

Information and Information Systems for Looked After Children

Report on work in the second year of the Data Analysis Network for Children's Services

The Data Analysis Network helps local authority social services departments to improve the ways in which they define, gather, analyse and make use of information in order to achieve better outcomes for children in need, particularly those who are looked after. The Network consists of 6 unitary authorities in Wales with a part-time co-ordinator under the direction of the Centre for Child and Family Research.

- Most local authorities use a range of different paper- and computer-based systems for recording data on looked after children. These disparate systems co-exist uneasily, with frequent incompatibilities and discrepancies in the data.
- Computer-based information systems in current use are often structured around a series of bureaucratic processes which do not reflect the needs of practice.
- Data entry tends to be an additional, separate, repetitive and rather onerous chore, whereas it should be simply a part of the normal way of achieving a particular task such as taking a referral, making a placement, or assigning a case.
- Practitioners are less likely to record information accurately and keep it up to date if the systems they use do not enable them to make use of that information in their daily work.
- More priority needs to be given to defining and obtaining outputs from computer-based information systems and to their use in day-to-day practice and management. Case summaries, chronologies, practitioner caseloads, lists of reviews due and similar routine outputs should be available directly from system menus.
- Statistical returns tend to be perceived as a periodic research chore conducted by specialist policy staff to satisfy the demands of senior management or an external authority rather than as a routine function of management at all levels to monitor and improve outcomes.
- Most of the data in 'management information systems' are generated and gathered by practitioners and would be more accurate and complete if those systems served practitioners better and they themselves were involved in interpreting the results and applying them to improve practice.
- Local authorities can generally aggregate and report the numbers of children whose cases do not reach a particular performance target but do not always put in place the feedback loops to ensure that the individual children who make up the numbers are monitored so that their outcomes can be improved.



Project Aims

The Data Analysis Network was established to assist local authorities to improve the ways in which they gather, analyse and make use of information about their services to children in need, in particular those children who are placed in care or accommodation.

Methodology

Questionnaires, spreadsheets and workshop discussions were used to identify problems and suggest ways in which local authorities can improve their use of information. Investigation focused on:

- Performance indicators and their definitions.
- Trigger events in the lives of looked after children which lead to information being recorded.
- The information 'dividends' which should be provided for social work practitioners to facilitate their work and motivate recording, ownership and quality control of data.
- The feedback loops which should link aggregate management information back to individual children to improve their outcomes.
- Creating information models, using database technology, to illustrate how information can be collected and presented in screen forms and reports geared to daily practice.

Proliferation of systems

Local authorities typically operate multiple information systems which coexist but are only loosely integrated with one another. These systems may be paper- or computer-based and include:

1. Client index system – usually common to both adult and child clients of social services. A key problem is the limited extent to which such systems can represent family relationships and display the history of contact with both the parents and children in a single family
2. Boarded out payments system – geared to the requirements of finance departments and the need for timely payment, especially of foster carers. This is often the most accurate source of information on placement histories, but is based on the payment and the carer rather than the child.
3. Placements system – often administered by a family placement team, it is used to identify carer registration, training and support and placement vacancies. Used as the basis for making or advising looked after children teams about placement choices,

it often lacks specific information on the outcomes of previous placements and the reasons for placement breakdown.

4. Movement forms – used to record the movement of a looked after child from one placement to another, these may be part of or linked to the payments and SSDA 903 systems. They provide an alternative to the placement history recorded in the LAC-EIR2, and are often inconsistent with it.
5. Returns system – geared primarily to producing the SSDA 903 return and therefore uses the particular definition of placement episode which is peculiar to that return.
6. Child Protection Register – for security reasons this is often held separately and may not be accessible to practitioners who need to know immediately whether a child is on the register.
7. The LAC system – linked to placement and care planning and case review, the Looking After Children system is mainly paper based and often poorly integrated with other (usually older) systems.

Team clerks and administrators play a key role because their knowledge bridges the gaps in these multiple information systems. Conversely, the resistance that often attends proposals for direct data input by social workers derives in part from their reluctance to learn a number of different systems rather than a single one which should be geared to the daily practice of looking after children.

Dividends

Effective case management of looked after children requires social workers (and in particular the duty officer) to have immediately available a considerable amount of information about a child, including details of the current and previous histories of legal status, care plan, placement, and carers.

In addition there is a wide range of important information concerning a child's family, health, education, additional support services (such as counselling, psychiatry, educational support), offending history (if any) and contacts with social workers (reviews and visits). Although such information is usually present on paper, either on the LAC forms or elsewhere on case files, it is generally spread, often chaotically, over many different forms and case-recording sheets, which make it difficult in practice to retrieve.

Some of this information may be recorded in computerised information systems. But these systems are generally structured around bureaucratic processes (client recording, placement change, boarding-out payment, preparation of 903 return and, more recently, performance indicators) and fail to provide an holistic, child-centred approach. Even when it is stored within a single system, the information is typically fragmented across different modules, menus and screens and it is hard to obtain a comprehensive view of the child and her/his recent history.

Equally, because the 'containers' of the system do not provide a general view of the child, much key information (especially that which concerns the family, life events and the child's own achievements) tends to be missed because it relates to events which occur outside the various bureaucratic or service delivery-oriented contexts which define the social services information systems.

In short, whether from paper or computer records, it is often very difficult to retrieve the wide gamut of information required for sensible day-to-day case management of a looked after child. This explains why practitioners sometimes have little regard for these systems and are reluctant to devote time to recording and entering data into them. When they do so they are rewarded with very little in return for their investment. The systems do not pay a dividend.

Outputs

Provision for outputs tends not to be built into commercially provided IT systems for social services or to be made only in a rudimentary way. Suppliers assume that client authorities will use separate reporting software to generate their reports.

Local authorities tend not to make sufficient provision of financial and design resources for reporting. New systems implemented without the requisite reporting facilities in place soon lose credibility with staff users. Separate reporting software is expensive so that authorities sometimes do not invest in an adequate number of user licences, thus restricting deployment. These applications are not easy to use and require extensive and costly training. Even when this is provided, managers may use the packages too infrequently to retain the skill and knowledge. Meanwhile, IT departments often have insufficient staff and resources to provide a timely response for ad hoc requests from managers for reports.

Returns

Performance management processes are incomplete so long as they are confined to making 'returns' of 'performance indicators'. At present production of returns tends to be a one-way process involving collection of data, aggregation and submission to a remote body or meeting (internal management, inspection or to the National Assembly). At that point the process often stalls, either indefinitely or at least for too long a period to produce changes for those children who are shown by the indicators to require affirmative action from the local authority.

Feedback loops

The DAN authorities attempted to trace the links in the knowledge chain, and especially to identify the 'feedback loops' which return information from the aggregated level of returns and performance indicators to the individual case-worker, case file and child.

DAN members were asked about the process of reporting on placement stability, a key performance indicator for Children First. All the authorities had identified the individual children with three or more placements, yet none had marked the children's files or designated any particular action for them and only one knew what had happened to these particular children since. None had put any procedure in place (other than routine reviews) to pick up and act on the cases of these children. None appeared to have done any research on why certain children have multiple, unstable placements. And, finally, only one authority appeared to be able to produce a regular, routine report on unstable placements. Commonly 'the computer' or inadequate software is blamed for this knowledge deficit. However, while some IT systems are indeed of poor quality, it is also striking that considerable differences are apparent between the knowledge derived from the same systems in different authorities.

Two of the authorities observed to be deriving the most information and analysis from their systems were using one of the oldest and most-often derided commercial software packages. Often, it is not the software as such that is at fault, but the way in which the system is implemented and, in particular, the failure to define and include reports, to produce them routinely and to use them at every level of the authority in departmental, team and case management.

Principal researchers

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Project length

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Where to find more evidence

Gatehouse, M. (2001) *Data Analysis Network for Children's Services (Annual Report 2000)*, Loughborough, Centre for Child and Family Research.

Gatehouse, M. and Ward, H. (2002) *Information and Information Systems for Looked After Children (Annual Report 2001)*, Loughborough, CCFR.

These are available in hard copy, in English or Welsh. Alternatively, they can be downloaded from the CCFR website: www.ccfrr.org.uk

DAN will publish a third and final annual report in the first quarter of 2003.

The various fact-sheets, questionnaires and spreadsheet analysis grids developed for the project are available as appendices to the DAN report, can be supplied in electronic form on request and will be published as a DAN Toolkit on CD and on the CCFR website.

The DAN Placement and Placements & Essential Information Model, which takes the form of a Microsoft Access database, is available by e-mail from mike@keen.demon.co.uk, and will be included in the DAN Toolkit CD and on the CCFR website.

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