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How is supervision recorded in child and family social work? An analysis of 244 written records of formal supervision.

Abstract

Written records belie the complexity of social work practice. And yet, keeping good records is a key function for social workers in England (and elsewhere). Written records provide a future reference point for children, especially those in public care; they are foundational for the inspection of children's services; they provide practitioners and managers with an opportunity to record their thinking and decisions; they add to, result from and cause much of the bureaucratic maze that practitioners have to navigate. As part of a wider study of child and family social work practice, this paper describes an analysis of more than 200 written records of supervision. These records primarily contain narrative descriptions of activity, often leading to a set of actions for the social worker to complete – *what* they should do next. Records of *why* these actions are necessary and *how* the social worker might undertake them are usually absent, as are records of analytical thinking or the child's views. This suggests that written records of supervision are not principally created in order to inform an understanding of the social work decision-making process; rather, they are created to demonstrate management oversight of practice and the accountability of the practitioner.

Introduction

The practice of social work is complex and written records of social work activity cannot help but fail to capture this complexity (Munro, 2011, p. 87). Nevertheless, *"recording is a key social work task and its centrality to the protection of children cannot be over-estimated"* (ibid, p. 111). In part, written records are important because they offer a *"future reference point for the child"* (Munro, 2011, p. 87), giving insight into how decisions were taken and why (Malloy, 2015, Levitt, 2016). Nevertheless, many social workers believe 'doing the work' is more important than 'writing it down' (Social Work Inspection Agency, 2010) and O'Rourke (2010) found that many social workers have little training in how to record effectively. This despite a system preoccupied with writing everything down (Munro, 2011, p. 8).

Understanding what happens in supervision is fundamental to our understanding of

the relationship between organizational context, good practice and outcomes for children and families (Bruce & Austin, 2001, Ruch, 2012, Bashirinia, 2013, Goulder, 2013). Given the wider political and social context of current practice in England, with a pervasive focus on risk (Parton, 2014), large numbers of families 'screened' for signs of abuse or neglect (Bilson and Martin, 2016) and increasingly defensive practice (Whittaker and Havard, 2015), it is unsurprising that recent decades have seen growing concern that supervision is not used to promote high quality practice but as a mechanism for managerial oversight and surveillance (Johns, 2001, Jones, 2003, Noble & Irwin, 2009, Baginsky et al, 2010).

Despite these concerns, we have little understanding of what currently happens in supervision between managers and child and family social workers, with almost all studies to date relying on self-reporting, albeit with some notable exceptions (Authors Own et al, 2016, Forrester et al, 2013, Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011, Ruch, 2007). Beddoe et al (2015) have called for a "*a shift [away] from retrospective accounts [and towards] empirical examination*" (p. 5). This paper relies on self-report too but of a different kind. Rather than interviewing or surveying managers and social workers about what happens in supervision, this paper uses written records of supervision prepared contemporaneously and as part of normal practice. Whilst these records do not provide an objective insight into what happens in supervision, they do indicate what managers believe to be the key features of their supervision discussions worth recording on the child's file whilst, of course, not capturing the complexity and nuance of *how* those discussions take place or what may be discussed but not recorded.

As noted by Beddoe et al (2015, p.16), there are many forms of supervision including informal discussions and group meetings. Nevertheless, formal 1:1 meetings between managers and social workers remain central to the provision of supervision in child and family social work (Baginsky et al, 2010) and much of the theoretical literature is focused on these meetings as well (Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010). The written records of supervision described in this paper are those produced by managers to reside on the child's file following a 1:1 supervision discussion with the allocated social worker.

Recording supervision

In the local authority in question, as one might suppose is true for all local authorities, the provision and recording of supervision are guided by a formal policy

(Unpublished local authority policy document, 2015). This policy says that managers are responsible for maintaining up-to-date written records of supervision activity and that these will form a useful reference point for future discussions, help evaluate progress and serve as a reminder of agreed actions. The purpose of supervision is described as the provision of a safe and confidential environment for staff to reflect on and discuss their work. The policy also says that supervision should help promote and govern excellent practice and help ensure accountability and performance management. Written records of supervision are created in order to help staff manage professional demands, to meet regulatory and audit requirements and to ensure people who use services are receiving a high quality service.

Although analyses of written materials have been used in social work research (Gordon, 1988, Tice, 1998), the written word is generally considered to be less important in social science than the spoken word (Prior, 2003). In child and family social work, written recordings may be viewed with ambivalence, "*on the one hand pointless, on the other absolutely essential*" (O'Rourke, 2009). Written records are typically produced by social workers (and managers) for a multitude of reasons, including agency and personal accountability and as raw material for assessments, plans and court statements (Denscombe, 2014). This suggests that although written records may appear to provide a direct insight into what happens in practice, as with other forms of data they offer only a partial and unverifiable account (Cockburn, 2000).

Research Approach

The methodological stance is one of theory-oriented evaluation (Weiss, 1998) starting with the provision of in-depth descriptions of practice, then developing theories of how different elements are linked and how they produce outcomes (White, 2009). This paper in particular aims to describe the content of written records of formal supervision discussions, intending that this will inform further studies of how supervision shapes practice and outcomes and ultimately contribute to a theory of good social work supervision. The method is action research, with a focus not simply on describing what happens but working with one particular local authority, helping them think about what they currently do in supervision, whether they need to change their approach and, if so, how (and why).

The study was undertaken in an inner London authority (rated as 'good' in their most

recent inspection) engaged in a significant programme of change (Department for Education, 2014a). As part of this programme, the research team were asked to consider the role of first line managers in supporting, challenging and improving social work practice within the 'Child in Need' service, responsible for the assessment of children and the provision of services on a 'child in need' or 'child protection' basis. As part of this work, the managers involved requested that we conduct an analysis of their written records of supervision, the results of which are presented here.

Data Collection

The local authority identified every written record of formal supervision dated between September and December 2015 (n=962). All the records not from the 'Child in Need' service were excluded, as were duplicate records, resulting in 244 unique records. The entire sample was subjected to content analysis, with 50 written records, the first, last and every fifth one, selected for further analysis. This involved coding sentences or paragraphs according to a set of pre-defined categories – 'actions', 'analysis', 'child's wishes and feelings' and 'summary information'. These categories were developed based on the expected content of the written records, expectations generated via a series of four workshops held with the managers, in which lengthy discussions took place about the nature and purpose of formal supervision. These categories also fit well with some of the key elements of the Department for Education's knowledge and skills statement for supervisors (2015a), most evidently "*confident analysis*" (p. 5), "*supporting effective decision making*" (p. 10) and the need to "[take] *account of the wishes and feelings of children*" (p. 5). The thematic nature of the content was then considered in context, with further categories developed on an emergent basis (based on a word-frequency analysis of the entire sample).

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the lead author's university via the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences' ethics committee. It was agreed that individual written records would remain confidential unless there were serious concerns about malpractice, in which case this would be reported to a senior manager. This did not occur. Where records are quoted, names and other details have been changed or omitted to protect the identities of the

families and professionals concerned.

Findings – what do written records of supervision contain?

The written records of supervision share a high degree of consistency. The majority contain summary information about the family and child, including what the social worker has been doing, followed by one or more actions to be completed. A number contain summary information only with no actions. Explicit records of analysis, such as alternative hypotheses, are rare. References to formal theories or research findings are almost entirely absent. The information is overwhelmingly descriptive and relates to things the social worker, parents and children or other professionals have said or done. The actions recorded are mostly organizational – to arrange meetings and make telephone calls, for assessments to be completed and recorded – although there are also many examples of social workers being directed to visit family homes. Often, the process by which the information has been ‘converted’ into a set of actions is unclear.

In the following complete example, the content is mostly descriptive information (who said what to whom), followed by an account of the social worker’s attempts to meet the child:

“Meeting was held on [date] and Jane [mother] informed of the decision to close the case as Peter is now in full time education at college, and is receiving the emotional support he needs via psychotherapy. Jane informed that Peter was being bullied at college, and also said that he had told her that he wanted to kill himself and that he wanted to change psychotherapist and wanted to see [another therapist] instead - she also said that he doesn't want to attend CAMHS anymore and had been missing appointments because of this. She was informed to advise [the therapist] of what Peter had told her. [The social worker] spoke to the college tutor and was advised that Peter has positive peer relationships and was doing well in college. Jane has consulted a solicitor who has written to challenge the decision to close. Peter has not been seen since [date]. [The social worker] contacted him and he has agreed to meet with her. [The social worker] planned to contact Peter to arrange a visit but received information that he had collapsed and was taken to hospital.”

As part of this record, the mother’s views are clearly recorded, as is information from another professional. A rationale is provided for why the case is closing. There is also a record of advice given by the social worker and an account of the social worker’s attempts to see the child. However, the narrative description of who said what to whom predominates, leaving little space to record analysis or reflection regarding the different, possibly contradictory, accounts of the child’s experiences at college or why the mother was so keen for the case to remain open. There is no record of a discussion about *why* the social worker needs to visit the child, given that the case is closing, nor *how* s/he might best conduct the visit.

The summary information contained within the sub-sample of 50 written records covered a wide range of topics, including information from other professionals, descriptions of parental behaviour (things they have done), parents’ views (things they have said) and social workers’ views. Most of the information related to recent events, although some referred to past events, such as previous involvement with Children’s Services (Figure 1).

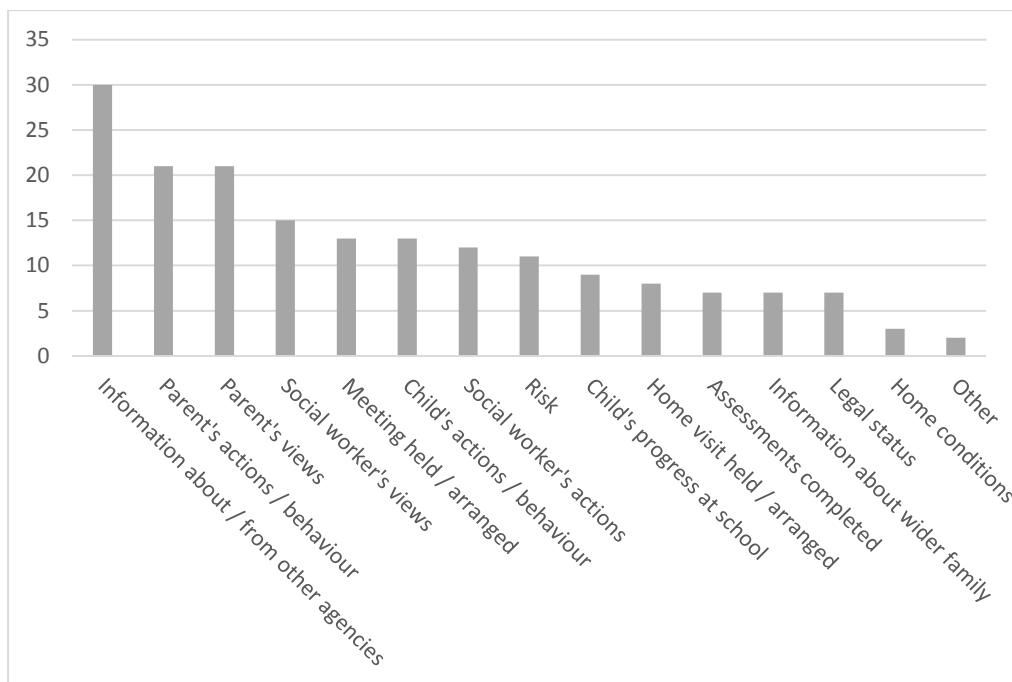


Figure 1. A breakdown of the summary information contained within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

In the following complete example, this focus on describing what people say and do is evident, alongside a record of the social worker’s observations:

“[The manager] did a recent joint visit to the home with the social worker. Mrs. Botha showed them pictures of Kayla dressed up and posing. The pictures weren't sexual or completely inappropriate but they were a bit strange and Kayla did look older in them. Mrs. Botha feels they are evidence she is "meeting men". Mrs. Botha was basically calm but still bizarre in her presentation. [The social worker] tried to touch the photos and Mrs. Botha snatched them away saying "they are mine". Despite this there was a sense she is worried about Kayla. The home was clean and tidy, the younger children are fine and there have been no recent concerns at school. The GP feels that mum is currently fine. Further conversation with Mrs. Botha to try and ascertain where she obtained the pictures.”

Alongside the summary information, there is an implication the child may be at risk of sexual exploitation. It also seems the social worker or manager are worried about the mother's behaviour, although this is not stated explicitly. Finally, there is an action for the social worker to complete. Other than this, it is difficult to know what has been recorded here that would not also appear in the social worker's own record of the visit (following home visits, almost all local authorities require social workers to create a record on the child's file of what happened).

A particular feature of the majority of the written records is the short conceptual step between the summary of information and any actions. The most common actions were to contact, meet with or refer to other professionals ('multi-agency tasks') and for the social worker to meet and / or complete direct work with the child (Figure 2).

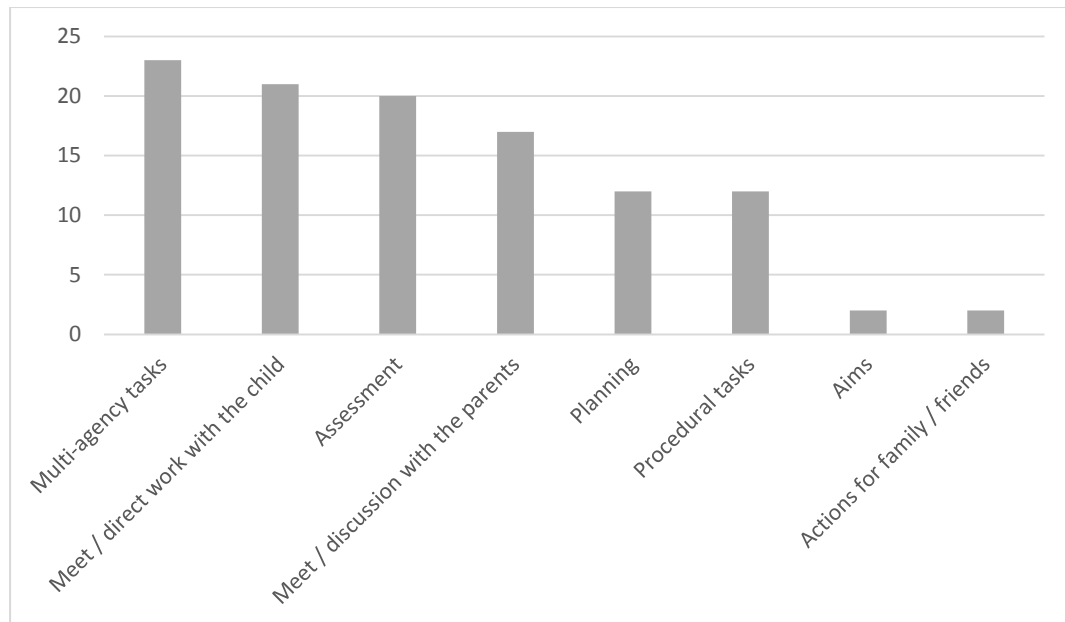


Figure 2. Actions related to different areas contained within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

In one quarter of the written records, alongside a summary of information and actions, there were also examples of analysis:

*“The children are doing well in Joanne’s care at present. The last few weeks have been very difficult for them. Their father, Paul, was sentenced to 7 years in prison for assault. This might be a blessing in disguise as Paul needs intensive rehabilitation and a long sentence will mean that he is eligible for prison programmes. Additionally, their aunt Stephanie’s partner died of heart disease. This man had been very violent to Stephanie and was in prison until recently. George’s behaviour is a bit difficult at present, mainly at school. It is likely that his father being in prison will affect him more than his sister. *Analysis: * The family are doing very well at present – Paul being incarcerated removes him as a risk factor. At this point we should be able to end the CP [child protection] Plan at the next conference. *Directions: * DTM [deputy team manager] is undertaking a home visit in order to meet the children. He will discuss the frequency of prison visits for the children.”*

In this example, information about the family is not only described but analyzed in relation to risk. It is also noted that one child’s behaviour has changed and this may be a result of his father’s incarceration. The link between the information, the analysis and the

action (to discuss the frequency of prison visits for the children) is however not made explicit.

Keyword in context analysis

In addition to this pre-defined coding, a word frequency analysis was undertaken. When common words such as 'it' and 'is' were removed, children were referred to most frequently, usually by their first names. Mothers, usually called 'mum' or 'mother', were referred to about four times more often than fathers, who were typically called 'dad' or 'father' (i.e. not by their names; Figure 3).

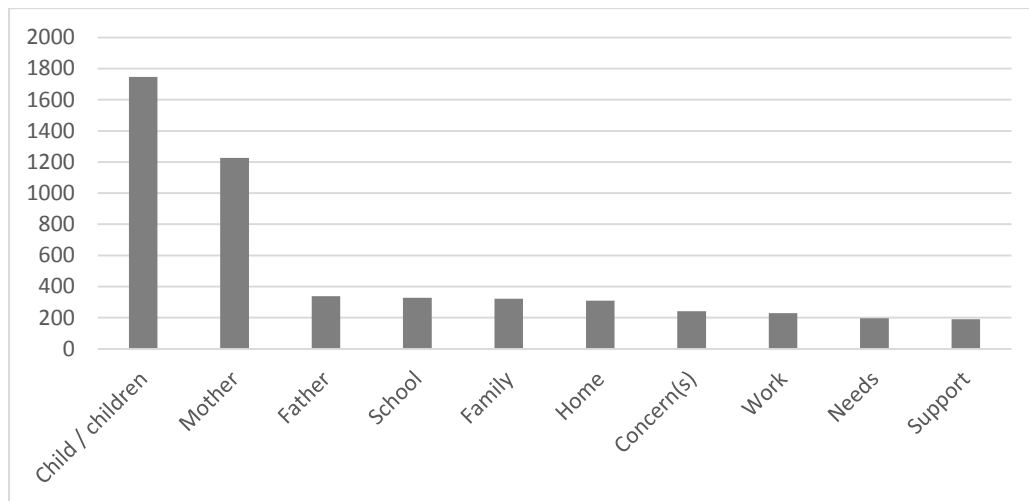


Figure 3. Word frequency in 244 case notes of supervision (including references to mothers, fathers and children by their names).

The first two words – child/ren and mother – were selected for further analysis, based on their frequency. The words 'concern' and 'father' were selected on the judgment of the researcher because of their likely significance. A key-word-in-context analysis was conducted on the 50 selected written records.

'Child/ren'

Including instances where children are referred to by name or as 'child/ren', there are 320 references in the 50 written records (Figure 4). Most recorded information about the child – for example, "Jon is now in full-time college"; "The children also suffer from poor health (asthma) for which they are receiving treatment from a specialist"; "Mrs Kavak and

children are travelling to Albania tomorrow.” Nearly one fifth were procedural references, noting the legal status of the case or that a meeting was due – for example, *“Robbie has been cla (a ‘child looked after’) for 13 weeks - ensure that the process of trying to transfer (case responsibility to another team) begins early”*; *“(we) have identified a worker for Taavi and joint planning meeting to take place.”* Just over one in ten of the references recorded the child’s views.

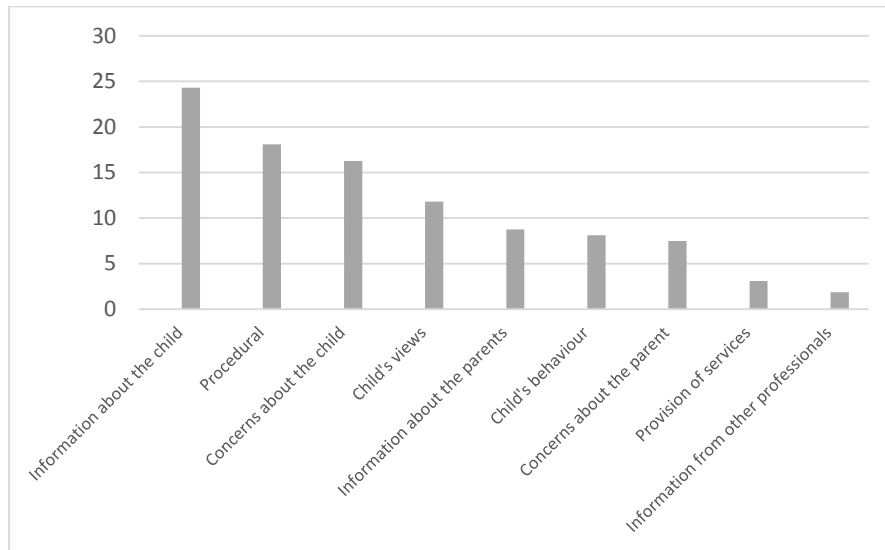


Figure 4. Nature of references to children contained within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

‘Mothers’

The word ‘mother’ appeared 142 times in the 50 selected written records. Most refer to the mother as a source of concern (Figure 5). For example:

“Case is in section 47 due to significant concerns, home conditions, Noah’s poor school attendance, presentation at school, mother’s presentation which has been observed by other professionals to be under the influence of alcohol or other substances. The professional network very concerned for Noah’s safety and wellbeing in mother’s care. There has been minimal change – mother is up and down regarding progress. She is using alcohol / cannabis regularly. Occasionally she’ll stop for a short period. She is not implementing boundaries.”

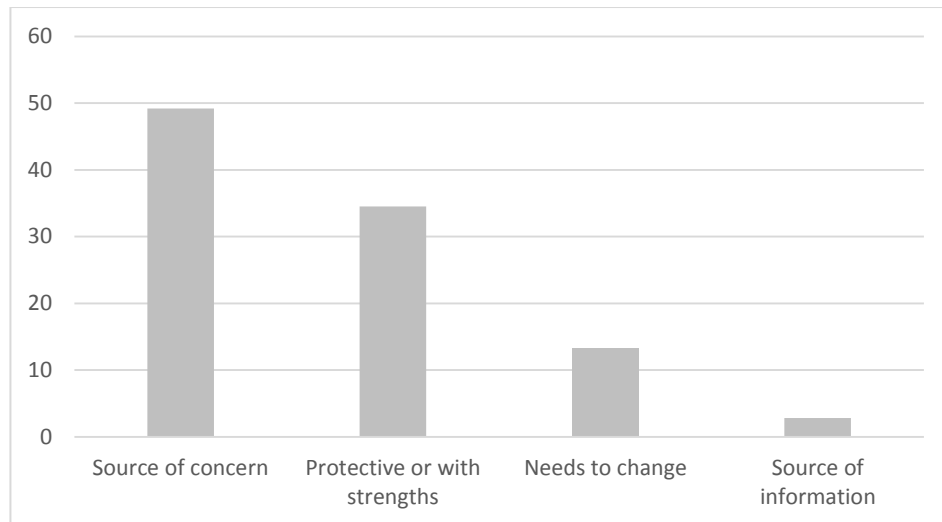


Figure 5. Nature of references to mothers within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

The second most common reference was to the mother as a source of strength. For example:

“There has been DV [domestic violence] in mother's relationship with Ronnie and Amelie's fathers, however mother ended the relationships and reports she can identify the impact of DV upon children. Mother is committed to supporting Ronnie despite his behaviour. Ronnie struggles to engage effectively with support however he is engaging with a mentor. Mother is attending the Parenting Programme and is enjoying this – it is unclear how much she takes from the course however it is positive she is socializing with others.”

‘Fathers’

The word ‘father’ appeared 67 times in the 50 selected written records (Figure 6). More than half refer to the father as a source of concern. For example:

“Michael cannot go and live with his father. His father does not want him in his care, they have a very complicated relationship, Michael has made allegations of his father physically abusing him (slapping him and squaring up to him), his father refuses to have any sort of engagement with Social Care. There are concerns about ongoing domestic violence, which Michael reports is still going on, however not to such an extent as in the past. The mother is now engaging with the SW and talking more

about the relationship. There was recently disclosure that father continues to demand sex...and this is being witnessed by Michael.”

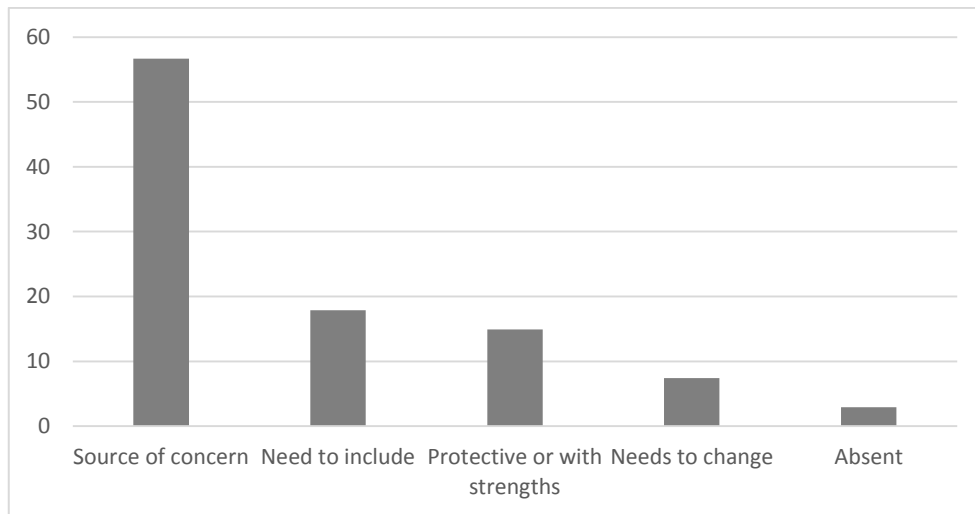


Figure 6. Nature of references to fathers within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

The second most common reference was to the need to include the father in the work. Fathers were also referred to as being absent or disengaged from their children. For example:

“Father is observed to take a back seat in terms of parenting, often takes himself out of visits. Maria and Anthony have reported that things improved since father moved out. It is important that father is included in the CP plan to identify his ability to support the children.”

Less often, fathers were referred to as a source of strength. For example:

“Terry says that things are "ok" now; father is helping out more. He would like to see him making more of an effort with their mother. The girls are happy to have their father back. They think he has made some improvements and is spending time with them. [The social worker] is worried about mother’s presentation. However, school are saying that the children present better and less tired since dad returned. The Children’s attendance is good. The family home is clean / tidy. Father has started [a parenting programme] which is positive considering his limited engagement with us.”

Taking account of the increased number of references to mothers overall, mothers and fathers are equally as likely to be referred to as a source of concern. The difference lies in the ratio between references to concerns and strengths, which for mothers is approximately 3:2 and for fathers is approximately 4:1 (Figure 7).

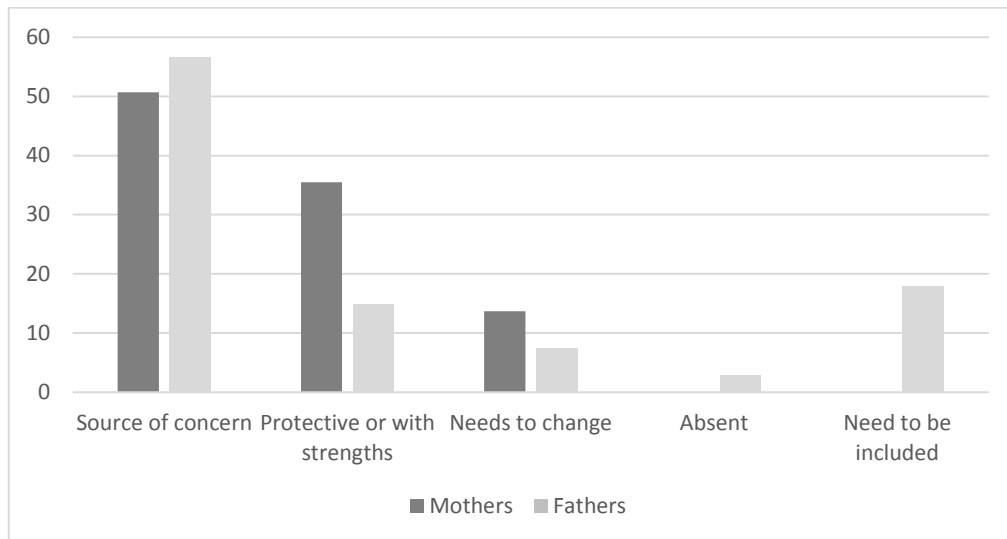


Figure 7. Relative comparison of references to mothers and fathers within 50 selected case notes.

'Concerns'

The word 'concern/s' appeared 148 times in the 50 selected written records. Of these, half related to children and just under half to parents. A small minority related to the wider environment (Figure 8).

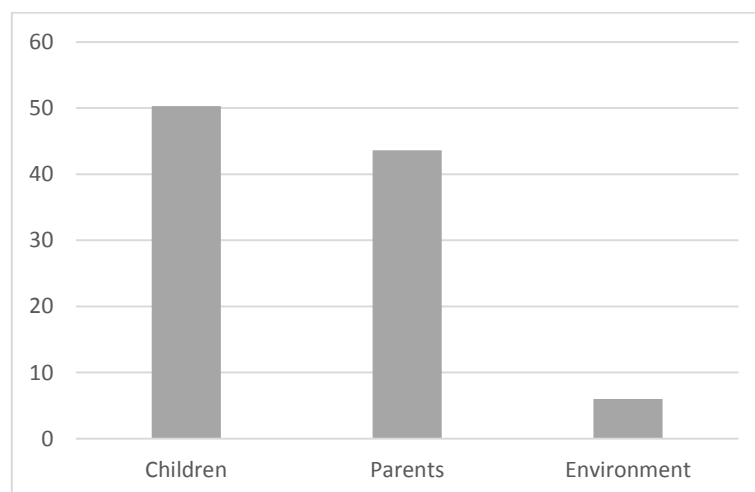


Figure 8. Nature of references to concerns within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

Of those related to children, more than one-third referred to the child’s behaviour. Another one-third referred to unspecified abuse of the child and 10 per cent to child sexual exploitation. The word ‘abuse’ appeared just 28 times within the entire sample although descriptions of abuse were more common – “Jessica disclosed in school that her father punches her and hits her with a belt. She is reported to have stated that her father hits her all over her body and it happens regularly.” Figure 9 shows the enormously wide range of concerns that Children’s Services respond to.

Three of the most common parental concerns include the ‘toxic trio’ of domestic violence, alcohol or substance misuse and mental health difficulties (Brandon et al, 2010). The second most common concern was ‘parenting’ (Figure 10). Most of the concerns about the wider environment (n=12) were related to housing or home conditions (Figure 11).

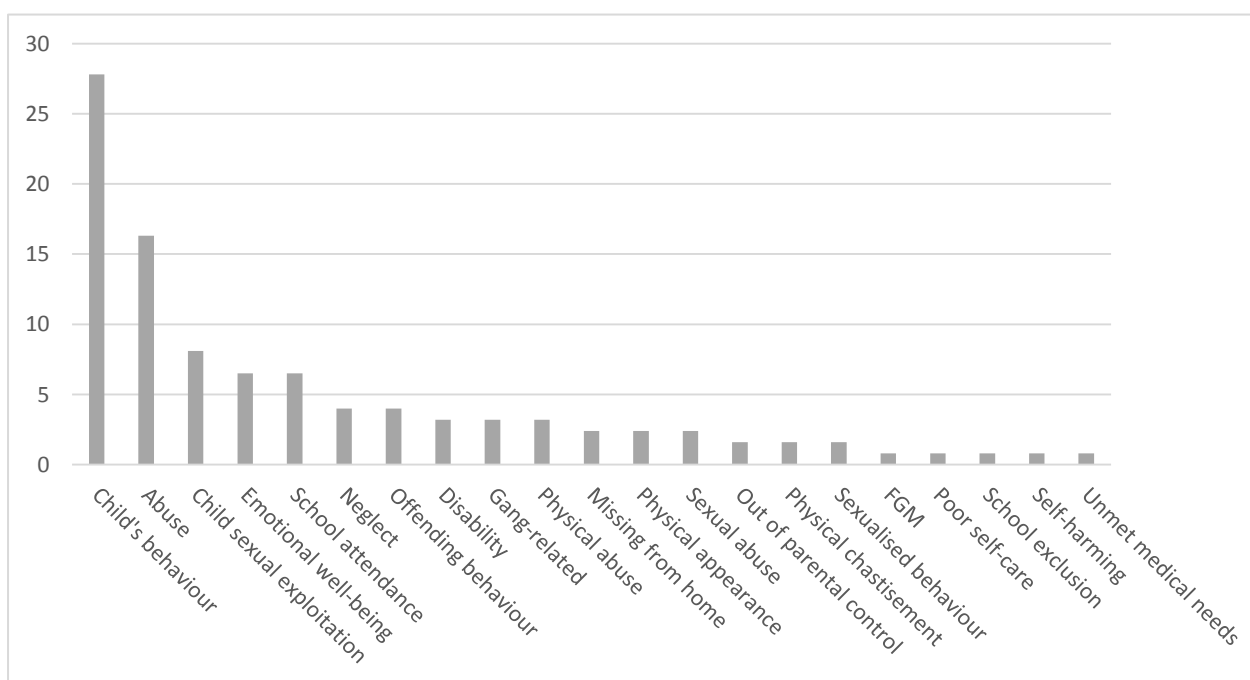


Figure 9. Nature of references to concerns about children within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

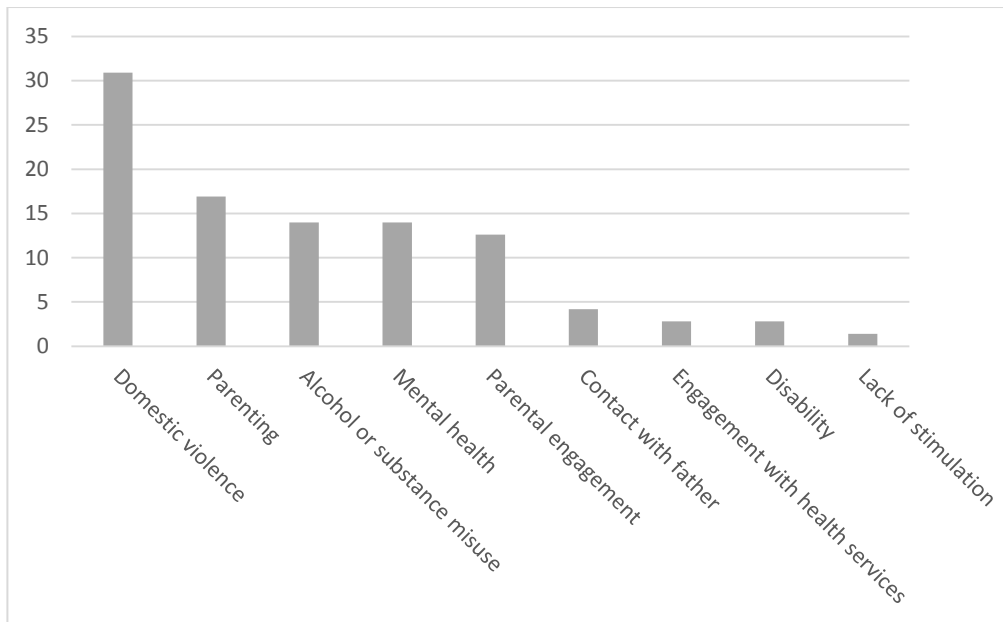


Figure 10. Nature of references to concerns about parents within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

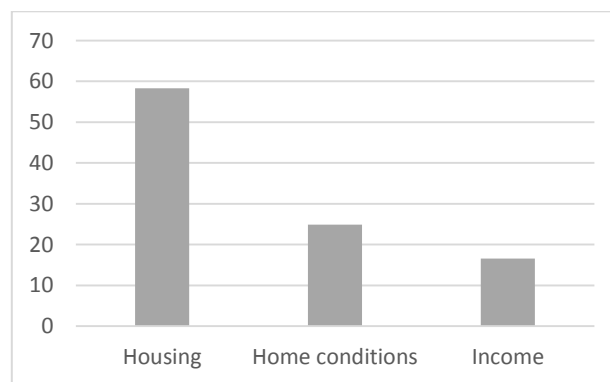


Figure 11. Nature of references to concerns about the wider social environment within 50 selected case notes (percentage of total references).

What is not recorded in supervision written records?

Of the four pre-defined categories, two were most obviously absent from the written records – analysis and the child’s wishes and feelings. According to the Department for Education (2015), analysis involves differentiating between facts and opinions, the use of multiple hypotheses, intuitive and logical ways of thinking and articulation of the reasoning behind conclusions and decisions.

Based on this definition, only a quarter of the 50 selected written records contained analysis. There was little recorded attempt to explore why people might behave in certain ways or how different aspects of family life might interact to create or mitigate risk. Where there were examples of analysis, most related to the parent’s behaviour or level of

understanding and were in one of two forms. Firstly, as in the following example, 'Because of A, B':

"Whilst some of her emotional presentation is linked to feelings around her father it's important this isn't seen as the 'reason' for everything. Agostina is going through a big transition in changing schools and also entering puberty." (Because of changing schools and puberty (A), the child's emotional presentation has changed (B)).

Alternatively, as in the following examples, analysis might take the form of 'A indicates (or results) from B':

"Mother said all the right things, this appears to be because of a long social work involvement." (The mother saying all the right things (A) results from a long history of social work involvement (B)).

"Given the complete lack of engagement it is very tricky to plan work with the family. This indicates that they do not wish for a service aside from the education placement." (The family's lack of engagement (A) indicates they do not want a service (B)).

It was rare to find multiple hypotheses being recorded and equally rare to find analysis linked to actions. The following extract contains probably the best example from the sample of hypothesizing linked to actions:

"There has been some positive progress for Hanako over the past few months, including attending college and presenting as motivated. CIN (child in need) team have been able to progress some effective work with mother in regards to parenting however issues with the eldest child have impacted upon mother's ability to focus and prioritise Hanako's needs. It is interesting that this recent incident occurred when Hanako's sister returned home and possibly this changed the dynamics. Further work with mother is required to explore these changes and the triggers to her behaviour and expectations in the home. There is risk associated with Hanako attending a

male's address and smoking weed for free - risk of CSE [child sexual exploitation]. Further information is required from Police to risk assess this and find out if these individuals are known in relation to CSE."

This record begins with a description of the situation, followed by a hypothesis – that ‘issues’ related to the eldest child have impacted on the mother’s parenting and changed family dynamics. This hypothesis is then linked to an action - to explore these changes with the mother and child. Similarly, there is a hypothesis that smoking cannabis at a particular address indicates a risk of sexual exploitation and this is linked to another action, to obtain further information from the police.

Finally, as can be seen in the next example, the child’s wishes and feelings were often unrecorded. It was more common to find children being discussed without reference to their views. For example, here the focus is on procedural or IT difficulties and concerns about the father, not what the child thinks about his situation:

"Harry continues to reside with his mother as a result of his father's alcohol misuse, we have tried to negotiate for this case to be transferred to [another local authority]. Initially, they said that they would take the case however, have now requested further information. DTM states Harry is safe in the care of his mother, risk assessment undertaken, Police and [the other local authority] aware that Harry is subject to a C.P plan and mother is the primary carer. Father continues to have a drink problem and engagement has been difficult. Manager and SW discussed the quality assurance form. SW explained that due to workload pressures she has not been able to update ICS (integrated children’s system). The SW stated this will be done asap. Action: DTM to check with SW on her visits to Harry and complete quality assurance form. To progress C.P plan."

Summary

Considering the incidence of these key words and the descriptions above, a typical written record of supervision would consist of the following - a summary of information about the family, in the form of who said and did what, highlighting issues of concern, such as substance misuse, most probably in relation to the mother. This will include a description of what the social worker has been doing. The summary may include some positives about

the family but these will be outweighed by concerns. The child's views will not be included directly. The father may be mentioned as a source of concern or in relation to not engaging with services. The record will end with a list of actions to complete.

Strengths and limitations

The primary limitation of the study is that it was based in one local authority, with supervisory approaches in other authorities potentially taking other forms. Yet whilst there are examples of specifically different approaches, such as Signs of Safety (Bunn, 2013, p. 39 – 40), there are no grounds for believing supervision is substantially different in many other settings. The authority has been inspected as 'good' and many of the supervisors have worked in other authorities; none identified supervisory practice in this authority as being unusual. On balance it is likely these written records are fairly typical, although similar studies will be undertaken in other authorities in order to test this proposition.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that supervision is a complex activity, not limited to what happens in formal meetings and written records do not offer a complete and unbiased account of what happened. Managers can choose what to record (subjective self-selection), guided by the local authority's supervision policy. The records cannot capture *how* these discussions took place and other discussions may take place but not be recorded.

The primary strength of the study is that it provides a direct insight into supervisory recording practices, in turn helping to illuminate that which managers believe to be the key components and content of their formal supervisory discussions worth recording on the child's file.

Discussion

According to the Department for Education's knowledge and skills statement for supervisors (2015a), supervision should enable social workers to think about their practice and themselves, to examine different hypotheses and plan their work. Good supervision should also make a difference not only to social workers but to children and families (ibid). Whilst written records of supervision cannot capture the complexity of what 'really' happens in supervision, nevertheless, the written record is important, offering a tangible

and lasting record of the social worker and manager's thinking, the actions they agreed and why.

The majority of the 244 written records present a similar structure, outlining what is known about the family, particularly what parents have said and done, followed by actions to be completed. These actions, which tend to focus on working with other professionals, visiting the family and completing assessments, often appear reasonable. Social workers should be doing these things and often (Department for Education, 2015b). However, two key things are missing. Firstly, it is rare to find explicit analysis linking what is known about the family with action. Clearly, managers and social workers know a great deal of information about families they work with, a testament to their communication and information-gathering skills. However, there is little evidence of information being routinely reflected upon or analyzed. This echoes a common criticism made of Children's Services (and other professionals) in Serious Case Reviews (Tri.X, 2013, p. 4). It also reflects a model of working focused primarily on assessing and monitoring families, rather than the provision of help and support (Bilson and Martin, 2016, Department for Education, 2014b, p. 5 - 7).

Secondly, the actions refer almost exclusively to 'what' needs to happen (sometimes 'when'), with almost no consideration of 'how' and 'why'. Discussions about how best to work with families and why certain actions might be necessary are not recorded and based on previous observations of these same managers in supervision, this reflects not simply an absence of recording but a genuine absence, of those discussion not taking place (Authors Own et al, 2016). Forrester (2016) has criticized this focus on "*the what and when of activity, without sufficient attention to why and almost none on how practice should be carried out*" (p. 8), suggesting it is problematic because it creates the impression of a very busy system but without sufficient understanding of purpose. This can leave families and workers unsure as to why they are working together, what they are trying to achieve and how they are going to achieve it. In extreme, but not uncommon, circumstances, it may leave families feeling 'processed' by a system that does not have their best interests at heart (Tickle, 2016).

A key driver for this may be the nature – or at least the perception – of public inspection of Children's Services in England. In their current framework, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 2015) use the word 'supervision' only 5 times in a document of more than 16,000 words. Once in relation to the supervision of foster carers,

once in relation to court orders and three times in relation to social workers. The first of these says local authorities are required to provide a copy of their supervision policy to the inspectors. The second and third references relate to employer standards, whether or not the local authority provides “*effective organizational support for the professional development of social workers*” (p. 30). Further, these standards say that supervision should “*improve the quality of decision-making and interventions, enable effective line-management and organizational accountability, identify and address issues related to caseloads and workload management and help identify and achieve personal learning, career and development opportunities.*” (Social Work Reform Board, 2012). Although all of these elements are important, including organizational accountability, only the first seems explicitly related to the quality of social work practice per se. In 2013, as a possible testament to their perceived importance, these standards were archived from the Department for Education’s website. Thus, OFSTED has only a very narrow interest in supervision and almost none in the role it plays in enabling or supporting social workers to “*reflect on the understanding they are forming of the family [and] their emotional response*” (Munro, 2010, p. 53). Rather, the interest is in creating a record of management oversight and of accountable actions.

The overall approach reflected in these records is of a problem-saturated, deficit-model of family life. Problems and risks are recorded prominently and often, positives and strengths are not. The imbalanced focus on mothers is notable and provides further evidence for the argument that in child protection contexts, practitioners tend to focus on working the mother-child dyad (Maxwell et al, 2012). When they are referred to, fathers are more likely to be considered as ‘threatening’ than supportive (Featherstone, 2003). Children are clearly seen often and their wishes and feelings sought but the influence of the child’s voice upon decision-making – or even a clear record of what the child has said - is difficult to discern.

Conclusion

These findings represent something of a conundrum. Having worked with the managers who produced these records over the past year, it is evident they care deeply about the families they work with, about the well-being of social workers and how best to work with parents and children. And yet almost none of this is reflected in their written

records of supervision. The problem is so widespread it cannot be due to individual failings on the part of one or two managers, rather it reflects an organization, not uniquely, in which the purpose of recording is essentially defensive, a way of demonstrating accountability to OFSTED and others, rather than a way of informing practice and providing a rationale for decisions.

Of course, supervision and practice more generally must be recorded in some way, not least because children and families have the right to access a record of their involvement with Children's Services. Even so, considering the majority of the written records described in this paper, it is unclear how many would help someone else understand the decision-making process. However, the purpose of examining these written records has not been to draw conclusions about social work recording more generally. Attempts to change recording practices on their own are, in any case, unlikely to produce meaningful changes in practice or in outcomes for children and families. Instead, it seems more likely that these recordings are a *reflection* of what happens in practice and a consequence rather than a cause of any apparent difficulties. In combination with a previous study of supervision (Author's Own et al, 2016), these records provide further evidence that child and family social work managers in this authority – and quite possibly elsewhere too – understand their role to be one of problem-solving. Social workers provide a narrative update (recorded by the manager in a written record) and the manager in turn provides a series of solutions, most often in the form of concrete and organizationally accountable actions for the social worker (which again, are recorded by the manager in a written record). This approach is at odds with the majority, if not every, theoretical model of what social work supervision is supposed to be. Thus, the challenge is not 'how might social work supervision be more helpfully recorded?' but 'how can managers be enabled and supported to provide more supportive, more theoretically-informed, more reflective and more analytical supervision?'

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