



## Turning away from the public sector in children's out-of-home care: An English experiment

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the evaluation of an English experiment which, for the first time, moved statutory social work support for children and young people in out-of-home care from the public to the private or independent sector. Five social work practices (SWPs), independent or semi-independent of local government, were established and evaluated using a matched control design with integrated process evaluation. Social work teams in the public sector, selected to correspond to key characteristics of the SWP sites, provided control sites.

While most SWPs were perceived to be accessible and user-friendly organizations, children's and young people's accounts showed no differences between pilots and control sites in terms of workers' accessibility and responsiveness. Perceptions of SWP staff's decision-making were mixed. SWP staff reported spending more time in direct face-to-face work with children and families but this was attributed to reduced caseload size and a tight remit which excluded child protection work rather than to decreased bureaucracy. SWP staff morale was generally found to be high in terms of depersonalization and social support, reflecting an emphasis on staff supervision in these organizations. However, this was offset by slightly higher job insecurity which reflected the precariousness of employment in the independent as opposed to state sector.

Staff retention varied between the SWPs, but although children and young people in the pilots were more likely to retain their key worker than those in control sites, they experienced disruption in the move into SWPs and back to public services when SWP contracts were not renewed. While some SWPs succeeded in reducing placement change rates for children and young people, a policy of switching placement providers to achieve flexibility and savings increased placement change rates in some SWPs. SWPs did not achieve financial independence from the local authority commissioners with only one assuming full responsibility for managing the placement budget. Payment by results was not used consistently. None of the commissioners interviewed considered that the SWP model had resulted in savings.

The study highlighted the interdependence of public and private sectors. As small organizations, most of the SWPs succeeded in offering an accessible and personalized service, and public services should consider reorganizing to achieve similar outcomes. However, this evaluation found that contracted-out organizations struggled to provide children in out-of home care with the consistency and continuity they require.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper reports findings from the independent evaluation of the Social Work Practice (SWP) pilots in England. This was a contentious pilot program initiated by the national government that aimed to move services for children in out-of-home care away from local government (described as 'local authorities' in the UK) and relocate

them in the independent sector (the term independent sector is used here to embrace voluntary (charitable or third sector) organizations, for-profit businesses and social enterprises which may be for-profit or not-for-profit but whose workers own a share in the organization). In England, this policy originated with the New Labour government but it was enthusiastically taken up by the Coalition government which inherited the pilots in 2010. The arguments for this shift of responsibility were articulated first in a government report highlighting the persistence of poor outcomes for children in out-of-home care despite a history of government initiatives (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) and then in the report of the subsequent working party (Le Grand, 2007) which provided the theoretical model to inform the development of the pilots. Both these documents attributed the poor outcomes achieved by

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children in out-of-home care to a lack of continuity. Smaller independent organizations led by social workers themselves would, it was argued, improve the morale of social workers and so increase retention rates, thereby improving consistency and outcomes for children and young people. At the time that the concept of SWPs was first mooted there were high vacancy rates among children's social workers in England and improving the morale of the profession was also seen as a means of addressing wider problems of recruitment and retention. SWPs, it was argued, would also release staff from the high levels of reporting and performance targets, generally termed bureaucracy, required by local and national government procedures and their restricted remit would free workers from the demands of child protection work. It was envisaged that more time would be available for face-to-face practice with children and young people and that delegating more responsibility to staff would facilitate flexible front-line decision-making that reflected the needs of the child rather than those of the organization.

## 2. Theoretical background

The SWP pilots embodied two divergent trends which, although they attracted very different types of support, converged in the Coalition government's thinking about social work and its organization. The first of these trends was a resistance to bureaucracy and a call for a reliance on procedure and targets to be replaced by professional discretion and expertise. In the UK, this trend emerged from critiques of managerialism in social welfare published in the 1990s (Clarke & Newman, 1997) and culminated in the Munro Review (2011) which recommended a reduction in central prescription to achieve a shift 'from a compliance culture to a learning culture' (Munro, 2011, p. 7). This report was widely welcomed by the social work profession. The second of these trends was a government-led drive towards reducing the size of the public sector by moving public employees into the independent sector which embraced voluntary organizations, commercial businesses and emerging organizational models such as social enterprises, whose workers have some share in or ownership of the business (HM Government, 2010). SWPs were to be autonomous organizations contracted to local authorities and it was envisaged that, while some of these new organizations would be managed by large voluntary or commercial organizations, others, described as 'professional practices', would be created by groups of social workers moving out of the local authority to form independent organizations or businesses (Le Grand, 2007).

This turn away from publicly provided social work services for children and families generated substantial controversy with some critics characterizing the pilots as the 'commodification' of children (Cardy, 2010; Garrett, 2008). While certain services such as the provision of residential child care and independent fostering agencies (whose function is restricted to placement finding and support for foster carers) had been outsourced for a number of years in many parts of the UK (Sellick, 2011), SWPs entailed the transfer of statutory powers away from the local authorities to the independent sector. This required legislation to be enacted and the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 enabled local authorities participating in the pilots to transfer responsibilities for children in out-of-home care to social work providers who were not local authorities, with the stipulation that the functions transferred would be undertaken by or supervised by registered social workers, and specifying a five year period for SWPs to be piloted and evaluated.

The privatization picture differs in the US where there has been a substantial move towards contracting out children's services since 2000 when the States of Kansas and Florida initiated this trend by privatizing their entire foster care services (Snell, 2000). Privatization has been accompanied by an increased use of performance measures and the emergence of a payment by results culture (Collins-Camargo, McBeath et al., 2011; Collins-Camargo, Sullivan et al., 2011). However, the sector remains a mixed economy: by 2006, US child welfare

administrators surveyed by Collins-Camargo, Ensign, and Flaherty (2008) reported that the majority of states retained responsibility for case management of child welfare services in the public sector with 11% describing movement of case management to the private sector on a large scale and a further 18% reporting smaller scale initiatives. These figures showed a little change when the survey was repeated in 2008 and when just over half of the 47 States surveyed were using performance-based contracts (Collins-Camargo, McBeath et al., 2011). Steen and Smith's (2012) review of the US evidence on private and public foster care agencies found a mixed picture depicting considerable variation in characteristics and performance within both the private and public sectors as well as conflicting findings in respect of outcomes such as permanence. While the private sector boasted higher staff morale, the public sector tended to employ more experienced staff who had a greater commitment to remaining with their employer. The authors concluded that: 'successful agencies exist in both public and private sectors and that success is not inherently connected to any organizational type' (p. 857).

This paper reports and discusses the results of the evaluation of the English pilots, measuring their achievements against some of the key concepts and drivers which informed their development.

## 3. Methods

The study was commissioned by the UK government and was undertaken between 2009 and 2012. It was designed as a matched control with integral process evaluation; this approach has been used successfully in a number of large-scale evaluations of health and social care initiatives which are not suited to a randomized control trial (Wiggins, Rosato, Austerberry, Sawtell, & Oliver, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2009). Six control or comparison sites<sup>1</sup> were selected by approaching local authorities matched with the pilot local authorities against a set of essential criteria which included demographic information and the key characteristics of the out-of-home care populations. These were supplemented by desirable criteria that included workforce characteristics and child protection figures. Mixed methods were adopted and this allowed for qualitative and quantitative data to be combined and for qualitative data to be used to explain and explore quantitative findings (Greene, 2007). The evaluation captured and compared the perspectives of a wide range of informants, acknowledging the different interests underpinning the pilots as well as their diverse impacts.

Between 2009 and 2011, 225 interviews were completed with 169 children and young people (121 in the pilots (56 were interviewed twice) and 48 in control sites). Pilot children and young people were selected to reflect the demographic profile of the pilots' populations and those interviewed in comparison sites were matched with this sample on key criteria that included age, gender, race, placement type, length of time in care and education/employment status. A further 13 young people who had participated in consultations about the establishment of the pilots were interviewed in the course of the study. Interviews were also completed with birth parents, pilot staff, local authority staff involved in establishing and commissioning the pilots, members of an Expert Advisory Group advising the pilot initiative and the Evaluation, and with local health and social care professionals working alongside the pilots at the local level. The researchers also analyzed and compared 45 care plans for children and young people (25 from pilots and 20 from control sites) (for full details of the study methods see Stanley et al., 2012b).

Two large-scale surveys were completed at two time points: Time 1 in 2009–10 before pilot start-up and Time 2 in 2011 when the pilots had been operational for at least 12 months. These comprised firstly, an on-line survey of staff working with children and families in the pilots, in local authorities where the pilots were sited and in control sites (Time 1,  $n = 1101$  responses; Time 2,  $n = 949$ ). This survey incorporated

<sup>1</sup> Six control sites were selected since there were originally six pilots planned, one failed to start.

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