

16 January 2019

Outcomes for children's social care

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

Ivana La Valle and Diane Hart will be attending the meeting to outline the work they are undertaking to develop a new outcomes framework for children's social care services. The intention of the project is to offer local authorities a more meaningful way of measuring the quality and impact of their service than is currently available, potentially supporting the LGA CYP Board's *Bright Futures* call for "local and national government to develop a better understanding of 'what works' and 'what good looks like' for children's services".

The paper that follows has been submitted by the research team, and outlines the background and emerging findings for discussion and direction from Board members.

Recommendation

Members are asked to consider the work underway to develop a new outcomes framework for children's social care services. The research team are particularly interested to hear Members' views on their proposed approach, and whether this is likely to provide more meaningful information on the performance of children's social care services.

Action

Researchers to note the views of Board Members and incorporate into future work.

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Outcomes for children's social care

The following paper has been submitted by Ivana La Valle and Diane Hart, researchers leading on work to develop a new outcomes framework for children's social care services. Ivana and Diane will attend the meeting and present the latest findings from the project for discussion and direction from the Board.

Background

1. In 2016 a feasibility study looked at whether there is sufficiently robust national evidence to compare children's social care services based on the quality of their provision, their capacity to improve and ultimately make a positive difference to the lives of children in need and their families. It concluded that it is not currently possible to do this, because there is no consensus on the expected outcomes from these services.
2. The study involved a review of key policy documents and research studies published in the previous decade. The review found that assessments of children's social care services focus largely on what it is easy to measure (for example processes), rather than the kind of changes in the lives of children and families one would expect when these services intervene.
3. The review also found very limited robust evidence on what can help to achieve positive outcomes for children in need and their families. The research literature abounds with narrative descriptions of what good social work practice should look like, but there is a scarcity of quantitative indicators that have been used to systematically and 'objectively' measure quality and link it to positive outcomes for users. Similarly, the evidence about organisational features that support good practice and effective service delivery is largely based on subjective opinions, with little consensus on how these features should be measured in a standardised way.
4. The study also included an analysis of children's social care data routinely collected by the Department for Education (DfE) on child outcomes and workforce and the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework ratings. The aim of this analysis was to explore relationships between different DfE outcomes, and between Ofsted judgements and the data used by DfE to monitor children's social care services.
5. There did not seem to be any pattern in terms of the local authorities that were in the top or bottom percentiles for the DfE child outcome variables. For example, no local authorities ranked in the top 10% for more than five out of 11 outcome variables and no authorities ranked in the worst performing 10% in more than four out of 11 variables. Furthermore, the (regression) analysis found that only one child outcome variable and only one workforce variable had a statistically significant relationship with the Ofsted ratings, and these associations were very weak.
6. The findings from the evidence reviews and the DfE/Ofsted data analysis were discussed with representatives from the sector, academic experts and policy makers. The clear

recommendation from this consultation was that there is need to develop a framework of expected outcomes from children's social care services, which reflects the views and expectations of key stakeholders, as well as the research evidence.

What should good outcomes from children's social care look like?

7. In the past year, the team that carried out the feasibility study has been gathering views on what 'good outcomes' from children's social care services should look like from those who plan, deliver and use these services. Building on the existing evidence base and the views of those consulted, the team has been developing an outcomes framework for children's social care services, which will be tested with key stakeholders to ensure that it will be useful and can be used to support service planning, monitoring and improvement.
8. The first issue explored by the study was the mechanisms through which children's social care services can make a positive difference to the lives of children in need and their families. We found a consensus that positive outcomes for users require stable and supportive relationships with front line staff, who have the skills and resources to meet the individual needs of children and their families. As we will see later, this means analysing data on the organisational and workforce 'conditions' that can support positive outcomes for users.
9. We then considered if there are any interim user outcomes we could measure to understand if a service is likely to achieve its goal of making a positive difference to the lives of children in need and their families. Again, there was a consensus that for a service to be effective, children and their families who access social care services must feel supported, valued and involved in planning the intervention.
10. Lastly, we considered what we need to measure to understand if and how children's social care services are making a positive difference to the lives of children in need and their families. The findings show that this means addressing three overarching questions: are children's social care services keeping children safe? Are they supporting the health and wellbeing of children in need? Are they supporting children in need to achieve their educational potential? In order to answer these three overarching questions, four types of data are needed.
11. First, we need cross-sectional data which provides a snapshot of patterns of use within children's social care services and how these change over time (e.g. number of looked after children, number of children with a child protection plan). Most of the data currently collected to monitor children's social care services falls into this category.
12. Second, to understand if and how children's social services make a difference we need longitudinal data on individual children who access these services to understand their 'journey' through services, and what difference services make to their lives. Very little evidence currently collected to monitor and evaluate children's social care services relies on longitudinal data, which can provide measures of 'distance travelled'. This is in

contrast with other children's policy areas, where longitudinal data has played a key role in policy development, monitoring and evaluation.

13. Third, we need proxy data, that is data about the organisation and its workforce that can help to explore if there are the 'right conditions' for services to make a positive difference to the lives of children in need and their families. Recent evaluations involving children's social care services have been gathering this kind of proxy evidence, but there are no standardised and validated methods of collecting these data and national data on these measures is very limited.
14. Fourth, a key finding from our consultation is that users' feedback must play a key role in understanding if services are working as intended and are likely to deliver the expected outcomes for users. While it is becoming increasingly common for children's social care services to collect data on children and families' experiences and views of services, a range of different tools are being used to collect this data and use it to inform service delivery and planning. This means that data collected by different LAs is not comparable, and there is no national data on users' experiences and views of services.
15. In our presentation, we will go through some examples showing what data is currently available to monitor children's social care services performance and why it is not always meaningful. We will then outline what additional data would be required to make a robust assessment of their performance. We would like to hear your views on our proposed approach, that is: if and how you think our approach will provide more meaningful information on the performance of children's social care services.

Next steps

16. The outcomes framework is being 'populated' with some existing outcome indicators (for example those currently required by DfE) and with new outcome indicators that more accurately reflect what good outcomes from children's social care should look like.
17. We plan to test the outcome framework and indicators with a range of stakeholders including: service users, ADCS, Performance and Improvement Leads, DfE and Ofsted. The main purpose of the testing will be to ensure that the framework will be considered useful and useable by those who plan and deliver children's social care services locally.
18. The new outcomes framework will be published in July 2019 and we may seek funding to work with some local authorities that wish to use the new framework.

Implications for Wales

19. There are no implications for Wales arising from this paper.

Financial implications

20. There are no financial implications for the LGA arising from this paper.