

Improving the effectiveness of the child protection system

Purpose

For discussion.

Summary

On Friday 23 June, the LGA and Early Intervention Foundation published a series of research reports examining the effectiveness of the child protection system. This paper summarises the main findings from that work, with Donna Molloy (Director of Dissemination at the Early Intervention Foundation) and Tom McBride (Director of Evidence at the Early Intervention Foundation) attending the CYP Board to lead a discussion focussed on the implications for practice and policy at both local and national level.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. Consider the key findings from the research and advise on potential implications for both national and local practice.
2. Note the paper and endorse its priorities for action.

Action

Officers to action as appropriate.

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Background

1. Increasing demands on the child protection system in the context of current fiscal constraints has led to growing debate as to how scarce resources can be used to best effect. In response, the LGA, Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and NSPCC, with support from Research in Practice (RiP) and the Department of Social Policy and Intervention at the University of Oxford, have collaborated on a large scale research project aiming to address three main questions:
 - 1.1. What has been shown to improve outcomes for children in the child protection system?
 - 1.2. What do we know about what local areas are delivering as part of the child protection system?
 - 1.3. What do we know about the overall effectiveness of the child protection system?
2. The scope of this work did not include interventions and approaches provided as part of a local early help offer, which could reduce later demand on children's social care. The evidence on effectiveness in early help is the core focus of the Early Intervention Foundation, with a range of resources available at www.eif.org.uk.
2. The research was published on Friday 23 June, with a project overview report (attached at **Appendix A**) providing a summary of key findings and lessons from five detailed research papers, which have been published separately and are available to download at www.local.gov.uk.
3. Donna Molloy, Director of Dissemination at the Early Intervention Foundation, will attend the meeting and lead a discussion on the main findings from the research and the implications for practice and policy at both local and national level.

Summary of main findings

4. The report highlights several named services and interventions that have been shown through trials and other robust methods to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, which will be of interest to members and those commissioning services. Notably, many of these are not currently widely available in local areas, suggesting a gap between what is known from evidence and what is delivered in reality.
5. There are currently a range of programmes being delivered locally which do not yet have evidence of improving outcomes for children who are at risk. This includes some well-established models such as multi agency safeguarding hubs (MASH), and the report calls for these to be prioritised for robust evaluation.
6. There are clear messages about the need to build capacity to use and generate evidence, as the current lack of capacity within councils makes it very difficult to engage

with evidence and make the case locally for introducing new evidence based approaches.

7. This lack of analytical capacity was reflected by the local authorities interviewed in the case study work, who reported that a lack of resources to effectively monitor the things they were delivering meant that they were sometimes operating without a strong sense of whether current services / practices were delivering the intended objectives or not.
8. Using evidence requires capacity, technical expertise and resource, all of which are very hard for local authorities to find when analytical capacity has been pared back due to budgetary constraints. The report concludes that central support is required to enable councils to use and apply evidence, tackle misconceptions and monitor whether the things being delivered locally are actually keeping children safe / improving outcomes. The DfE will shortly be launching a new What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, and the report contains some clear messages on how this new infrastructure can be used most effectively.

Priorities for action

9. Supporting use of evidence of effectiveness and overcoming misconceptions about gaps in the evidence. Specifically, those working in evidence generation and knowledge brokerage need to do more to:
 - 9.1. Communicate the nature of the evidence for child protection to local leaders and commissioners, including which activities are supported by good evidence, which activities are harder to evaluate, and where the gaps are.
 - 9.2. Guide local decisions by providing clear information about which approaches are likely to provide the most effective help and protection and those that have yet to demonstrate impact on outcomes for children.
 - 9.3. Make it clear whether and how particular circumstances and local context might impact upon the effectiveness of an intervention.
10. Building 'evidence literacy' among local leaders, commissioners and practitioners:
 - 10.1. It is important to ensure that the way evidence is presented helps to build awareness of why evidence matters and makes clear to practitioners how the evidence in question can underpin professional judgment and direct work.
 - 10.2. At a practice level, it is vital that social workers feel confident in using evidence and in playing a role in generating new evidence.
11. Filling the gaps in the evidence:
 - 11.1. This work highlights some clear gaps and issues in relation to the available evidence that need to be addressed by all those with an interest in ensuring child protection work is informed by evidence.

11.2. Developing evidence of impact takes time, and the evidence base is always some distance behind innovation. Nevertheless, it is vitally important that it keeps pace with local delivery and the realities of the sector in a time of increasing demand and fewer resources. Funding that is currently available for generating evidence to support child protection could be usefully directed towards evaluating some of the widely used approaches that have not yet been well evaluated, such as multiagency safeguarding hubs (MASH) and multi-disciplinary delivery models. This information should also include detail about the costs of delivery and cost– benefit analysis, to help other areas develop business cases.

12. Supporting the analytical capacity in local areas:

12.1. Action is needed to develop the analytical capacity in children’s social care to understand the nature of their local demand and apply the evidence as it relates to leadership, commissioning and practice. Support to test and monitor local approaches is particularly important to reduce the volume of activity where very little is known about impact or outcomes. Government, in close partnership with the sector, has an important role to play in providing assistance or capacity in local areas that have had to reduce own their internal capacity for evidence appraisal and data analysis.

Appendices

13. **Appendix A** – Improving the effectiveness of the child protection system: Overview

Implications for Wales¹

14. The research was primarily concerned with the child protection system and practice in England, though many of the findings will be equally relevant for child protection departments in Wales.

Financial Implications

15. None.

Next steps

16. Members are asked to:

16.1. Consider the key findings from the research and advise on potential implications for both national and local practice.

16.2. Note the paper and endorse its priorities for action.

¹ The WLGA pays a membership fee to the LGA on behalf of all Welsh councils and we lobby for them on “non-devolved” issues - e.g. DWP work. The WLGA provides “top-slice” for workforce support, but none for “improvement”.