

How Social Workers Spend Their Time

An Analysis of the Key Issues that Impact on Practice pre- and post Implementation of the Integrated Children's System

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How Social Workers Spend Their Time: An Analysis of the Key Issues that impact on Practice pre and post Implementation of the Integrated Children's System

How do social workers spend their time? Over several years now commentators have raised concerns that an increasing administrative burden is deflecting social workers from working directly with children and families to identify and meet their needs. These concerns have been evident since the introduction of performance assessment and the development and implementation of structured recording programmes in children's services (see Garrett, 1999; 2003; Audit Commission, 2002; Munro, 2004). They have become more apparent since the introduction of the Integrated Children's System (ICS) in 2007-8 (see Bell *et al*, 2008; Seneviratna, 2007; Burton and van der Broek 2008; Broadhurst *et al*, 2009).

The ICS aims to offer a single approach to undertaking the key processes of assessment, planning, intervention and review of services offered to children in need. Data are recorded through a series of exemplars that reflect the case management processes undertaken from first contact to the closure of a case (Cleaver *et al*, 2008). The data and process requirements of the ICS are designed to be implemented as an electronic system, and underpinned by appropriate information technology.

Many of the concerns discussed in this paper reflect the problems encountered in developing adequate IT systems for children's services and it is difficult to separate these from concerns about the additional burden imposed by the ICS *per se*. The concerns also reflect a perceived increase in indirect work (i.e. in tasks that do not involve direct contact with children and families); although these may reflect an increase in bureaucratic or administrative work, the term is often loosely used. In the following analysis we separated administrative tasks such as form filling, recording and writing minutes from other indirect client related tasks such as attending meetings, liaising with other professionals and travel.

Between 2001 and 2002 the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University ran a series of focus groups with social work practitioners in six local authorities in England and Wales in order to gather activity data on the amount of time they typically spent on the eight case management processes that support their work with looked after children (see Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008). Between 2007 and 2008, the research team ran a further series of focus groups with social work practitioners in order to gather data on the same activities in six other local authorities. The data were collected in order to calculate unit costs for social care processes for looked after children. Both sets of focus groups also explored key issues that affected social work practice in the participating authorities. The first series of focus groups was undertaken to inform a research study that explored the relationship between costs and outcomes for looked after children (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008). The second series was undertaken as part of an ongoing programme of research on the costs and outcomes of services for a wider group of children in need (Holmes, McDermid and Ward, forthcoming; Holmes and Jones, forthcoming).

This paper compares the data collected from the two series of focus groups. The methodology for calculating unit costs requires practitioners to divide their activities into those that are directly related to service users, such as visits and phone calls to children and families, and those that are indirectly related, such as liaison with other professionals or recording information. Thus it has been possible to calculate from the activity data the proportions of social work time spent on direct work with children and families and the amount spent on indirect and administrative tasks. It has also been possible to explore the data to identify any evidence of change in activity between the two time points, and to compare the key issues perceived as affecting practice at these two junctures.

The activity data gathered in the focus groups identified time spent undertaking tasks for a 'standard case'. This was defined as a looked after child, with no identified additional support needs, placed in local authority provided foster care, within the local authority boundary. Workers were also asked to identify how the time spent on the different activities might vary for children in different types of placements, or with different needs. The activity times discussed in this paper are those identified for a standard case.

While the findings presented here shed some light on the key question, the reader should, however, bear in mind two caveats. Firstly, twelve authorities participated in all, with no authority that provided data at the first collection point taking part at the second; and secondly, although the time points fortuitously cover an appropriate period, the data were not originally collected in order to discover whether the time social workers spend on indirect and administrative tasks has increased or whether changes can be related to the implementation of the ICS and/or the functionality of the IT systems that support it. Both these issues have arisen because the data were originally collected for a different purpose from that for which it has been utilised in this paper, and the findings should therefore be treated with some caution.

Methodology

The focus groups were convened as part of weekly team meetings in the participating authorities in order to facilitate access to as many workers as possible without the need to take up additional staff time. In the first data collection period (2001-2002) a total of 17 focus groups (142 participants) were conducted across six local authorities, including two shire authorities, two inner London boroughs and two unitary authorities. These authorities were matched according to similarities in the extent of deprivation and differences in their published costs of foster and residential care (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008). Focus groups were conducted with the following teams: referral and assessment, looked after children, family placement, children with disabilities, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and leaving care. This data collection was conducted prior to the implementation of the ICS. None of these six authorities had implemented electronic case management systems and all were still using paper case files for the majority of their recording.

The second data collection period took place between November 2007 and December 2008. In this period focus groups were conducted with 47 teams (with 312 participants). These teams included looked after children, leaving care, children with disabilities, referral and assessment, and fostering teams. The six participating authorities included three shire authorities, an inner London borough, a unitary authority and a metropolitan borough. The authorities in the second data collection period were all participating in the ongoing programme of research on the costs and outcomes of children's services and were selected from those that had expressed an interest in implementing and developing the extended Cost Calculator for Children's Services. Data collection in these second six authorities took place after they had implemented the ICS as an electronic recording system. However, each had adopted a phased approach for implementing the ICS, and as a result, although all of the teams were using the system, some were more familiar with it than others. Activity data collected in relation to children in need who were not looked after from this data collection period is not included in the following analysis which is restricted to comparing the data collected at both time points. This concerns the time spent on activities to support 'standard cases' of looked after children with no additional support needs placed in local authority foster care. However, comments from the children in need teams on key issues affecting practice in 2007-8 have been included (see page 13 onwards).

The processes for looked after children, including some examples of the different types of activity, are detailed in Table 1 below. The activities undertaken for each of the processes were broken down into those that were completed by field social workers and their team managers, family placement social workers and team managers, administrative staff and other personnel either within or outside children's social care services. Activities were further broken down into direct client related, such as home visits and telephone calls, indirect client related tasks, such as attendance at meetings of professionals on behalf of the child and administrative tasks such as record keeping and the completion and distribution of minutes. Some of these administrative tasks might have been completed by business support or secretarial staff and others are an integral part of case management activities. The definitions of direct and indirect work are based on the methodology used in the original Children in Need (CiN) Census (Department of Health, 2001) and outlined by Beecham (2000).

Table 1: Social care processes for looked after children

Process	Examples of Activity		
	Direct client related	Indirect client related	Indirect client related administrative
1 - Decide child needs to be looked after and find initial placement	Visits to child and family.	Travel for visits to child and family. Liaising between field and family placement teams.	Additional form filling and duplication of assessments. Gathering contact information of other professionals. Write up of assessment.
2 - Care planning	Discussion of care plan/personal education plan (PEP) with the child.	Information gathering. Completion of care plan and PEP.	Writing up, copying and circulation of Care Plan and PEP.
3 - Maintaining the placement	Statutory visits to child in placement, facilitating contact.	Travel for visits to child. Action(s) resulting from statutory visit and contact.	Typing and sending letters. Recording statutory visits and contacts.
4 - Return home (exit care)	Information gathering from child and family for assessment.	Gaining decision from Director of Children's Services, informing relevant parties. Completion of assessment for child to return home.	Writing up, copying and circulation of assessment to relevant parties.
5 - Find subsequent placement	Visits to child and introduction of child to new placement if planned placement change.	Finding a suitable placement, liaising between field and family placement teams. Obtaining agreement for funding.	Any additional assessments or paperwork for placement panels or for agreement for funding.
6 - Review	Discussion with child of issues to be raised at the review meeting.	Review meeting.	Inviting attendees. Circulation of information prior to and following review meeting. Completion of review form.
7 - Legal processes (to obtain a care order)	Visits to child and family including travelling time.	Consultation with legal department, court proceedings. Construction of chronology and statement for court.	Writing up, formatting and editing of reports.
8 - Transition to leaving care services	Introduction of new worker to young person, discussion of pathway plan.	Multi-agency assessment, development and completion of a pathway plan.	Recording assessment and pathway plan; Transfer of file.

Table 2 below outlines the number of staff that participated in the focus group discussions across the two data collection periods. The number of participants ranged from one to twenty, depending on the size of the team and workers' other commitments. A team manager was present at eleven (65%) of the meetings in the first round of data collection and thirty (64%) at round two.

Table 2: Focus group participants across the two data collection periods

Who	Number of workers		Number of authorities		Length of focus groups (average)	
	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08
Field social workers	104	206	6	6	1 hr	1 hr 15 mins
Field social work team managers	9	51	5	5	50 mins	1 hr 15 mins
Family placement social workers	23	27	3	3	1 hr 15 mins	1 hr
Family placement team managers	4	4	3	3	1 hr 30 mins	1 hr
Independent reviewing officers	2	6	1	2	1 hr	1 hr
Administrators	0	18	0	3	-	1 hr 15 mins

The focus group methodology was used as a way of collecting information from as many workers as possible with the minimum of imposition. Furthermore, the methodology proved to be robust in the original study, in that there was little variation between workers in the six participating authorities concerning the amount of time they said they spent completing standard tasks for the eight processes for looked after children (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008).

As outlined in our earlier paper (Holmes, Ward and McDermid 2008) we are in the process of triangulating the focus group methodology by asking social workers and other staff to complete event records. These records are being completed over a three month time period, with workers recording all the activity undertaken for specific cases. The event records have been based on those used by Byford and Fiander (2007).

Whilst data from these event records is not available at present, it is evident from one of our other studies that the activity figures reported at the focus groups tend to be higher than those recorded on the event records. When analysing the figures for the study to explore the costs of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care it became apparent that during focus group discussions, workers tended to recall cases that had been particularly time consuming, or instances when they had responded to a crisis (Holmes, Westlake and Ward, 2008). However, it should be noted that Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care is a specialist intensive programme, working with looked after children with high levels of support needs. The reporting of higher activity times in the focus groups may be due to the intensive work required for this particular intervention. Further data collection, to be available summer 2009, will demonstrate whether the difference in reported activity times in focus groups, when compared with event record data, is limited to specific intensive interventions.

Case loads

As illustrated in Table 3 below, there were differences in the reported looked after children caseloads between the two data collection periods. The average caseload for field social workers was 21 children for the authorities in the first data collection period and 14 children for those in the second. Specialist social work teams¹, however, reported higher caseloads. Teams in both data collection periods also reported a wide range in the number of children on their caseloads. In the second data collection period, the majority of teams reported that caseloads were weighted in relation to the complexity of cases on each worker's caseload, although only one authority reported that a formalised system of weighting was used to manage individual allocation. Weighted caseloads were not identified in the first set of focus groups.

Table 3: Reported caseloads across both data collection periods

Who	Case Load Range		Average Number of Children on Case load	
	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08
Field social workers	12 - 30	7 - 30	21	14
Family placement	8 - 25	10 - 20	17	15.5
Specialist social work teams ¹	Unknown	8 - 33	15	23

Hours worked

In all twelve local authorities the full time staff were contracted to work between 35 and 37 ½ hours per week. However, field social workers, family placement workers and team managers all reported that it was not possible to complete their work within the contracted hours and that on average they worked 45 hours per week at the first round of data collection and 46 hours, on average, per week at the second round of data collection. This total did not include the additional hours they often worked completing paperwork and reading at home. All of the participating authorities operated a system of "time off in lieu" (TOIL), where workers are entitled to take any additional hours worked over their contracted time off as leave. However, workers in each of the authorities anecdotally reported that they rarely were able to take all of their TOIL. In some cases this was because they regularly worked more than the allocated ten or twelve hours per month they were entitled to reclaim. A number of the workers stated that the pressures of work made it difficult to find "time in the diary" to take TOIL.

¹ These teams include children with disabilities, leaving care and unaccompanied asylum seeking children teams.

Table 4: Average reported weekly hours worked across both data collection periods

Who	Contracted weekly hours (average)		Reported weekly hours worked (average)	
	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08	Data collection 1 2001/02	Data collection 2 2007/08
Field social workers	37	37.5	45	46
Family placement	37	37.5	45	47.5
Specialist social work teams ¹	35.5	37.5	44.5	45

Time use activity data

The focus of the following section of the paper is the estimated activity figures reported by workers with responsibility for the case management of looked after children. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 below show the estimated number of hours taken to complete the tasks for a standard case along with the proportion of time spent on direct and indirect activities for the two data collection periods.

Table 5.1: Direct and indirect social worker activity at the first data collection period, 2001/02

Process	Reported time spent per process					
	Direct client related activity		Indirect client related activity (Contact with other professionals, administrative tasks, travel)		Total	
	No of estimated hours	Proportion of time (%)	No of estimated hours	Proportion of time (%)	Total time per process	Percentage
1 - Decide child needs to be looked after and find initial placement	2 hrs	20	8 hrs 15 mins	80	10 hrs 15 mins	100
2 - Care planning	0	0	4 hrs 30 mins	100	4 hrs 30 mins	100
3 - Maintaining the placement (<i>per month</i>)	4 hrs	47	4 hrs 30 mins	53	8hrs 30 mins	100
4 - Return home (exit care)	Total activity for this process was 10 hrs 30 mins					
5 - Find subsequent placement	Total activity for this process was 3 hours					
6 - Review	0	0	5 hrs 15 mins	100	5 hrs 15 mins	100
7 - Legal processes	14 hrs 30 mins	18	64 hrs	82	78 hours	100
8 - Transition to leaving care services	Total activity for this process was 48 hrs					

For three of the processes, exit from care, finding a subsequent placement and transition to leaving care services, it was not possible for workers in the first data collection period to separate the time spent on direct and indirect client related activities, although for all three, there was an element of direct work with the child and/or their family. Times shown for process three, maintaining the placement, are per month.

Table 5.2: Direct and indirect social worker activity at the second data collection period, 2007/08

Process	Reported time spent per process					
	Direct client related activity		Indirect client related activity (Contact with other professionals, administrative tasks, travel)		Total	
	No of estimated hours	Proportion of time (%)	No of estimated hours	Proportion of time (%)	Total time per process	Percentage
1 - Decide child needs to be looked after and find initial placement	7 hrs 43 mins	39	11 hrs 55 mins	61	19 hrs 38 mins	100
2 - Care planning - initial Care Planning	2 hrs 50 mins	17	13 hrs 43 mins	83	16 hrs 33 mins	100
2 - Care planning - after the Review	2 hours	12	15 hrs 49 mins	88	17 hrs 49 mins	100
3 - Maintaining the placement (<i>per month</i>)	9 hrs 25 mins	42	13 hrs 13 mins	58	22 hrs 38 mins	100
4 - Return home (exit care)	8 hrs 17 mins	27	21 hrs 43 mins	73	30 hours	100
5 - Find subsequent placement	8 hrs 45 mins	37	15 hrs 20 mins	63	24 hrs 5 mins	100
6 - Review	2 hrs 56 mins	16	15 hrs	84	17 hrs 56 mins	100
7 - Legal processes	10 hrs 25 mins	27	28hrs 10 mins	73	38 hrs 35 mins	100
8 - Transition to leaving care services	5 hours	59	3 hrs 30 mins	42	8 hrs 30 mins	100

Processes One and Five: Decide child needs to be looked after, find initial and subsequent placements

As the tables above show, the reported time spent on finding initial and subsequent placements is substantially higher at the second round of data collection. A proportion of the increased time may be attributable to the introduction of placement panels (referred to as allocation meetings in some of the participating authorities). Of the six authorities participating in the original data collection, only one had introduced a 'gatekeeping' panel through which social workers apply to receive authorisation to place a child. However, placement panels have now become common practice, and each of the six authorities in the second set of data collection reported that panel meetings are routinely held. Preparation for,

and attendance at, a placement panel accounts for an increase in activity time. Social workers who wish to place a child have to make a written case and attend the meeting to present it to senior managers before authorisation for a placement can be given. Furthermore, four of the authorities in the second data collection reported that they have a 'Higher Level Needs Panel' for children who require a more comprehensive, and therefore costly, service, such as residential care or a placement with support for behavioural difficulties. Workers reported that these panels require a greater level of preparation. In one authority they estimated that preparation for the Higher Level Needs Panel required twice the amount of time as that for the ordinary Placement Panel. It was noted that higher level placements are often required where a previous placement has broken down. The increased activity time in Process 5: Find Subsequent Placement, may be attributable, to some extent, to activity preparing for and attending Higher Level Needs Panels.

The time spent in finding placements and placing a child may also be increased because of the type of placement or provider. Three of the six authorities in the second set of data collection reported that they have a discrete Placement Management Service (PMS). One of these authorities reported that their PMS undertook seven hours of indirect work to find an appropriate placement. While the majority of this time involved contacting providers and local authority foster carers, 14% of the activity undertaken by the PMS was directly attributable to administrative tasks, such as checking and completing referral forms, requesting authorisation from senior manager on ICS, and updating electronic records. However, in each of the authorities with a PMS, it was the responsibility of the social worker to find residential and some agency placements. The administrative tasks were reported to increase substantially for residential placements, with workers stating that they spend approximately an additional 10 hours completing paperwork, such as risk assessments and handling policies when a child is to be placed in a residential unit. These additional administrative tasks are not related to the Integrated Children's System.

Processes Two, Six and Eight: Care planning, review and transitions to leaving care

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 demonstrate a substantial increase in the estimated time spent for the care planning and reviewing processes between the two data collection points. The increase in time can be attributed to increases in both direct and indirect work. In the initial discussions, during the first round of data collection, workers found it difficult to separate care planning and review from the ongoing work associated with maintaining the placement. Field social workers did report that they carried out direct client related activities for these processes, although discussions regarding the review and care planning would usually be undertaken as part of a statutory or other ongoing visit, rather than a visit in its own right. Therefore, as Table 5.1 shows, there is no reported additional direct contact with the child prior to a review meeting. The direct activities are included in the monthly activity as part of Process 3: Maintaining the Placement.

In contrast, in the second set of data collection, while workers acknowledged that planning and review are ongoing activities, the processes of updating the care plan and the review meeting, and subsequent work associated with it, are conceptualised as discrete processes. This may reflect the increased importance placed on the role of planning and review in safeguarding children. While workers in the first round of data collection reported that discussions regarding the review and care plan formed part of their ongoing work, social workers in the second round reported that they frequently make additional visits to parents, carers and children in relation to these processes, with a consequent increase in the amount of direct time spent with children and families in this part of their work. Workers in the second data collection period also reported that the initial care plan and the care planning activities undertaken after reviews were conceptualised as distinct processes. As Table 5.2 shows, workers reported a slightly higher level of direct work for the initial than for subsequent care plans.

This trend was also evident in the transition to leaving care services (Process Eight). Activity times for this process were substantially greater at the first round of data collection. Two leaving care teams provided information in the first round of data collection. The workers from these teams reported that they approached the pathway plan as an assessment that was completed in consultation with the young person; completing the paperwork for the pathway plan and meeting with the young person were not viewed as discrete tasks. Practitioners estimated that they spent an average of 39 hours, or three to four hours a week, completing a pathway plan. However, in the second period of data collection, workers conceptualised the completion of the pathway plan as a discrete process from the ongoing work with the young person. The 8 ½ hours estimated for this process accounts for the work specifically focussed on the pathway plan. Ongoing work with the young person is considered separate to this process and is included in the figures for Process 3: Maintaining the Placement.

During the second data collection it was noted by workers across all six participating authorities that the ICS exemplars for the care plans and the reviews were much more extensive than prior documentation. Workers reported that completing these forms was a complex task and a number of screens needed to be navigated before a short update of one or two lines could be made. Furthermore, workers noted that their IT systems were set up in such a way that the completion of the review paperwork would trigger the reminder for the next review. If there were delays in completing the forms, there would be a delay in the date of the next review. This had increased the pressure to finish administrative tasks when managing work loads, as discussed further below. While this electronic trigger had been introduced in order to ensure essential work was completed, participating workers reported that they felt pressured by competing priorities.

Process Three: Maintaining the placement

The ongoing work, including both direct and indirect activities, to maintain the placement associated with Process Three also appears to have increased by the second period of data collection. Additional direct work appeared to be carried out with some children, for workers reported that they may accompany children to additional services, such as after school clubs, to help them engage with the service. In some cases workers also reported that visits may be made in addition to the statutory requirements, where these were felt to be beneficial to the child.

Nevertheless, for this process, workers reported an increase in both the *amount* and the *proportion* of estimated time spent on indirect activities, from 53% to 58%. This increase can be accounted for by both increased levels of administrative tasks, such as the completion of case notes, and increased liaison with other professionals in relation to individual cases. Case notes are part of regular recording and are completed after every event associated with a case. They are located on the ICS and form part of the electronic record keeping. Workers reported that case notes take 35 minutes on average to complete. Three of the six participating authorities reported that they have regular 'care team' meetings, which bring together professionals involved with a family between regular reviews. These meetings require some preparation and arranging, as well as the meeting itself.

Key issues cited across both data collection periods

While it was evident that a great deal of change has occurred between the two data collections the following issues were raised during the focus groups across both timeframes.

Proportion of direct and indirect work

Social care professionals across all twelve authorities expressed concerns regarding the proportion of time spent on indirect activities compared with direct activities. Workers reported that indirect and administrative work took time away from direct work with families. While workers consistently reported that they spent 80- 90% of their time on indirect tasks, however, this was not the case for all processes. Collation and analysis of the proportion of indirect and administrative activities indicated that it was particularly high for care planning and review processes, ranging between 83 % and 88% at the second round of data collection. Breakdown of these percentages shows that 48% of the overall time for care planning (Process 2) was spent on indirect activities. Administrative activities constituted 35% for the initial care plan and 40% for subsequent care plans. Workers reported high levels of administrative activity for Process 6: Review, with 49% of time spent of administrative tasks, and 35% on indirect activities. Furthermore, as indicated above, workers at the first round of data collection reported that they did not carry out any additional direct activities with the child or their family for either of the care planning or review processes. These were in place by the time of the second data collection.

In comparison with care planning and review processes, the ratio of direct and indirect activity is much lower for Process 3: Maintaining the placement. As outlined above, for both data collection periods, the proportion of indirect activity accounted for just over half of all the ongoing tasks associated with the activities to continue to support the child in their placement.

Meeting statutory requirements

Direct work was considered to be of great importance by participants. During both data collections workers across all twelve authorities reported that they were able to meet the minimum statutory requirements and in some cases, workers also reported that direct work was sometimes carried out beyond the statutory requirements.

Administrative support

Despite concerns regarding increasing administrative tasks, a substantial number of teams across both sets of data collection felt that they had insufficient administrative support. Teams consulted at the second round of data collection indicated that typing up reports, assessments and reviews into the electronic recording system could not be done by an administrator as these were considered to be important practice documents and quality could only be maintained through social workers completing their own inputting. However, some of the processes, such as Process 6: Review, have a considerable administrative element, for example inviting participants to meetings, booking rooms, arranging transport and distributing minutes. These tasks took, on average, just under two hours to complete for each review. It was felt by a large number of the teams that these tasks could be conducted by administrative support. While all six local authorities participating in the second round of data collection reported that these tasks are currently undertaken by social workers, one reported that they are in the process of enabling administrators to undertake them on social workers' behalf.

Travel time

Workers in both data collection periods expressed concerns that the increase in travelling times to visit children placed out of authority often resulted in their being visited less frequently than those placed within the authority. It was reported that visits to children placed out of authority increased travelling time, on average, by eight hours, per visit.

Adapting to new policies and procedures

It was evident from both sets of data that social care personnel have been operating within a context of great change. New policies and procedures, including changes in management information systems and electronic recording and the introduction of ICS, have been implemented since our first round of data collection in 2001-2. In addition, local authorities, including a large number of those that participated in these studies, have been undergoing considerable re-structuring. Workers reported that new policies and procedures take time to become familiar with or embed into practice. Therefore, the implementation of a number of new initiatives will, at least initially, increase the time spent on these activities by workers.

Additional key issues highlighted during the first data collection period

The majority of the key issues highlighted by workers during the first data collection timeframe have been outlined above. However, workers across all six authorities in 2001-2 also reported that there was a shortage of available placements and that this affected the amount of time that they spent on placement finding. This was particularly problematic for children with complex needs requiring more specialist placements. At the time when this information was collected, only one of the six authorities had either a commissioning unit or a manager with responsibility for commissioning placements. Therefore, the placement finding activity, in particular for out of authority and/or agency placements was undertaken by the child's allocated worker. Furthermore, only the authority with a commissioning manager reported using 'preferred provider' placements; the other authorities reported that the process of finding placements was 'ad hoc'.

Key issues highlighted during the second data collection period

The issues identified by workers across the six authorities in 2007-8 can broadly be divided into three categories: general difficulties with electronic systems; design of electronic records not reflecting practice; problems associated with the implementation of new processes, including those relating to closer liaison with other agencies following the introduction of the Children Act 2004.

Issues identified by participants regarding the electronic systems

Many of the issues raised by workers related to general difficulties associated with information technology. The technological difficulties in implementing and maintaining a substantial networked electronic recording system were frequently cited across participating teams. It was reported in all six authorities that routine maintenance or unscheduled problems to networks would restrict access to electronic recording systems. Support from ICT departments was required in resolving technical difficulties. This could result in delays in gathering information and checking child records - a particular concern in family crises or emergencies. Where network or system failures occurred, social workers were unable to access the information necessary to respond. Furthermore, workers in twenty of the 47 groups reported work was frequently lost as a result of the system crashing while reports were being inputted. It was reported across the authorities that the lack of an auto-save function and an unstable network were sources of great frustration, along with increased inputting times, for many workers. In addition, some workers noted that their systems might

'time-out' if reports were inactive for a given amount of time. If a worker received a phone call, for example, during the completion of a report, their system might time them out and lose the work that had been completed.

Two of the authorities reported that because of inadequate resources there were not enough available computers with network access for workers to update electronic records. Time was therefore spent waiting for an available computer to complete work which could previously have been completed at any time on the old paper based system. Workers across the authorities also reported concerns regarding their own proficiency with computer technology. Time spent on completing electronic records varied considerably between workers, depending on their own IT, particularly typing, skills. However, electronic recording enables workers to use the cut and paste function between some documents. The capacity to do this should be time saving when compared with completing traditional paper files.

The location of and access to electronic systems was also highlighted as a concern for workers. Workers across five of the authorities did not feel that they had sufficient remote access to electronic recording systems. Social work offices are busy and frenetic locations and workers indicated that it was difficult to find focussed time to complete reports and assessments. Previously they would complete such work at home, away from interruptions and distractions. This would allow them to have quiet and focussed time to complete complex and important pieces of work. However, it was now not possible to do this without remote access. Reports had to be completed on site, and interruptions were frequent, increasing the time spent on these activities. The lack of a 'quiet room' in some authorities was felt to restrict the ability of workers to complete reports efficiently. Participants in nine of the focus groups reported going into the office at weekends to get some 'quiet time'; to complete paperwork.

However, it was noted that being unable to take work home was positive to workers 'work-life balance' and helped define the barriers between work and home. Remote access and the use of portable 'tablets' was being piloted in one authority. The outcomes of the pilot are presently unknown.

Systems design and social work practice

Sixteen of the 47 focus groups across all six of the participating authorities reported issues relating to the design and user interface of the electronic recording systems. The systems were not felt to be user friendly, intuitive or reflective of social work practice. It was noted that management information systems (MIS) were complex and difficult to navigate, but there were also problems with the ICS exemplars. Workers observed that making a small update to a record can be time consuming because of the large number of pages that have to be navigated in order to locate the section that needs updating. Furthermore, workers reported that at times it was unclear where specific data items were to be recorded. It was noted that some data items did not easily conform to the exemplars and had to be recorded elsewhere in free text files. This was also considered to be a time consuming process.

Twenty two of the 47 focus groups reported that forms did not always proceed in a logical order or reflect the needs and issues raised by families. The 'one size fits all' approach to template designs was frequently not felt to be appropriate for the complex and highly varied work conducted with families. For example, children with disabilities teams reported that forms presume that children have a very clear diagnosis of an identified condition, which fits into a particular category. However many of the children they work with may not even have a diagnosis, let alone a clear one. The needs categories specified were often considered unsuitable for children with complex needs and assumed that needs are mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, workers reported that the templates made false distinctions between the issues affecting families, many of which workers assess as being interrelated. For instance, one team reported that 'economic circumstances', 'housing' and 'employment' are recorded as separate categories on the Initial Assessment template used in their authority. However, in assessing the needs of families, they analyse the cumulative impact of each of these factors on a family's well being. Therefore, in recording these issues separately, the template does not reflect an accurate picture of a family's needs. Although there are summary and analysis sections on Initial and Core Assessments, workers reported that they were not clear how cumulative issues should be recorded.

Difficulties with ICS exemplars were compounded by the way the supporting IT systems had been set up. For instance, certain actions on some processes could not be completed without managers' approval being recorded on the system at some stages, a factor that may cause delays in families receiving services. Moreover, certain activities, such as the location of an appropriate placement or the transfer of a case between teams, could only be actioned through management information systems. One team noted that this had led to confusion with regard to priorities and work load management. While previously the onus had been on visiting families and face to face work, now, if the ICS records were not completed, a child would not get a service. Again, workers felt caught between competing priorities, as increased pressure to complete records within given timeframes deflected them from their earlier focus on face to face contact with families.

Implementation issues

A number of the concerns raised by participants can be attributed to the implementation of any new system or process. Twenty-one teams cited problems with implementation, such as, for instance, a reduction in data sharing capacities within the authorities because the upgraded electronic record system was available to different teams at different times. To implement a substantial system takes a great deal of planning and time, and the slowness of this process was cited as a point of frustration by a number of the participants. However, many of the difficulties raised were implementation issues associated with a new system in general, rather than specific to ICS or electronic recording.

Teams across all six participating authorities noted that one key factor in the time spent inputting data into electronic recording systems was familiarity with the whole system or individual report sections. The Placement Information Record, previously a twenty page separate document, has now been incorporated into ICS. One worker noted that it took her the whole day to complete this record for the first time, compared to the 30 minutes it would have previously taken. It was noted, however, that this time would significantly reduce as workers become more familiar with the record. Becoming more aware of where particular pieces of information are held within the electronic record would reduce the time spent navigating through and locating relevant sections.

It was felt across the authorities that as workers become more accustomed to the electronic systems, time spent on inputting data would be reduced. Workers across all six authorities noted that the issues regarding navigating electronic records and IT proficiency, as identified above, would improve, reducing time on administrative tasks, as workers become more familiar with the systems in place and electronic recording becomes more embedded in social work culture. One team noted that they had historically always kept electronic records, which were inputted by themselves rather than by an administrator. It was felt that the transition to ICS was much smoother for this team than others in the same authority. Familiarity with electronic recording in general was felt to be a factor in the time taken to input and update data.

Workers raised training as an issue in three of the participating authorities. They expressed concerns that not enough guidance or training had been given initially, or that the interval between training and implementation of the electronic recording system had been too great and thought that refresher training would be valuable. One authority noted that there were no written policies or guidance as to the use of the ICS, and workers expressed concerns that it was open to interpretation where some particular pieces of information should be recorded in reports and assessments. As a result, recording might not be consistent across the local authority.

Conclusion

Four key themes emerged from the data relating to social work activity collected through the focus groups: pressures on social work time; difficulties associated with the implementation of the ICS; difficulties with electronic systems in general; and the environment of continued change.

At both points of data collection practitioners and managers all reported that it was not possible to complete their work within their contracted hours. On average they worked up to ten hours per week more than their contract, and it was not always possible to claim this back as 'time off in lieu'. The data also show that the average reported time spent on all but two of the social care processes had increased substantially between the two rounds of data collection (Tables 5.1 and 5.2). However there had been only been one hour increase in the average reported hours worked. This is presumably because, by the second round of data collection, there had been a substantial reduction in the average caseloads and arrangements had been introduced to weight them according to their complexity for the majority of teams,.

Across both data collection time periods, front line social care workers reported that they had insufficient time for direct work with children. Nevertheless, when they came to map the time they spent on each of the social care processes for looked after children, they appeared to be able to meet the statutory requirements for visits in most cases. At the second round of data collection, practitioners reported a lower *proportion* of time spent in direct contact with children and families in some processes; however this occurred within the context of a larger estimated *number* of hours spent in direct contact in most processes. For instance, the estimated number of hours of direct contact per month spent on the task of maintaining the placement had more than doubled, although the proportion of time spent on direct work had decreased (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2). Additional direct work undertaken as part of this process, such as non statutory visits and accompanying children to after school clubs was reported by some caseworkers at the second data collection point. The data also show a substantial increase in *both* the estimated number of hours *and* the proportion of time spent in direct contact with children and families as part of the planning and review processes, possibly reflecting the greater importance now given to these procedures.

Notwithstanding the above, the data also show an increase in the number of hours spent on administrative activities and indirect work for most of the social work processes. This does not, however, reflect an increase in the *proportion* of hours spent on indirect activities for most processes.

The implementation of the Integrated Children's system has contributed to the increase in indirect work. The difficulty most frequently cited by practitioners in all six participating authorities was their perception that the ICS exemplars have not been designed in a way that reflects practice, are problematic to navigate and are complex and repetitive. Furthermore, problems have been further compounded by insufficient training and a lack of proficiency in both the new procedures and recording requirements. Workers reported a time lapse between the provision of training and information on ICS and its implementation. Their

difficulties were also exacerbated by their lack of familiarity and proficiency with using electronic recording systems in general.

On the other hand, some of the teams consulted during the second round of data collection reported that while time spent on some activities was increased following implementation of the ICS, time was also saved in others. For example, one Intake and Assessment team observed that where a worker had taken the time to input the substantial data required from ICS, when a worker is new to the case, or where a child is re-referred to children's services, a great deal of time is saved on data gathering. Previously Intake and Assessment workers would have to contact each of the teams to gather data. Now this data is held in one place on the electronic recording system.

Some of the difficulties associated with implementation of the ICS have been compounded by problems in the way that the management information systems that support it have been set up. Scott, Moore and Ward (2005) observe that many information systems have been designed to store and record data, with little attention being given to how they might be used to support practice or decision making. This was evident from the data gathered in the focus groups; indeed, many participants did not distinguish between difficulties associated with the ICS and those that lay with the information technology. As noted by McDermid (forthcoming) tensions arise when developing a recording system that facilitates both systematic, routine collection of data, and reflects the varied and complex nature of work carried out with vulnerable children. The focus group data also showed that insufficient access to computers and the management information system was also a problem in some authorities.

The overall increase in indirect activity is not solely attributable to the implementation of the Integrated Children's System or the introduction of electronic recording systems. Since the beginning of the data collection in 2001, practitioners and managers have described how they are working within an environment of continual change. New policies and procedures have been introduced, services have been integrated and departments restructured. They have reported that there has been an increase in statutory processes, and a tightening of timescales. All of these have added to the volume of indirect work, particularly as staff take time to learn new procedures. Concerns have been raised by some workers who felt that social work activity was too focussed on achieving national targets and ensuring that statutory processes were met at the expense of direct contact, in particular, time given to developing rapport and building a relationship with children and their families (see also Burton and van der Broek, 2008).

A shortage of placements has also led to an increase in indirect activity: the introduction of 'gatekeeping' placement panels and higher level needs panels has substantially increased the amount of activity necessary to place a child, while the large numbers of children placed out of authority has led to a substantial amount of time spent on travelling to statutory visits.

The integration of children's services has also increased the amount of indirect activity by requiring that more time be spent in liaising with other professionals. Attempts to improve inter-agency communication, together with resource constraints, have led to the introduction of yet another set of procedures, such as more frequent multi-professional care team meetings to discuss individual cases. Preparation for, and attendance at these meetings have further increased the amount and proportion of indirect work related to some of the processes which underpin the case management of looked after children. Moreover, at both data collection points practitioners reported that they were required to spend a substantial proportion of their time on routine administrative tasks, such as booking rooms and arranging meetings; there is an obvious shortage of the administrative support needed to free up practitioners' time for more direct work.

The implementation of the ICS needs to be understood within this context of a more general move towards increased emphasis on administrative procedures against a background of constant change. The amount of time spent on administrative and indirect procedures has undoubtedly increased, but so has the amount of time spent on direct work with children and families in each case. The increase in administrative and indirect activities can be attributed to a constellation of factors: these include the introduction of the ICS and difficulties with the exemplars; problems with information systems which do not adequately support the tasks required of practitioners; increased liaison with professionals and new procedures following the integration of children's services; a shortage of placements and an increase in gatekeeping procedures; and a shortage of administrative support.

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