young people what they find helpful and unhelpful about the services the family receives. Social workers can try to minimise, although they may not be able to eliminate, the aspects of the child protection process that the child experiences negatively. If the child has a trusting relationship with the social worker this will encourage them to tell the social worker when tensions are increasing within the family or why they are feeling monitored and controlled. The social worker can then explain the purpose of particular provisions and reconsider them if appropriate. Social workers should also be sensitive about the stigma the child may feel and be careful about sharing information appropriately and managing visits to the child, whether at school, home or in the community.

Messages for policy and service provision:

- To form relationships with children social workers need to be knowledgeable about child development and the impact of abuse and maltreatment.
- Social workers need to have good skills in communicating with children, based in this knowledge. This should be an important focus of social work training and continuing professional development.

5. Conclusion

This research has been undertaken at a time when the child protection system in England is under review. The Munro Review is tasked to scrutinise the child protection system with a view to strengthening the social work profession. It is due to report in May, 2011. In a parallel development the Social Work Reform Board was set up in January 2010 to implement reforms relating to the education and training of social workers, career development and standards for employers of social workers.

The research aimed to seek the views of children and young people about the child protection system. We talked to children and young people with a current child protection plan who remained living with their families. Our sample was restricted to children and young people aged between six and 17 whose parents agreed for them to take part. In addition, the participating agencies screened out certain cases that they considered to be high risk. Therefore the sample is not likely to be representative of all children with a child protection plan. There may be important differences between the young people taking part in the study and young people whose parents refused their consent. It might be postulated that parents would be more likely to agree if there was less antagonism between themselves and children's services or if they were confident that the child would not say anything too damaging. Although this is a limitation of the study, there were children and young people in the study whose parents told us that they were in conflict with children's services. Ten of the children told us either that court proceedings were on-going, that they themselves had been in care in the past, or that they had a sibling who had been removed from their household and was currently in care. These factors can be taken as indicators of the seriousness of the professionals' concerns.

Working under Section 17 or Section 47 of the Children Act 1989

Working with children in the child protection arena is very complex for children, their families and the professionals involved. The stakes are high and there are potential tensions between parents' rights, children's rights and state intervention versus the privacy of the family. Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 should only be invoked where there is thought to be a risk of significant harm. In some of these cases provision of services can be made under the Section 17 (family support) provisions of the Children Act where parents, older children and professionals can agree on a plan to secure the child's safety and prevent any further impairment to his or her health or welfare. Children are judged to need a formal child protection plan where the judgement is made in a multi-agency child protection conference that they are suffering or are at risk of suffering significant harm and it is felt that there needs to be an element of coercion in the work with the family.

These are fine grained judgements and professionals may differ in how they would manage the same case. The skills of a social worker may enable a more participatory way of working with the child and family, preventing the need for the formal child protection process to be instigated. Organisational factors may affect practice, in part in response to cases receiving a high profile in the media (Munro 2011). It is impossible to tell from our data how necessary it was to work under child protection procedures with the children and young people in the study, since we did not have access to the professionals' accounts. However, we did find that there was a disparity between the children's own view of risk and what they took to be the professionals' view. Some of the children and young people clearly thought that the risk was in the past. It is at least possible that more thought could have been given to whether a formal child protection process was necessary or whether it remained necessary.

Other young people thought that the child protection plan was a gateway to services. There are significantly more social work services provided for children who have child protection plans than for those who do not (Holmes et al 2010). However, services should be based on need and not on the existence of a formal child protection plan. Wise judgements about the need for formal child protection procedures are particularly important because the process itself may have the unintended consequence of increasing tension in the family. This was a factor that came through clearly in the children and young people's stories.

Making sense of the child's world

The children and young people's accounts of their worries suggest that their concerns may be different from those of adult professionals. The risks that the child is concerned about, such as being separated from siblings long term if they go into care, may not be emphasised by the professional whose focus is on possible maltreatment by the parent. The children and young people we spoke to not only spoke about the sorts of 'risky' situations that social workers might identify. They also talked about being bullied, not being picked for the football team, and of being moved on by the police when they were out in the community. They spoke of significant risks that they did not feel that professionals paid sufficient heed to, for example the risk of violence from a sibling. There may be a danger that professionals pay insufficient attention to sources of psychological and physical violence both within families (including violence between siblings) and in peer groups (Finkelhor 2008, NSPCC 2011). Whilst it is appropriate for the formal child protection system to focus on parental maltreatment, there may be a lesson here for practitioners that in their day to day practice they should listen carefully to the child and work with a broader focus on what he or she finds harmful.

It was interesting that when children and young people talked about their concerns that they were more likely to talk about aspects of their own behaviour or psychological

states than to be critical of a parent. It is not hard to understand why this might be the case. For some older young people it may indeed be the case that it is their own difficulties such as anger, depression and self-harm that bring them to the attention of children's services (Rees et al 2010), although such difficulties may be related to chronic problems at home. Young people may be viewed as more able to cope than younger children, as was the case with one young person in the study for whom the responsibility of shouldering his family's problems became too much.

Many of children in the present study shouldered responsibility for the professional concerns, attributing difficulties to their own behaviours, being protective of parents and sometimes aligning themselves with their parents against children's services in what they presented as a 'them and us' situation. Any child, not to mention adult, might be expected to feel divided loyalties if they felt that their parent was being criticised by a relative stranger. Maltreated children may in addition have developed the survival strategy of thinking that they are to blame because the alternative of criticising the parent is too painful psychologically (Howe 2005). Children and young people who have suffered abuse and neglect are likely to have negative feelings about themselves. At the same time they can feel a complex mixture of feelings including loyalty to their parents who are their main attachment figures (Schofield 2005).

The disparity in some cases between the child's and the social worker's view of risk was apparent in the present study. There are three potential responses to this, which are not mutually exclusive:

The social worker's view shifts towards the child's view. The social worker needs to spend time coming to understand the child's priorities and should remain open to the possibility of altering their own perception of the situation as a result. This should be an on-going conversation and not a one off assessment.

The child shifts towards the professionals' view. In a few cases in the study a young person looked back and recognised that, although they did not think so at the time, actually the professionals had been right to be concerned about them.

A difference remains between the child's view and the professional view. In this case it is important that the difference is a topic for discussion. There should be a means for the child to express their disagreement and the social worker should offer the child a clear explanation of their position. If necessary the child may need the help of a professional or a trained lay advocate to ensure their voice is represented. In our study one young person talked about disagreeing with the social work report, but it was something that was openly debated and the process seemed, if anything, to cement rather than undermine the quality of their relationship. For other young people such a disparity without transparency led them to withdraw from their social worker.

Keeping the child in mind

Making sense of the child's world involves seeing the family system and professional systems as interrelated, rather than seeing the professional intervention as an external factor. The child will be aware of the relationship between the parent and the social worker and, where that relationship is difficult, the child may align themselves with the parent, making it difficult for the social worker to establish a trusting relationship with the child. Keeping the child in mind means being attuned to how the child is feeling and likely to be affected at every stage of social work involvement (Brandon et al 1998). Early parts of the process may set the tone for later involvement. There were examples in the present research of the investigation stage being handled with very different levels of sensitivity by the professionals involved. It is important to recognise that the child protection process itself impacts on the family and, both directly and indirectly, on the child. The professional intervention may have negative consequences. Children pick up on additional tension in the family. They may consider the intervention as intrusive or unwarranted. As Munro comments,

“For children and young people who have been maltreated by their parents or carers, it is especially important that the professionals trying to help them do not add to the feelings of being powerless and vulnerable”.

(Munro 2010:18, par.1.33)

Social workers can try to minimise, although they may not be able to eliminate, the aspects of the child protection process that the child experiences negatively. If the child has a trusting relationship with the social worker this will encourage them to tell the social worker when tensions are increasing within the family or why they are feeling monitored and controlled. The social worker can then explain the purpose of particular provisions and reconsider them if appropriate. Involving children and young people in the child protection process and enabling them to make informed choices wherever possible can potentially be empowering if the child is adequately supported.

Relationship-based practice

Butler-Sloss (1987) in the Cleveland Report stated that ‘the child is a person not an object of concern’. In the present research the young people suggested that it was important to listen to them and get to know them rather than treat them solely as a source of evidence. Children and young people drew a distinction between social workers who listened first and withheld their judgement and those who bombarded them with ‘heavy’ questions without showing an interest in getting to know them or what the child thought would help. The children's relationships with their social workers were particularly important. Other professionals were valued and for many children the key professional who helped them was not a social worker. However, it was not acceptable to the young people for the social worker to be a case manager, a remote figure only seen at meetings, whilst the day-to-day involvement was with someone else. Some of

the young people were aware of the power dimension. If the social worker had a key decision-making role in relation to them the young person wanted to get to know them and be able to influence them. They resented social workers who descended upon them at meetings and who did not have a relationship with them. A few children seemed particularly vulnerable where they did not see the social worker on their own, and it is concerning that seven out of 19 children who answered said that they did not. Children seemed especially vulnerable if, in addition, they did not mention any other professionals in their network to whom they could talk. This was more likely for the younger children.

Participation

It was concerning that many of the children had only a partial understanding of the child protection process. They had bits and pieces of information that they were trying to make sense of, and which in some cases added to their worries. Social workers should be wary of assuming that the child is not of sufficient age and understanding to know something about the child protection process. It is important that they receive information appropriate to their needs. This is likely to be different from case to case and social workers need to take into account the fact that information (sometimes erroneous) may come from other sources, such as older siblings, parents, friends or the media. In the current study parents varied in their views about how much the child should know about the child protection process. In the course of setting up the interviews some parents made it clear that they wanted to protect their children from knowledge about the formal child protection system whilst others spoke to their children about what was going on. In one case the main source of the child's information was the parents and going into care appeared to be used as a threat.

It was notable that children who were involved in the court process often had a better understanding of this than of other aspects of the child protection process such as their child protection conference or their plans. The source of the information was the children's guardian in some cases. This suggests that it was not the child's age and understanding alone that determined how much information the child received, but some other aspect of practice. It may be that children's guardians are particularly skilled at working in a participatory way. Alternatively it may be easier for them to work in this way because their role is clearly to represent the child whereas the child's social worker may be caught up in complex dynamics between the child and the parents and may be the focus of hostility from the parents. This may indicate the advisability of providing a separate worker for the child and the parents in some cases (a suggestion made as early as 1995 by Thoburn et al and repeated recently by Munro (2011)). A few children in the present research said that their parents needed more help for themselves.

Some children did not attend meetings but wanted to do so. However, those children who attended meetings did not feel listened to. It is important that practice is improved

to provide more information for children who do not wish to attend the meetings so that this is a positive option. If children and young people do want to attend their presence requires careful planning. It was particularly concerning that four young people reported that they were asked awkward questions about their parents in front of their parents. This is not in keeping with the purpose of the meeting and is potentially harmful. If the child cannot speak openly they are likely to feel disempowered and the professionals may get a misleading picture of their circumstances. If they do speak honestly they may worsen their situation at home. There is specific guidance on involving children and young people in meetings. The answer is not in further procedures. It seemed that existing guidance was not being followed and that professionals might lose sight of the child in the sometimes fraught arena of the child protection meeting. The chairperson of the conference should have a key role in ensuring that the child is not put in a difficult position.

Child protection plans

The abolition of the child protection register and the move towards a focus on children who have a child protection plan was potentially helpful. Whereas a plan offers the promise of help the register might seem to the child to be just a matter of putting a name on a list. Current guidance suggests that the child should receive a version of their plan targeted at their age and level of understanding. Children in the current research took a lot of responsibility for the problems in their families, often attributing them to their own behaviours. Giving the child a copy of the plan could offer the opportunity for the child to see that keeping them safe is a collective responsibility and not the child's individual burden. It was particularly disappointing therefore that only five children had seen a copy or had a copy of their child protection plans. Those who could recall some of the provisions seemed to find it helpful in understanding that their welfare was a central consideration.

Messages for policy makers:

- To form relationships with children social workers need to be knowledgeable about child development and the impact of abuse and maltreatment. They need to have good skills in communicating with children, based in this knowledge. This should be an important focus of social work training and continuing professional development.
- Guidance on good practice needs to be easily accessible and its importance to the quality of practice and professional development promoted.

- Local authorities should have a forum where children who are receiving services but are not in care could contribute their views of the child protection process and have an impact on service development. This could operate on a similar model to Children in Care councils.

Messages for managers and service providers:

- Local authorities should recognise the importance of the child's relationship with the social worker and organise the work so that social workers can get to know children, and are not viewed as remote but powerful figures.
- Where there are particularly difficult dynamics between professionals and parents, managers should consider providing a separate worker for the child.
- Guidance on good practice should be promoted so that workers think about how best to involve each individual child.

Messages for practitioners:

- Try to make sense of the child's view of the situation and include a focus in the work on what he or she finds harmful. Be aware of the strategies that the child has developed to deal with their worries and the problems in the family.
- Consider who might be a trusted adult for the child and how they might continue to be involved in their support.
- Maintain an openness to the child's view of the situation. Where there is a difference between the child's and the social worker's views, make sure that the child's views are represented and the social worker's position is explained to the child.
- Understand the importance of the child's relationship with their social worker.
- Make sure that the child is seen on his or her own.
- Be aware that the child has a view about the child protection process as well as about the problems within the family. Think about the sense that the child makes of the social work intervention and check what they find helpful and unhelpful.
- Make sure that the child is given information about the child protection process that is appropriate to his or her needs. In assessing this, and their involvement, take account of the dynamics within the family as well as his or her age and understanding.
- Ensure that the child has an appropriately worded copy of the child protection plan and that this is discussed with the child and incorporates their input. Consider how best to explain the plan to a young child.
- Be mindful of the existing guidance on involving children and young people in the child protection process and think about how best to involve each individual child. Include the child in these discussions.

Next steps

This research has provided an insight into the experiences and views of children and young people who have a child protection plan and are living at home with a parent. The sample was small and may not be representative. However, the research highlights a number of key tensions and challenges in this field of social work. It is now important that messages are fed back to children and families and to social workers and other professionals working with children at risk. Future research must include other groups of vulnerable children and young people, including those who are at risk but do not come to the attention of services, those who have an assessment, but who do not receive a service and other children and young people who receive a service under the family support provisions of the Children Act. The focus of future research could also include further study of what children and young people consider harmful and how they go about seeking help.

Children's and young people's messages about child protection

We would like to conclude this report by finishing with the words of the children and young people who gave up their time to contribute to this report so generously. In the interviews and in the workshop the children and young people were asked what they would change about child protection and what would help them to feel safer. At the end of the interview the children were offered the chance to send a 'message in a bottle' to the Children's Commissioner. This final section reports their ideas in their own eloquent words:

Messages for social workers and other professionals:

- Check back with the family before putting things in the report, get the family view.
- Don't be overly negative. Focus on the good bits as well as the not so good.
- Do the best you can, don't just go into a family and back out and not actually try and help them.
- Listen to what children have got to say and work with them.
- Only help children when they want it and really need it.
- Make sure children have someone outside the family to talk to.
- I don't like people looking down on me and I don't like people looking up at me like I'm an adult. I like people talking to me for my age.
- Take what the young people say seriously.
- I'd like to be less kept in the dark, explain things a bit more.

- Be nice and don't involve your personal life. Have a general chat about stuff before going into heavy questions.
- Give children your mobile number so they can text. They might not always want to have someone talk back to them straight away.
- Let me have a diary that only the social worker and I can see. Every time the social worker visits she could look through my diary and see what we did.
- Kids aren't as naïve as you think. I think the reason that people don't listen to kids is that they're kids.
- Don't make assumptions about my thoughts and feelings.
- Be lenient with children, let them do things, but be there for them and let them know you're there.
- Make appointments that fit the young person's schedule as well as the professional's.
- Don't keep bringing up things from the past that we want to forget about.
- Don't ask for police checks on friends when you want to stay overnight – it's embarrassing.
- Don't get too involved – let the family try to solve itself.

Messages about the system and other support needs

- Social workers should not change so often.
- Police, police, police – to help in a crisis.
- Look out for children who are slipping through the system. Social workers should really look into the cases that matter so that children don't get hurt.
- I think that five times a year police should come and speak to school about problems like when people are bullying other people.
- Get some help for my mum because she needs to talk about things as well.
- Make the [court] system move faster.
- Get the family out on trips.
- There should be more information about issues that affect parents like alcohol abuse.

- Provide vouchers for families so that people don't spend the money on drink or cigarettes.
- More advocates – someone to speak with you and for you.
- More support for young people who run away from home – somewhere safe to stay, with a games room, a chill out room, a private room and a medical room.

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Appendix 1

Recruiting children and young people to the study

Recruitment materials were developed in consultation with young people from a support group run by a local authority for children with a child protection plan. A flyer was designed using an 'alien' figure designed by a young person, including basic details about the research, contact number and photographs of the research team. The consultation group provided the alien with a name and made suggestions about wording, typeface, size and colour. They also considered a draft of the covering letter and which included answers to questions that children might wish to ask before deciding whether or not to take part. They made some changes suggesting less formal language. One young person in the consultation group drew attention to a phrase about children deciding how much they wanted to take part, pointing out that the phrase 'you do not have to answer any question' sounded reminiscent of a police caution. As a result of the meeting changes were made to the design of the flyer and content of the covering letter.

Consent and gatekeeping

The role of gatekeepers in negotiating access to children and young people has been commented upon (Murray 2005). The gatekeepers in the current research were local authorities, social workers and parents. In both local authorities social workers raised concerns about the risks of contact with certain families. In some of these cases the family was included after further information was provided to the social worker about the research and after further discussion of the exact nature of the risk. In other cases the family was not contacted. There were differences between the participating agencies in the extent to which social workers acted as gatekeepers for the children. In agency one flyers were sent to 87 families, providing information about the study and a contact number. The letter stated that they might receive a follow up phone call. Twenty-two received a follow up phone call and 11 families including 17 children agreed to take part, a response rate of 50%. Social workers raised concerns about interviewing children in two of the families but after further discussion the children were included in the study. In the second agency 47 families were initially selected, social workers raised concerns about contacting six of these families. Flyers were sent to 41 families, 24 follow up phone calls were made and seven families including nine children agreed to take part, a response rate of 29%.

When the family was contacted the initial pack was sent to the parent and contained a separate letter and flyer for the child. Thus the consent of the parent was sought before the child was approached since the parent was relied upon to pass on the letter to the child. The research sought to interview vulnerable children and young people about whom significant concerns had been raised, but who had not been removed from the care of their parents. It was felt that to interview a child without the consent of the

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parent could conceivably put that child at risk. Therefore making a direct approach to the child was not felt to be appropriate. Thus it is likely that children and young people who were eligible and might have wished to take part were not made aware of the research.

Across both the agencies 46 follow up phone calls were made and 18 families agreed to take part, providing a sample of 26 children in total (response rate 40%). Twenty-five families did not wish to take part and three parents were undecided at the time of follow up phone call. Reasons given for refusal were as follows:

Table 3: Reasons for not wishing to participate in the research

Person	Reason	Number of families
Parent declined	No reason given	9
	Not interested	5
	Angry at being contacted	3
	Wanted to forget whole episode	1
	Too much going on	2
	Child had not been involved in child protection process	1
	Child too young	1
	Child felt by professional and family member to lack capacity to consent due to profound disability	1
	Child declined	No reason given
Total		25

Particular efforts were made to recruit disabled children to the study. Funding was available to allow researchers with specialist communication skills to undertake interviews if necessary and to liaise with key workers to adapt research materials. The lead worker in each participating agency contacted disabled children's team managers

asking them to put forward children who might participate in the study. In one local authority the family of the one eligible disabled child subject of a child protection plan was contacted. Both a family member and a key worker at his school, felt that he would be unable to give consent to take part as he would not be able to understand what the research was about. Despite the efforts of the research team to recruit disabled children to the study in the final sample two of the 26 children had learning difficulties and a further child had a statement of special educational needs.

Disclaimer (This is a requirement of research reports undertaken by the University)

The views expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Office of the Children's Commissioner.

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