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Where to find more evidence

Gatehouse, M., Ward, H. and Holmes, L. (2008)
Developing Definitions of Local Authority Services and Guidance for the New Children in Need Census.
Loughborough: CCFR

Ward, H., Holmes, L., Dyson, P., and McDermid, S. (2008)
The Costs and Outcome of Child Welfare Interventions: Mapping Children in Need Services. Loughborough: CCFR

Ward, H., Holmes, L. and Soper, J. (2008) *Costs and Consequences of Placing Children in Care.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Cost Calculator for Children's Services website:
www.ccfcs.org.uk

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Extending the Cost Calculator for all Children in Need

Mapping services for children in need and identifying child level data for those services

Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide services to all children in need living in their area. Work is currently being undertaken to extend the Cost Calculator methodology to include all children in need, making it possible for local authorities to cost a fuller range of services and to cost family support interventions provided under section 17 arrangements. This paper details the findings of two complementary studies forming the basis of the extended Cost Calculator methodology: The Mapping of Children in Need Services; and Guidance for the New Children in Need Census.

- Two complementary mapping exercises were undertaken to inform the development of the Cost Calculator and the replacement Children In Need Census. These studies explored the range and nature of child in need services, and the availability of child level data for those services.
- It became evident from the mapping exercises that the Every Child Matters principles of early intervention, prevention and integration have been embraced wholeheartedly by local authorities.
- A complex picture of child in need services emerged, pointing to a wide range of interventions with varying delivery, expenditure and data collection arrangements.
- There was evidence that an increased focus on early intervention, prevention and vulnerable children, including the introduction of the Common Assessment Framework, has led to some disparities in how individual authorities define a 'child in need'.
- On examination of a sample of policy and procedure documents, notable variations were found to exist in the interpretation and implementation of the threshold criteria for the provision of services across participating local authorities.
- A great variety of agencies and providers were identified by the research, reflecting the increasingly complex picture of service provision for children in need.
- The child level data collected on children in need within the local authorities were found to be highly varied and complex. The research found little consistency in data collection, with a great number of databases and data collection tools being used within local authorities.
- Two types of services were identified in the research: 'case management teams', whereby social care professionals manage the day to day needs of a case; and the 'additional services', such as groups or interventions aimed at addressing specific needs.

- The work of the case management teams, primarily associated with social care processes, will be a core focus of the ongoing research. This will form the basis of unit cost calculations.
- The core additional services identified will be costed in the extended version of the Cost Calculator and included in unit cost calculations.

Background: The Cost Calculator methodology

The Cost Calculator methodology is a bottom up method for calculating the unit costs of child welfare interventions. It uses the unit costs of social work activities associated with eight social care processes as the basis for building up costs over time.

At present the Cost Calculator has been established for looked after children. As part of a wider programme of development, work is currently underway to extend the methodology for all children in need.

Project aims

The mapping of children in need services sought to identify the nature and prevalence of services accessed by children in need, the objectives of their service provision and their cost. This was undertaken as a scoping study to inform the development of the extended version of the Cost Calculator for all children in need.

The research to inform the development of the replacement Children In Need Census established working definitions for the services identified in the mapping exercise and sought to identify the nature of routinely collected child level data for those services.

Methodology

Fifteen local authorities participated in the mapping of children in need services and were invited to identify the services that they either solely or jointly funded or commissioned to support those children identified as being in need under section 17 of the Children Act (1989). Participating authorities were asked to categorise each service by the Every Child Matters outcomes and to give some detail regarding the funding, delivery and nature of the service.

'Core services', defined as those services that were most frequently cited and identified as taking up the largest proportion of the children's services budget, were then

identified. These core services will be costed in the extended version of the Cost Calculator.

The Children in Need Census research was conducted with nine authorities. A questionnaire style datasheet was used to collect details of the recording, storage and availability of child level data for each of the services identified.

Four authorities agreed to participate in the pilot test, which attempted to identify the services accessed by a sample of children in need for a given time period. The source, quality and accessibility of the data on service use were then examined.

The context of children in need services

It was evident through both studies that the Every Child Matters focus on early intervention, prevention and integration, has impacted on the provision of child in need services. The pace of change within local authorities is great, with the process of integration and re-organisation occurring at different rates and in different ways across local authorities. This has led to increasing diversity in how services for children in need are structured, delivered and funded.

Notable disparities in how individual local authorities defined a child in need emerged. Local authorities may be providing a great number of services to vulnerable children who may not necessarily be receiving interventions from social care under section 17 arrangements. This may lead to a significant underestimation in the numbers, and cost, of children receiving children in need interventions. Further disparities were evident in threshold criteria. On examination of a sample of policy and procedure documents, variations in the interpretation and implementation of threshold criteria for the delivery of services were found, with a variety of frameworks used across local authorities.

A great number of agencies and providers were identified by the research, reflecting the increasingly complex nature of child in need provision. Integrated funding arrangements were identified, which may suggest increasingly integrated children in need service provision.

Child level data

Although services are increasingly integrated, databases have often not been merged so that where a single child may be receiving interventions from a number of different sources, information on that child may be held in a variety of locations and databases. Consequently, building a complete picture of a child's holistic experience may be

problematic. Cross referencing children across different systems, along with extracting information from free text, frequently used in social care information systems, is vastly time consuming.

A number of inconsistencies in the recording of child level data for children in need were identified. These included the language used to describe services, the data recorded including the number of visits to the child or family, and the frequency with which individual services were accessed. Such inconsistencies may make comparable, reliable data collection problematic.

Core services: Next steps for the Cost Calculator

Two types of services were identified in the research: 'case management teams', whereby social care professionals manage the day to day needs of a case; and the 'additional services', such as groups or interventions aimed at addressing specific needs.

The case management teams were identified as a core service. These teams primarily undertake activities associated with social care processes essential to the Cost Calculator methodology. As such, costing these teams and their activities will be a core focus of the ongoing research to develop the Cost Calculator for children in need.

Those additional services that were most frequently cited across local authorities and were reported as taking up the largest proportion of the children's services budget will be taken forward to be costed in the extended version of the Cost Calculator. The unit costs of these services, along with the activity of the case management teams, will form the basis of the unit cost calculations in the extended version of the Cost Calculator for children in need.

Implications for policy and practice

A complex picture of children in need services emerged from the studies, which identified a wide variety of services, delivery structures and funding arrangements, defined by local needs and settings. This varied picture may make comparisons across local authorities problematic without careful use of guidance and definitions. This further highlighted the need for clear guidance and definitions of services if data is to be collected consistently and comparably.