RPU 188 November 2016

The research summaries this month look at the use of technology in children’s social care including:

- How Electronic Information Systems shape social work practice and how we might better ensure practice shapes new developments
- Social workers’ experiences of the importance of emotions and workplace culture in information sharing
- Tracking Child Protection professionals’ emotional responses during a virtual home visit and how this might be used to support staff development
- An internet service designed to enhance communication between foster carers and social workers

Policy and report highlights this month

- Inquiry: Implications of Brexit for the justice system, including family court
- Children’s Centres should become Family Hubs, says Children’s Commissioner
- Social care reform: Government responds to select committee report
- National Audit Office publishes report on services for children in need of help or protection

Related resources by Research in Practice

- Social media: opportunities as well as risks for frontline practice: Strategic briefing
- Social media: opportunities as well as risks for frontline practice: Recorded webinar
- Enabling effective contribution of health partners to safeguarding: Leaders Briefing
- Multi agency working: Research and Policy Update September 2015

Related resources by others

- Research summaries from National Elf Service
  - Mental health provider views about digital technologies in day-to-day practice
  - Turn on, tune in, burnout: clerical burden, e-health systems and doctor burnout
  - Digital innovation works best when users are involved at every stage
  - Can Twitter data analysis help improve service quality in hospital settings? #EvidenceLive
- NHS Digital - research study about how frontline social workers can be supported through use of information and technology
A divergence of opinion: how those involved in child and family social work are responding to the challenges of the Internet and social media

Resources this month

- From IRISS:
  - Using tools to enhance engagement in social services
  - Appreciative Inquiry: what it is and examples of the practices, strengths and limitations of the approach
  - Complementary discussion of Appreciative Inquiry on Iriss.fm
  - Reflection for practitioners working with care leavers: online versions of IRISS’ Relationships Matter conversation tool and case studies of how it has been used

- New resources from NSPCC:
  - What Should I Do? An NSPCC report which looks at the risks posed to young people online around sexual content, grooming and sexual exploitation
  - A newly updated Keeping children safe online e-learning course
  - Free Share Aware lesson plans and guidance

- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children: ADCS Special Thematic Report
- Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers: A Rees Centre report
- The Early Intervention Foundation outlines five key lessons from the evaluation of the Troubled Families programme
- Wiley Psychology supports World Mental Health Day with a special collection of free articles on Psychological First Aid

Articles and Summaries

“Facts with feelings – social workers’ experiences of sharing information across team and agency borders to safeguard children” (2016)

Information sharing solutions need to be better informed by an understanding of the role of emotions and workplace culture in information management. Here, Lees considers practitioners’ experiences of sharing information across teams in one Local Authority (LA).

Since Lord Laming’s (2003) report following the death of Victoria Climbié, the dominance of techno-rational conceptualisations of information sharing has been challenged. Sharing information takes place in social context, affected by:

- professional culture (Hunt and van der Arend, 2002; Richardson and Asthana, 2006)
- organisational structures (Bellamy et al, 2008)
- practice at the policy, systems and individual levels (Richardson, 2007)
• the unclear, emergent nature of some of the information in child protection (CP) social work (Munro, 2005)
• emotional responses to the work (Horwath, 2007; Thompson, 2010)

Cooper (2005) highlights the difference between policy makers’ ‘surface’ level perceptions of information sharing as being about structures and procedures, and the ‘depth’ understanding of practitioners about how it feels to do CP work.

For the purposes of this study, Lees undertook observation, 32 semi-structured interviews and document analysis across a referral screening team (RST), initial assessment team and longer term team in one LA for two weeks. Observations included day to day office activities and multi-agency meetings on and off site, and were focused on the events taking place, the emotional atmosphere, and the researcher’s inner experience (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000).

The surface of information sharing

When asked about activities integral to information sharing, practitioners talked of collecting, interpreting and communicating information. Information recording was also discussed, in the context of a managerialist culture concerned with performance and blame.

Participants found it difficult to identify any task not involving information sharing, confirming Thompson’s (2010; 2013) view that information sharing is no longer just a part of CP work but has become the work. Practitioners discussed the need for clear facts on which to base decision making. This required practitioners to be skilled and tenacious in obtaining information and communicating it, both verbally – to families - and in writing, such as case file recording and court documents.

The depth of information sharing

All tasks, from receiving the referral through to decision making and court proceedings, were loaded with emotion and anxiety:

• frustration, when referrals were received late and with missing information, resulting in children being left in potentially dangerous situations;
• fear and anxiety around giving evidence in court
• the dynamics of working with people who may mislead or be intimidating
• joy and satisfaction when a family managed to change or an assessment was completed well.

A further complexity related to workers managing their reactions to information about abuse. Practitioners spoke of using instinct and emotion to help them understand a case; these responses were accepted as valuable sources of intelligence, vital to gaining an accurate understanding of what was happening for families. Such ‘emotion information’ (Thompson 2010) needs to be substantiated by factual evidence, bringing ‘depth’ concerns to the ‘surface’. Practitioners gave striking examples of knowledge that began as instinctive which they managed to ‘surface’ and articulate in case work.
Conclusions

These findings highlight practice and information sharing as both rational and emotional and identify the challenge in the requirement for ‘emotional information’ to be shared and recorded within rational frameworks. Where this is done inconsistently this can result in teams and agencies developing an understanding of a case based on different information and differing interpretations of whether or not an intervention threshold has been met.

Lees concludes by suggesting:

- Increased acknowledgement of the dual nature of information.
- Practice development in order to use ‘emotional information’ to service users’ benefit.
- Training in information sharing to emphasise the emotional aspects alongside technical-rational instruments such as flow charts.
- Shadowing and shared learning opportunities to explore others’ roles (Cooper, 2005).
- Psychoanalytically informed interventions such as the use of the case study discussion model (Ruch, 2007) or systems-centred therapy (eg Agazarian, 1992).

References


Internet Technology: An Empowering or Alienating Tool for Communication between Foster Carers and Social Workers? (2013)

Foster carers and social workers are increasingly expected to embrace information and communication technologies (ICT). This article reports on the introduction of a purpose-designed internet service, to enhance interaction and information exchange between foster carers and social workers, provide a secure social networking facility for communication between carers and create the potential for a fostering community forum.

In 2009, the Digital Inclusion Team (DIT), funded to implement the ‘Inclusion Through Innovation Report’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005), commissioned an independent evaluation of the implementation of the fostering internet service within three authorities in England.

Findings

- Carers felt that the internet service was not integrated into social workers’ practice, that social workers were too busy and that too few staff used the service to make it an accepted method of communication. Carers preferred sending emails, as they knew social workers ‘check e-mails first thing’, or text messages as ‘people can’t ignore a text’.
- Only 60 per cent of the 205 foster carers were in touch with other foster carers through any means. Forty per cent reported that they were not in touch with other foster carers and some stated that they had neither the time nor
inclination to do so. This latter group clearly did not perceive that they were in any way part of a 'community of fostering practice'.

- Those foster carers who had contacted other carers did so for practical and emotional purposes: to arrange car shares, suggest excursions, discuss paperwork, to 'off load', seek or offer support and chat.
- Booking training courses via the website was popular in all three authorities.
- Perceived concerns around confidentiality prevented wider use of an electronic daily log facility, indicating a need for further monitoring and review of systems, but also for ongoing support and training for carers to increase confidence in, and awareness of, the level of confidentiality built into the internet service.
- The message board was used to provide, rather than request, information and the information tended to be oriented to task communication rather than socio-emotional content.
- The exchange of information and views and the potential for increased foster carer knowledge and participation was perceived as threatening by those social workers, who felt less technologically competent than some foster carers.
- Some carers stated they fostered because they liked children and that an overemphasis on standards and qualifications, or a requirement to become IT proficient in order to foster well, could act as impediments. Other foster carers were willing to use all the resources, including IT resources, available to them to foster as effectively as possible.

Discussion

There were some marked similarities in the factors that either impeded or facilitated the implementation and subsequent use of the fostering internet service. The first factor was the degree to which carers owned, or whose LA provided, computers and had access to a broadband connection. The second was the degree to which both carers and staff were computer literate, had sufficient training and ongoing support to use the online site and were open or resistant to the use of ICT in a fostering context. Thirdly, whether the LA promoted the idea of some carers being encouraged to be 'champions', providing peer support by and for carers, was significant. A fourth factor was whether carers and social workers were accessing rather than sharing knowledge through the website, being passive rather than active participants of this virtual fostering community.

A consideration arising from the findings was whether a system could be developed in relation to certain tasks, such as secure file transfer, for those wishing to use it in this way, when others were unwilling or unable to take this up. Strategies were needed for foster carers who, either through resistance or lack of ICT connection, were excluded from information and opportunities that were available to other carers and for social workers who were resistant or unable to embrace new technologies.

Conclusions
Whilst recognising the limitations of a small-scale evaluative study, it is notable that the findings echo themes identified in other studies in terms of agency and social workers’ and foster carers’ perceptions, concerns and hopes regarding the use of ICT, suggesting a need for further research on the wider issue of power relationships between foster carers and social workers and the part technology can play in empowering carers and enhancing their professional standing.

References


The complexity of child protection (CP) places heavy demands on professionals making decisions in difficult circumstances. These stresses can affect workers’ health and ability to be reflective, leading to ‘compassion fatigue’, ‘burnout’ and ‘secondary trauma’. One way forward may be through the acknowledgement, engagement, support and supervision of emotion in practice.

Aiming to support CP professionals to practice the complex skills involved in working with neglect, the University of Kent has developed a CP simulation – ‘Rosie 2’. It follows a social worker and health visitor on a virtual home visit to a family where neglect is a significant concern. This pilot study tracks the emotional responses of eight social workers, five health visitors and 11 control group members to the simulation using eye tracker technology and facial recognition software. In so doing, it provides information on the use of simulations for CP training and how professionals might be supported to be aware of and regulate their emotional responses.

Results

The results indicated that the prevailing emotion exhibited by this sample group was a ‘neutral’ response. There were differences between the groups, with health visitors displaying more sadness and social workers demonstrating greater surprise and disgust. A control group consisting of university educated non-professionals showed more anger and sadness than the two groups of professionals.

Discussion

It is possible that the control group were more likely to expose their reactions, whilst professionals become adept at hiding some emotions (Mills, 2011); this is something that warrants further inquiry. It may be encouraging that professionals are better able to manage their emotions than non-professionals. However, as Gibbs (2009), Halton
(2004) and Menzies-Lyth (1988) point out, this repression could also indicate the inappropriate management of anxiety. Indeed, Gibbs (2009: 290) identifies that ‘individuals working in emotionally charged arenas like child protection can collectively, often unconsciously and collusively develop defences to allay their anxiety’. Without challenge, emotions can compromise and cloud decision-making and can accommodate ‘untested assumptions, biases and personal beliefs’ (Gibbs, 2009: 290). Conrad and Keller-Guenther (2006) also suggest that burnout is associated with increasing emotional distance from people and situations.

Sadness dominated the emotional responses of the small group of health visitors. This suggests clear links with compassion fatigue, whereby professionals internalise the trauma of their clients and could, in the longer term, develop a negative emotional response (Conrad and Keller-Guenther, 2006). This finding raises questions about the exploration of emotion within supervisory sessions.

Additionally, there was a significant gap between the levels of ‘disgust’ expressed by these two professional groups. The social workers’ consistently higher levels of disgust in comparison to those exhibited by these health visitors are worthy of analysis. What might this sense of disgust mean for communication, assessment and relationship building with families? Such responses may well affect judgement and emotional functioning in working with families and may be transmitted nonverbally to them.

Fergusson highlights the contemporary practice dilemma of organisational cultures that leave little room for emotion, and where ‘admitting to fears and other feelings of disgust which appear to judge and oppress people who are invariably already subordinated has become virtually taboo’ (Fergusson, 2005: 790). A number of authors have responded to the surfacing of unconscious and irrational responses in CP practice and the significant impact of professionals’ emotional states on the relationship with the client (Stanley and Goddard, 1993). Child Protection practitioners must be able to identify and respond to negative emotions and anxiety in order to function effectively (Cooper, 2005). Well-managed reflective supervision plays a critical role here (Morrison, 2005).

Conclusions

This is a very small study but the findings suggest value in the use of simulations providing immersive, realistic environments for CP training. The authors remind us of the link between the wellbeing and emotional analysis of the practitioner and positive and optimum engagement with children and families. The main implication is that reflective supervision is needed to facilitate reflection and discussion on emotional responses in the management of cases.

References


“Technology configuring the user: Implications for the redesign of Electronic Information Systems in Social Work” (2016)

Electronic information systems (IS) used in child protection services have been strongly criticised in England and Australia as presenting ‘substantial obstacles to good practice’ (Munro 2011: 214). Understanding the problems is crucial to redesigning IS in ways that support rather than hinder frontline practice. In this article, based on ethnographic research in four Australian and two English organisations, examples of how technology has impacted on social work practice are analysed.

Changes to practice – information gathering
Because IS can store more information than paper files, the temptation can be to record as much detail as possible on the premise that mining it in the future may provide previously hidden insights. In one organisation, this included information which was passed verbally between staff and required all practitioners involved to take time to enter information into the system.

However, compelling practitioners to record information just because they can may not be constructive as social workers develop ways to manage information to meet their practice needs, such as persisting to share information verbally only (Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2013). Information systems also affect the shape of recorded information (Aas, 2004; Shaw et al, 2009), for instance by encouraging practitioners to predetermine and categorise information using tick-boxes or dropdown lists. This ‘jigsaw’ approach to gathering information is limited because meanings and values are not fixed and building a picture of a child’s life is an process requiring ongoing analysis of the information (Thompson, 2013).

Changes to priorities - servicing the IS versus service users

Participants estimated that they spend 60-80 per cent of their time engaged with IS and the study explored the reasons for this concerning pattern.

One participant reflected that on returning to work after a 20-year gap they felt like no one was trusted to do their job anymore as everything had to be recorded on the IS. If it was not recorded, it was as if it had not been done – even if recording took twice as long as the activity. This participant also reflected that technology had made it possible for frontline practitioners to do tasks previously undertaken by administrative staff. In interviews with younger staff, many, though not all, complained about the amount of time they spend servicing the IS. This might mean that some did not resent this way of working, accepted it and/or had adapted to it.

Social work practice and priorities have been ‘configured’ through interactions with IS. In particular, the balance of time spent on interacting with service users as opposed to IS has shifted, with the potential to jeopardise the central goal of social work, engagement with people in supportive interventions.

Implications for future IS design and social work practice development

Problems identified in social work practice and with IS are interlinked. However, while IS have reconfigured social work practice, changes in IS design will not automatically lead to improvements in practice.

New approaches to practice are difficult to embed into IS. In current designs, social work activities are modelled procedurally, as if all the variables in a situation can be predicted and planned for (Wastell and White, 2013). For example, in an initiative to promote relationship-based practice, it might be possible to build into an IS expectations that social workers spend a certain amount of time with a service user. However, specifying this time in advance is no use to social workers who are aware that it is quality rather than quantity that counts in building supportive relationships and that the time required to do so will vary from one service user to another.
With these considerations in mind, a strategy for addressing these challenges involves:

- Reversing the process of social work practice being configured by technology by developing a clear vision of how improvements to practice can be made, which can then inform the redesign of IS.
- Putting this vision at the heart of participatory design, with the functionality of IS directly benefiting practice initiatives and practitioners directing designers, rather than the other way around.
- Evaluating new IS in terms of their effects on social work practice, specifically the extent to which they support and promote practice improvement initiatives; ethnography is an effective method.

References


Parliamentary Business
Children and Social Work Bill: Government accepts that new regulator must be ‘independent’

For a full list of Bills currently before Parliament click here.

Ministers have responded to concerns about the need for social work regulation to be independent of government by bringing forward amendments to the Children and Social Work Bill that provide for the establishment of a ‘bespoke regulator for social workers’ that will operate ‘at arm’s length’ from ministers.

The government had intended to move responsibility for regulating social work from the Health and Care Professions Council into an executive agency, which would potentially have allowed ministers more direct influence over regulation.

However, in a letter to peers on 1 November, Education Minister Lord Nash confirmed the new body, which will be known as Social Work England, will operate at arm’s length from government and will be modelled on a similar approach taken in the devolved administrations, thereby ‘ensuring an appropriate separation between the regulator and ministers’. The Bill also provides for oversight of Social Work England by the Professional Standards Authority.

‘The new body will have a clear remit around maintaining a register of social workers; running fitness to practise hearings; and setting standards for both initial education and training, and professional standards (including proficiency and continuous professional development). We intend that, over time, Social Work England will work to raise the minimum standards across all these aspects.’

The Department has now published an updated policy paper detailing its revised proposals for regulatory reform.

Editorial note: On 1 November, UNISON published a survey of social workers which found that only one per cent of respondents believe the government’s plans for social work reform address their main concerns. More than two-thirds (68.6%) of the 2,858 respondents were opposed to plans to allow local authorities to apply for exemption from social care legislation in order to innovate and test new ways of working (9.5% agreed with the proposal, 21.8% didn’t know); 69% also felt the plans would lead to more children being placed at risk.

Almost all respondents (98.8%) said they did not trust the government not to privatise social work functions and half (49.2%) said the Chief Social Workers are not articulating their main concerns (43.6% of respondents said they didn’t know). Respondents were asked to rank what they felt the government’s main priorities should be for supporting social work. The top concerns were: investing more in social work services; tackling caseload levels; improving pay and conditions; and improving levels of supervision.

further info

Homelessness Reduction Bill
Bob Blackman’s Private Member’s Bill proposes a number of changes to the current homelessness legislation set out in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 in order to refocus local authorities on efforts to prevent homelessness.

The Bill would place duties on local housing authorities to intervene at an earlier stage to prevent homelessness and to take reasonable steps to help anyone who becomes homeless to secure accommodation.

Local authorities are already under a general duty to ensure that advice about homelessness (and its prevention) is available to everyone in their area free of charge. Clause 2 of the Bill would expand this duty by setting service standards (particularly in relation to preventing homelessness) and requiring that advice services meet the needs of specified vulnerable groups, including care leavers, young people released from youth detention and victims of domestic abuse.

Clause 8 clarifies the circumstances under which care leavers should be treated as having a local connection. All care leavers who are ‘owed continuing duties’ (under section 23C of the Children Act 1989) would be deemed to have a local connection in the area of the local authority that owes them those duties. Where a young person was looked after by a county council, they will have a local connection to any district in that county; where a care leaver has lived in a different area for at least two years (some or all of which falls before they turned 16) they also have a local connection with that district until they are 21.

Bob Blackman (Con, Harlow East) drew second place in the Private Members’ Bill Ballot earlier this year. On 24 October the government confirmed it would support his Bill’s progress through Parliament. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee took evidence on the draft Bill ahead of its formal publication and the House of Commons Library published a briefing paper on the Bill ahead of its second reading on 28 October. The Bill has now proceeded to committee stage.

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

Baroness Tonge’s Private Member’s Bill, which seeks to raise the minimum age for consent to marriage and civil partnership from 16 to 18 years, had its second reading in the House of Lords on 21 October.

Speaking in the debate, Baroness Tonge said girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage and the consequences can be ‘enormous’. ‘They can suffer lifelong injuries following childbirth and, because they then have children to look after, they lose out on education and opportunity.’

Baroness Tonge chairs the All Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, which in 2012 published a report on child marriage in the UK and the developing world. She told the House the group had ‘heard many stories about horrendous child marriages and their consequences, as
well as taking testimonies from British women who had been married against their will between the ages of 16 and 18. We also learned … that young girls in the 16 to 18 age group are often badly treated and abused within their new families.’

Although the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 has made forced marriage a criminal offence and strengthened provisions on consent for children aged 16 and 17, Baroness Tonge said young people are often reluctantly complying with their parents' wishes so their marriage may not appear to be ‘forced’.

For the government, Baroness Goldie said the number of people marrying at 16 or 17 'is small and continues to decrease without any legislative encouragement'. Of the 480,000 people who got married in 2013, only 210 were aged 16 or 17, she said.

The government is committed to ending forced marriage but believes that ‘the existing requirement of parental or judicial consent for those under 18 continues to provide adequate protection’. The government has seen ‘no evidence of any failing that requires raising the minimum age to 18 in England and Wales’. Baroness Goldie added that raising the age of consent to 18 would also introduce a disparity with the minimum ages applicable in the other UK jurisdictions.

The Bill passed its second reading; its committee stage is yet to be scheduled.

further info

Maternity and Paternity Leave (Premature Birth) Bill

Steve Reed (Lab, Croydon North) has introduced a Private Member's Bill under the Ten Minute Rule that would amend the Employment Rights Act 1996 to give parents of prematurely born babies extended parental leave.

Speaking in the House of Commons, Mr Reed told MPs that the stress and anxiety of having a premature baby, who may need intensive hospital care for weeks or months, leads to two in every five mothers suffering some form of mental ill health.

He said: ‘One mum told me her baby spent three months in intensive care, and that time was all taken out of her statutory maternity leave. So her baby suffers twice: first, from the serious health complications of being born too soon and, secondly, from having less time at home with Mum and Dad – vital bonding time that can affect a child’s development for many years to come.’

On returning to work, another mother lost her job because her employer would not give her the time off to cope with her premature child’s frequent illnesses. ‘We should give the parents of premature babies all the support they need to cope at one of the most traumatic times they will ever experience,’ Mr Reed said.

further info

School Admissions (Special Educational Needs) Bill
Martin Vickers (Con, Cleethorpes) has introduced a Private Member’s Bill that he says would close a loophole in the Equality Act 2010 that adversely affects some children with autism.

Speaking in the House of Commons on 1 November, Mr Vickers said that while the Equality Act exists to protect people of all ages from discrimination, it is an irony that it is sometimes ‘being used to discriminate against children with autism’. He told MPs that ‘there appears to be a loophole in the law that does not consider challenging behaviour linked to a child’s disability as an impairment’.

Regulation 4(1) of the Equality Act 2010 (Disability) Regulations 2010 identifies a tendency to the physical abuse of others as one of the ‘conditions’ that ‘are to be treated as not amounting to impairment’ for the purposes of the Act. Mr Vickers said some school governing bodies are using this as a reason not to meet the needs of an autistic child and to exclude them.

Mr Vickers gave the example of the son of two of his constituents who was permanently excluded by his primary school when it became an academy. Although they successfully challenged the decision through an independent panel review, which concluded the school had made a premature decision and asked it to reconsider, the panel had no power to reinstate their son.

Mr Vickers said: ‘Parents of autistic children can sometimes have an uphill task to ensure that a full and comprehensive education is made available. My Bill seeks to remedy one of the loopholes and I hope the Minister will work with me and the various charities and support groups to ensure that the difficulties faced by my constituents and thousands of others is minimised and eventually eliminated.’

Consultations

**NICE guidance: Alcohol and school-based interventions**

NICE is consulting on its draft scope for an updated public health guideline on school-based interventions relating to alcohol and children and young people.

The revised guideline will not cover children under the age of 11 but, in line with the Children and Families Act 2014, will include young people aged 18 to 25 who have special educational needs or disabilities. The guideline is aimed primarily at local authorities, teachers, school governors and school nurses, but also other health and social care practitioners who work with children and young people. It will cover secure children’s homes and secure training centres, as well as schools and colleges.

Among other questions, the consultation asks which universal and school-based programmes are effective at preventing or reducing alcohol use among young
people aged 18 to 25 with special educational needs or disabilities. The revised guideline (which will replace guidance issued in 2007) is scheduled for publication in January 2019. **Consultation ends 4 November**

Inquiry: Disclosure of criminal records relating to offences committed prior to age 18

MPs on the House of Commons Justice Committee have launched a short inquiry into the system governing the disclosure of criminal records relating to offences committed by people when they were under 18 years of age.

The committee would welcome written submissions on the effectiveness of the statutory framework that applies to the disclosure (to employers and others). MPs will also consider the effects of changes made in 2013 to the filtering of offences from criminal records checks and of changes made in 2014 to rehabilitation periods.

The committee would also welcome views on whether the regime governing disclosure of criminal records relating to offences committed by under-18s should be extended to cover offences committed by young adults between ages 21 and 25. This follows publication in October of the committee’s report on young adults in the criminal justice system, which called for ‘a step change in policy and practice’ (see RPU 188). **Deadline for submissions 11 November**

Inquiry: Implications of Brexit for the justice system, including family court

The House of Commons Justice Committee is to carry out an inquiry into the implications of Brexit for the justice system, including the family court.

The purpose of the inquiry will be to establish which questions it will be essential for the government to resolve during its negotiations of the terms for the UK’s departure from the European Union.

There is currently a significant body of EU law dealing with the handling of cross-border legal issues, including the Brussels IIA Regulation that covers family matters. Post-Brexit, this EU legislation will not automatically apply to the UK.

The committee is inviting written submissions that address the implications of Brexit for the criminal justice system in England and Wales and future cooperation with EU member states and agencies, and for the civil justice system, including the family court. **Deadline for submissions 11 November**
Editorial note: In September, the Joint Committee on Human Rights launched an inquiry into the human rights implications of Brexit, including children’s rights – see RPU 187).

further info

Reports and Reviews

Children in custody get fewer visits the further they’re held from home

Children in custody receive fewer visits from family members and community-based professionals the further they are held from home, a thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons has found.

The review, which was commissioned by the Youth Justice Board, finds that each 25-mile interval a child is held from home is associated with one less visit from a family member or friend; and each 26-mile interval is associated with one less visit from an external professional.

Over the last ten years, the number of children held in young offender institutions (YOIs) and secure training centres (STCs) has fallen by more than two-thirds, from 2,647 in 2005 to 802 in April 2016. The consequent reduction in the number of YOIs and STCs means some children are now being held further from home.

The report draws on interviews with children and staff, survey data from four YOIs and two STCs (n=595) and recall data provided by the Youth Justice Board (n=1,343). During interviews, the main disadvantage children identified with being a long way from home was the impact on visits. Most caseworkers and managers also linked children’s vulnerabilities to problems with family contact.

Little was being done to mitigate the impact of distance from home on family contact, however, with the exception of one YOI that was piloting the use of Skype to maintain contact with both family and professionals. The pilot ‘was at an early stage and it was too early to determine its effectiveness’.

Caseworkers told the review that it is sometimes harder to put a suitable release package in place when children are held a long way from home. In particular, family mediation work and ‘through the gate work’ (ie, continuation into the community of work begun in custody) are seen as more difficult.

The report calls for ‘more imaginative solutions’ to mitigate the lack of visits, including an additional phone call allowance in place of unused visit entitlements and greater use of new technologies to enable children to maintain appropriate contact with external professionals. Children should also be routinely given the opportunity to discuss how they feel and how any negative impacts arising from their distance from home can be mitigated.
Children’s Centres should become Family Hubs, says Children’s Commissioner

The Children’s Commissioner Anne Longfield is calling for Children’s Centres to be developed into Family Hubs that offer a wide range of services from ‘under one roof’ to children in need and their families.

The Commissioner has published a short ‘discussion paper’ looking at how the existing infrastructure of Children’s Centres could be used to support the many thousands of families with children ‘who are on social services’ radar and who are considered in need of services, but who do not reach the threshold of significant harm’.

Family Hubs would be able to focus on providing interventions that strengthen family relationships and provide additional support for children outside the home. The paper envisages hubs offering a range of services such as childcare, new parent support, couple and relationship support, help with parenting issues and advice on employment and training.

Specialist support for children and parents, including mental health services and advice on substance misuse, could also be delivered by hubs, the paper suggests, while the Troubled Families programme could be ‘integrated into the Family Hub offering’.

The idea is not new. In 2014 the national charity 4Children called on local authorities to invest in Children’s Centres as ‘hubs for local improvement activity’ (see RPU 158), while later that year the Centre for Social Justice called for a nationwide rollout of Family Hubs. The idea of ‘augmenting’ Children’s Centres into Family Hubs was also supported in a report published earlier this year by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Children’s Centres.

Think tank urges government and local authorities to adopt ‘a proactive approach’ to outsourcing

The think tank Demos is calling for a new children’s social care forum to help maximise the potential benefits of outsourcing in children’s services.

The call comes in a new report urging local authorities and central government to adopt a proactive approach to outsourcing so that ‘it is seen not as a way of responding to failure or cutting costs, but as a way to improve outcomes in a planned and strategic manner’.
The report is based on an examination of how the independent trust model has been implemented in the UK (in Slough and Doncaster) and the liberalisation of children’s services in the US (in Kansas, Florida and Washington), as well as interviews with experts and a review of existing literature. The project also benefited from the support of an expert advisory board, who provided advice and feedback on the report.

At a time of rising demand for children’s social care and continuing budget constraint, the report concludes that outsourcing, when used correctly, has the potential to help local authorities ‘deal with the pressures they face, drive up standards, and ultimately secure better outcomes for vulnerable children’. However, it also warns that outsourcing ‘may not be the best response to failure, in that failure does not create the right conditions under which outsourcing succeeds’.

The report identifies the characteristics that outsourced children’s services that are working well tend to have in common. These include: strong and collaborative commissioner-provider relationships ‘with high levels of communication and trust, and mutual respect’; strategic use of data covering population, costs and outcomes; and a strong focus on consensually agreed outcomes.

The report also calls for a new national children’s social care forum with a ‘wide membership’ of social care leaders and professionals, commissioners, provider, and children and families. The forum would have two key purposes:

(1) **To bring people together to develop outcomes-based strategies.** In order to maximise the benefits of outsourcing, commissioners need to be ‘ambitious in their approach’ to using outcomes. Developing outcomes-based strategies is complex, however, and a forum would enable those involved in the process to come together to share expertise.

(2) **To help identify ways of cutting costs while maintaining quality and promoting innovation.** The report says budget cuts ‘often lead commissioners to make knee-jerk decisions that do not ultimately result in cost savings’. The forum would enable commissioners to learn from each other’s experiences and help ‘to prevent short-termist attempts to cut costs’.

Similar bodies already exist in other areas, the report says. For example, the National Market Development Fund leads improvements in the adult social care sector, while the Children and Young People’s Health Outcomes Forum advises on the most important health outcomes for children and young people.

**Further info**

[Social care reform: Government responds to select committee report](www.rip.org.uk)
The Education Committee has published the government’s response to its report on social work reform (see RPU 185). (The response deals with each of the committee’s recommendations in turn; it can be read in full by clicking here.)

Among other issues, the response welcomes the committee’s call for an extended study of Frontline alongside university routes to qualification, in order to establish comparative long-term outcomes. Government says it will commission research looking into the long-term retention and progression of Frontline and Step Up participants. ‘We intend to explore fully options around comparison groups in order to determine the impact of our fast-track programmes against other entry routes.’ (The government anticipates that by 2018 ‘around 30% of new child and family social workers will come from fast-tack routes, and up to 40% by 2020’.)

On social worker retention, the government says its plans for ‘more rigorous accreditation of social work courses and our continued commitment to the ASYE programme’ are helping to ensure social workers are ‘better prepared at the start of their careers’. The development of a national assessment and accreditation system, tailored standards for CPD and exploration of more effective practice through the Innovation Programme will also ‘all play an important role in supporting retention’.

The committee had also called on the government to reinforce the use of Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England and to make ‘health checks’ of working conditions mandatory. However, while the government ‘continues to support the principles’ set out in the Standards, it says these should be implemented ‘in ways that reflect specific local contexts, priorities and resources’. Responsibility ‘sits best with local authorities’ and ‘we do not believe there is a case for mandatory health checks or making the framework binding, nor that it would be welcomed by employers’.

The committee had also expressed its concern at ‘the absence of a professional body for social work’ following closure of The College for Social Work. The government regrets the closure and agrees that ‘the development of a strong professional body for social work is important’. However, success would hinge on it being ‘a sustainable, member-led organisation that represents professional interests across the social work workforce’. The government would support such a body but believes ‘the most effective body would be one established by the social work profession’.

In response to the committee’s call to assess the effectiveness of independent children’s services trusts ‘before expanding the model any further’, the government points to recent Ofsted inspections as providing ‘a growing bank of evidence’ of service improvement in Doncaster and Slough since trusts took over. However, the government says it does recognise the need to gather evidence. It is already undertaking an evaluation of existing trusts and ‘will continue to develop the evidence base’.

**Editorial note:** Education Committee chair Neil Carmichael led a debate in Westminster Hall on 20 October on both the committee’s report on social work
reform, and the committee’s later report on the mental health and wellbeing of looked after children (see RPU 182). To watch a recording of the debate, click here.

further info

National Audit Office publishes report on services for children in need of help or protection

The Department for Education’s interventions to improve services for children in need of help or protection are neither risk-based nor take place early enough, the National Audit Office has said.

In a new report, the NAO criticises the Department for intervening only after ‘Ofsted has already found services to have failed local children’ and for not using ‘performance information to anticipate risks of failure’. The report also notes that the Department has no data on outcomes for children who have been in need of help or protection other than educational outcomes. ‘The Department and local authorities therefore do not understand which approaches provide the most effective help and protection.’

The report highlights wide variations in spending on children’s social work, which the NAO says are not related to quality. Average reported spending in 2014-15 ranged from an estimated annual £340 per child in need in one local authority, to £4,970 in another. ‘Neither the Department nor authorities understand why spending varies,’ the report says.

Children in different parts of the country are not getting the same access to help or protection, the NAO says. In the year ending 31 March 2015, there were ‘very wide’ variations between local authorities in the rates of referrals accepted, re-referrals, children in need and repeat child protection plans. The NAO found that re-referral rates to children’s social care during the year varied between 6% and 46%, while children with repeat child protection plans varied from 3% to 44%.

The report describes current arrangements for developing, identifying and sharing good practice as ‘piecemeal’. Although many local authorities demonstrate good practice, social workers do not always find it easy to find out what works. ‘Local authorities judged “good” by Ofsted provide support to those judged as “inadequate”. However, given only 24 out of 103 local authorities inspected so far are judged to be “good”, spreading good practice is a challenge.’

The NAO is calling on the Department for Education to:

- Develop its intervention regime so that it uses lead indicators, such as re-referral rates, repeat child protection plans and social worker vacancy and agency staff rates, to ‘anticipate and act on failing services before they fail’.
- Develop better indicators to monitor the lives and outcomes for children who have been in contact with the child protection system, and to hold local authorities to account for their performance.
The report also makes a number of other recommendations. These include calling on the Department to:

- Set out how (and by when) it will have the capacity and capability to meet its stated goal of transforming children’s services by 2020
- Set out how it reconciles the variability introduced by local thresholds for help and protection with its goal of all children having equal access to high-quality services
- Set out (in consultation with Ofsted) how it will secure more timely assurances on the quality of services offered across all local authorities
- Improve cost information on services, particularly local authorities’ financial returns, ‘so that cost-effectiveness can underpin decisions on practice’.

Responding to the report, Dave Hill, President of the ADCS, said ‘it is well known that since 2008 demand for children’s social care has continued to grow with no equivalent growth in budget’. This has placed children’s services under immense pressure. One way of helping to reduce variations in service would be for the government to bring forward its plans for the development of its new What Works Centre.

Richard Watts, Chair of the Local Government Association’s Children and Young People Board, said that 78% of children’s services were rated ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ in 2008. ‘It is notable that this figure has now dropped below 25 per cent, over a period in which child protection reform and improvement has been largely removed from local government and increasingly centralised within Whitehall instead.’

**Editorial note**: Following publication of the NAO report, the Public Accounts Committee took evidence from Department for Education officials and the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families on 31 October. Jonathan Slater, Permanent Secretary at the Department, told MPs that while the Department formally intervenes at the point of an ‘inadequate’ Ofsted inspection result, it is ‘also working with 50 of the 60 councils that are in the “requiring improvement” phase and is seeking to drive up their performance in parallel’.

He said early intervention ‘is obviously crucial’ but emphasised ‘just how complicated it is to get this right’. If there were an indicator ‘that definitely identified, in advance, that something was going wrong, who wouldn’t want to use it?’

He said the Department is now collecting data on the use of agency staff, turnover rates and staff caseloads, and there are some early signs (‘although we mustn’t overdo it’) of ‘some correlation’ between agency rates, turnover and Ofsted inspections results. ‘The last thing we should do, though, is leap to getting councils to start to perform against a particular input measure, because that is precisely what was wrong with the system back in 2011.’

To watch a recording of the PAC session on Parliament TV, [click here](#).

**further info**
MPs set out a blueprint for the treatment of young adults in the criminal justice system

The House of Commons Justice Committee says there is ‘overwhelming evidence’ that the criminal justice system is failing to address the needs of young adults.

In the report of its recent inquiry, the committee says research from a range of disciplines now strongly supports the view that young adults are a distinct group with different needs to under-18s and adults older than 25.

MPs considered evidence on the needs and characteristics of young adults in the criminal justice system, including propensity to criminal behaviour arising from factors such as social background, psychological and neurological maturation, brain development, learning disability and acquired and traumatic brain injury.

Their conclusion is that there is a strong case for a distinct approach to the treatment of young adults and that dealing effectively with young adults while the brain is still developing is crucial in helping them make a successful transition to a crime-free adulthood.

The committee is calling a step-change in policy and practice underpinned by a strategic approach that explicitly acknowledges young adults’ developmental status and recognises ‘unapologetically’ the degree of overlap between their status as both victims and offenders.

Recommendations set out in the committee’s blueprint include:

- **Screening**: Prisons and probation services should introduce universal screening for ‘mental health needs, neuro-developmental disorders, maturity and neuro-psychological impairment’.

- **Training**: A specialised approach should be taken to staffing prison and probation services working with young adults, underpinned by in-depth training. This would enable staff to address behaviours typical of lack of emotional maturity, including ‘impulsive, ill-considered actions and non-consequential decision making’.

- **Evidence base**: A strategic approach should be taken to developing the evidence base, identifying gaps in knowledge and providing incentives to devise and test new approaches. The Ministry of Justice should investigate whether this could be facilitated through the creation of an equivalent to the pupil premium.

- **Cross-departmental reform**: Young adults are treated distinctly by government departments, with some policies making it harder for young adults who do not have support networks to desist from crime. If young adults are to be given the best opportunity to become law-abiding, a coherent cross-departmental approach is needed that aims to remove structural barriers to gaining sustainable employment, affordable accommodation and age-appropriate mental health services.
- **Sentencing**: Further work should be undertaken to evaluate the impact of maturity as a mitigating factor in sentencing. And the potential of young adult courts are ‘worth testing’, particularly if ‘they can be developed cost-neutrally using the expertise of youth sentencers’.

- **Detention and YOIs**: The forthcoming Prison Reform Bill should be used to extend for those up to age 25 the sentence of detention in a YOI. The ‘inexcusable gaps’ in the research evidence regarding the best strategies for holding young adults in prison should be ‘urgently addressed’.

**Initiatives and Guidance**

**Gove to advise on drive to end criminalisation of children in residential care**

The former Education Secretary Michael Gove is to chair the advisory board supporting a two-year programme to end the criminalisation of children living in residential care.

The new programme has been launched by The Howard League for Penal Reform on the back of research it published earlier this year (see RPU 181). That report found that children living in residential care are almost six times as likely to be criminalised as children living in other forms of care – and nearly 20 times as likely to be criminalised as children of a similar age who are not in care.

The Howard League also found that residential care staff are more likely to call the police following minor incidents of the sort that would not lead to police involvement if they took place in a family home.

The new programme will investigate how the best-performing children’s homes support children and will identify best practice by police forces to divert children from the criminal justice system.

**Government to launch strategy for safeguarding unaccompanied refugee children next year**

The government is to publish a safeguarding strategy for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugees by 1 May, which will include plans to increase the number of foster carers and encourage the provision of supported lodgings.

In a joint ministerial statement issued on 1 November, Edward Timpson, Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, and Robert Goodwill, Minister of State for
Immigration, said the strategy will build on existing guidance ‘in recognition of the increased numbers and specific needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children’. This includes ‘children already in the UK, unaccompanied children who we transfer to the UK from Europe, and unaccompanied children who we resettle directly from outside Europe’.

Plans for increasing the number of foster carers will include ‘evaluating the need’ for any additional training to help foster carers and support workers look after unaccompanied children.

Ministers also pledged to evaluate procedures for (and speed of) transferring unaccompanied children who have been identified for transfer from Europe, and to ‘regularly review funding to support and care’ for unaccompanied children, working closely with the Local Government Association and local authorities.

The government will consult the devolved administrations in order to ‘ensure a joined-up approach’ across the UK and will consult with ‘all relevant public bodies’ while drawing up the strategy, including local authorities in England, NGOs and the four Children’s Commissioners.

The government will also seek the views of local authorities ‘to identify any further action that might be taken to prevent unaccompanied asylum-seeking or refugee children going missing’ and will consider whether to introduce a new set of standard actions for the police on first encountering an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. The Department for Education will revise the statutory guidance on the Care of Unaccompanied and Trafficked Children issued in 2014.

further info

**MP launches action plan to prevent abuse and violence in teenage relationships**

Sarah Champion, the Labour MP for Rotherham and Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, has launched a national action plan for preventing child abuse and violence in teenage relationships.

The plan aims to prevent child abuse and violence in teenagers’ relationships before it has occurred by equipping children, parents and professionals to recognise exploitative and coercive behaviour – and to have the tools to challenge it.

Among other recommendations, the plan calls for the implementation of compulsory, age-appropriate resilience and relationships education from Key Stage 1 so that children are helped to recognise abuse. It also calls for a ‘long-running health campaign’ that will help parents detect the signs of exploitation and abuse, and provide them with support to stop it.

The plan also calls on the government to strengthen the content of the e-curriculum taught in schools at all key stages to include recognising abuse and exploitation
online and mitigating risks. And it urges the government to create ‘a cross-party, cross-sector, cross-departmental digital advisory group to monitor trends in online abuse and identify ways to prevent it.

further info

**NICE publishes Quality Standard on looked after children and attachment**

NICE has published its Quality Standard on the identification, assessment and treatment of attachment difficulties in looked after children.

The quality standard focuses on children and young people (up to age 18) who are looked after by their local authority in foster care (including kinship care), in special guardianship, in residential care or who have been adopted from care, and children considered to be on the edge of care.

The guidance includes four quality statements:

1. **Assessment**: Children and young people who may have attachment difficulties (and their parents or carers) should have a comprehensive assessment before any intervention programme.
2. **Education**: Children and young people with attachment difficulties should have an up-to-date education plan that sets out how they will be supported in school.
3. **Video feedback programmes**: Parents and carers of preschool-age children with or at risk of attachment difficulties should be offered a video feedback programme. This can help carers nurture their child, understand the child’s behaviour, respond positively and behave in ways that are not frightening. A video feedback programme can also improve how parents and carers respond to their own feelings when nurturing the child.
4. **Training and support for carers**: Health and social care provider organisations provide training, education and support programmes for carers of school aged children and young people with attachment difficulties. This should help improve the stability of placements and reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown.

The quality standard is expected to contribute to improvements in children’s social and emotional development and behavioural functioning, help improve the quality of carer-child relationships and help reduce placement breakdowns. It is also expected to help reduce or alleviate mental health problems in children and carers, reduce youth offending rates, and improve educational attainment and reduce school absence.

further info

**NCB launches Whole School Framework for Emotional Wellbeing**
The National Children’s Bureau has launched a ‘whole school’ framework to help schools and colleges promote emotional wellbeing and mental health.

The framework, which is designed as a self-assessment and improvement tool, spans four stages:

1. **Deciding to act and identifying what is already in place**
2. **Developing a shared understanding and commitment to change**, including establishing a shared definition of ‘social and emotional wellbeing and ‘mental health problems’ and using seven ‘framing principles’ to organise evidence of what works
3. **Building relationships and developing practice**, including planning objectives, deciding what to change and how, building links with external partners (eg, CAMHS and children’s social services), and data collection
4. **Implementation and evaluation**, including ‘deciding what good looks like’, tracking progress and evaluating costs and benefits.

**further info**