



A study of performance indicators and Ofsted ratings in English child protection services



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents new findings from a study of performance measures for children in need and child protection services in England. National datasets and census returns from 152 local authorities over a 13-year period were combined in order to analyse trends and correlations in quality indicators. The study also explored the relationship between these measures and inspection ratings from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), with a particular focus on services rated as inadequate. The available quality measures mainly focused on the timeliness of work processes, but these did not seem to affect outcomes in the form of re-referral rates. However, re-referrals were higher in local authorities with a tendency to close cases quickly and in those with high rates of agency workers. A small number of indicators were able to predict an inadequate Ofsted rating in 2012 and 2013. Changes in performance measures in the year following an inadequate Ofsted rating may suggest greater use of protective interventions compared with similarly performing local authorities. Implications are considered for performance measurement, management and inspection in the field of child protection.

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1. Introduction

Performance management, the process through which an organisation's managers evaluate their employees' work and distribute rewards in order to achieve strategic goals, has been a feature of UK public services since the early 1980s (Baars, Evers, Arntz, & van Merode, 2010; Osbourne, Bovaird, Martin, Tricker, & Waterson, 1995). It gathered pace during the New Labour administration of 1997–2010, during which the use of performance-related indicators, benchmarks, targets, and incentives in the public sector become widespread (Propper & Wilson, 2003). The increasing focus on performance can be connected to the New Public Management (NPM) approach, which over the same period has sought to make the professional bureaucracies originally established by the post-war welfare state more 'business-like', and in the process make professional groups more accountable to service users and taxpayers (Cochrane, 2000; Hood, 1991). The

'doctrinal components' of NPM include a commitment to 'explicit standards and measures of performance', and 'greater emphasis on output controls' (Hood, 1991: 4). Over time, these components have become associated with a regime of internal audit and external inspection, reinforced by IT-based workflow systems and the threat of sanctions for non-compliance (Bevan & Hood, 2006).

These ideas and reforms have greatly influenced the design and delivery of child protection services over recent decades. Frontline practice has been transformed by the introduction of electronic workflow systems that not only shape assessment and intervention processes but also gather statistics for managerial and quality assurance purposes (Munro, 2004; Shaw et al., 2009). The expansion of audit and performance monitoring has also been accompanied by an increasingly robust approach to external inspection, which in relation to children and families services is currently carried out by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2015a). Such developments have been criticised for focusing on process outputs rather than user outcomes (Munro, 2004; Tilbury, 2004), and shaping child protection into a technocratic exercise that revolves around compliance with procedures and standards (Ayre & Preston-Shoot, 2010). Organisations and professionals have sought to use performance data to reduce the uncertainty inherent in such a complex field, driven by anxiety about making the wrong decision and of public criticism (Lees, Meyer,

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& Rafferty, 2013; Munro, 2010). Accountability and performance have therefore become increasingly associated with risk and risk management (Hood, 2015).

1.1. Performance-based accountability

‘Performance-based accountability’ is a framework for conceptualising the distinction between processes and outcomes in performance management (Friedman, 1997, 2001). Processes in relation to child welfare include inputs and resources, such as numbers of staff and caseloads, as well as the time taken to complete important pieces of work, such as needs assessments. Outcomes relate to the effects of intervention; taking the example of children subject to child protection (CP) plans, outcomes might include the number of children who are stepped down from CP plans within a certain time frame, or the proportion of plans made for children who have already had this service in the past. These distinctions can be used to create a typology of indicators based on how they are measuring performance, a version of which is represented in Fig. 1 below:

Fig. 1 distinguishes not only between ‘effort’ (i.e. inputs) and ‘effect’ (i.e. outcomes), but also between quantity and quality. Freidman (1997) notes that the most significant data are provided by ‘quality’ measures, particularly those in the bottom right quadrant that indicate the quality of ‘change for the better’ produced by the service. Unfortunately, these are also the most difficult measures to obtain, partly because the nature of outcomes often takes a long time to emerge. As a result, a lot of the quality measures organisations tend to collect a tend to be skewed towards effort (‘how well did we do it’) rather than effect (‘change for the better’). This is illustrated below in Table 1, which uses the matrix shown in Fig. 1 to categorise the main quality measures for children’s social care that are collected and made publicly available by the Department of Education (DfE, 2015a, 2015b) and Ofsted (2015b).

It will be apparent that Table 1 has only three ‘quality of effect’ measures, and two of these relate to the proportion of re-referrals and re-registrations – i.e. they are a ‘negative’ measure in the sense of highlighting the rate of cases that are not dealt with first time round. In other words, ‘change for the better’ is assumed to involve a reduction in both of these measures. Barth and Reid (2000) point out that child welfare services have tended to ignore what happens to children after their involvement with services ends, although connecting CIN statistics to information on educational achievement from the National Pupil Database has recently been suggested (DfE, 2015c). Ofsted inspections are a wide-ranging review of service delivery in public sector organisations. As such, inspection ratings reflect a range of qualitative and quantitative data including some of the indicators listed above, and have therefore been categorised here as both a quality-of-effort and quality-of-effect measure.

Table 1
Common quality indicators for English children’s social care services.

Quality of effort: How well did we do it?	
Numbers of CIN per social worker	
Social work vacancies	
Turnover of social workers	
Percentage of agency workers ^a	
Core assessments completed within 35 days	
Continuous single assessments completed within 45 days	
Assessments as a percentage of referrals	
CP conference held within 15 days of section 47	
CPP cease times (<3 months, 3–5 months, 6–11 months, 1–2 years, 2+ years)	
Initial assessments completed within 7/10 days	
CP plans review held within 6 months	
CIN cease times (<3 months, 3–5 months, 6–11 months, 1–2 years, 2+ years)	
Ofsted ratings	
Quality of effect: Was it change for the better?	
CP Plan where children had prior CP Plan	
Referrals within 12 months of a prior referral	
Ofsted ratings	

^a In England, most statutory social workers are public sector workers, i.e. they are employed on a permanent basis by local authorities. However, a minority of vacancies may be filled on a short-term basis through private social work agencies, and these employees are often termed ‘locum’ or ‘agency’ workers.

2. Method

In this study, the following questions were posed:

1. How have indicators of quality varied over time?
2. How do different measures of quality relate to each other, i.e. are changes in one correlated with changes in any of the others?
3. Is there a connection between performance indicators and Ofsted ratings?
4. What happens to indicators after an Ofsted inadequate rating?

The procedures used for gathering and combining the national datasets are described in Hood et al. (2016). A comprehensive set of indicators of local authority child protection services were obtained for the period 2001–2014 from the UK Government website, the National Archives online, and the Cafcass website. Indicators were converted to rates per 10,000 population, and two small and unusual authorities, the City of London and the Isles of Scilly, were excluded from the analysis. This paper focusses on the quality indicators set out in the right hand column of Table 1. To address the first research question, national trends were plotted over time. For the second question, significant Spearman’s correlations among the indicators were compared for each year in 2009–14. This period had comparable data from the CIN census as well as workforce.

	Quantity	Quality
Effort	How much did we do?	How well did we do it?
Effect	Did anything change?	Was it change for the better?

Fig. 1. Performance-based accountability. Adapted from Friedman, 1997: 4–5).

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