Measuring Performance in Child Protection – A Change of Focus

Introduction

This briefing summarises changes to the collection of child protection performance information recommended by the Munro Review of Child Protection. In December 2011, the Government announced that it accepted these recommendations.

About the Author

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Background

The first report from the Munro Review (October 2010) was critical of the current system used for monitoring performance in child protection. Munro explained that by focusing on specific aspects of process within the child protection system - as opposed to the quality of practice - performance indicators have skewed and misdirected local priorities. Current performance indicators focus on data which is easy to collect; and achievements are measured in the form of numbers (e.g. number of CP plans) and efficiency targets (e.g. % of core assessments completed in timescale.) These are important measures, but on their own tell us nothing about whether children are safer as a result of our intervention.

Anxiety around how best to manage uncertainty in child protection supported the creation of the current performance regime. By focusing on process issues, current performance measures obscure attention from whether or not children, young people and families are receiving the help they need, when they need it and, crucially, whether the help provided made a difference to their lives. While process measures are useful for telling us how well a service is operating, they tell us nothing about how well outcomes for children or young people are improving or their experiences of the child protection process.

To redress the balance, Professor Munro recommended (2011a) that in future local authorities and their partners should use a ‘twin set’ of nationally collected and locally published performance indicators. These new indicators place a clear emphasis on the importance of collecting outcome data, as well as obtaining feedback from children, young people and families.
What will change look like?

In December 2011, the Department for Education issued a Ministerial Foreword confirming that the Government accepted the Munro Review recommendations on performance measurement, and that in future Local Authorities and their partners should use a combination of nationally collected and locally published performance information to help benchmark their own performance. This new approach is intended to help facilitate improvement in services and promote local transparency and accountability. There will be a much stronger focus on outcomes and impact.

The nationally collected dataset will comprise mainly quantitative measures, many of which are already collected – for example, information on the number of assessments completed, number of referrals received and the number and characteristics of children subject to child protection plans.

The locally collected data will map the child’s journey and focus on the quality of help offered and the impact it has on the lives of children and young people. Local measures will comprise feedback from children, young people, families and the workforce. In addition, local areas will be required to look at the quality and timeliness of decision making. This data will be used to inform discussions about local practice.

Scope of the new data collection measures

The new data collection measures will focus on three broad areas - outcomes and experiences of children, young people and families, workforce issues and timeliness. National and local measures will be collected for each of the themes.

a) Outcomes and Experiences of Children, Young People and Families

The Munro Review is clear that the key measure of success for the child protection system must be whether children are receiving effective help when they need it. Feedback from children, young people and families will therefore be crucial to helping partners understand the impact of services, and the difference children and families feel has been made to their lives.

Added to this, Ofsted (2012) recently issued guidance on the new inspection arrangements for local authority child protection services. The guidance is clear that from now on the child’s experience will be central to inspections. Authorities will be judged on the extent to which services consistently focus on the needs of children / young people, and the effectiveness of the help and protection offered.

b) Workforce

Reforms contained in the Munro Review reduce prescription for child protection social workers; in future staff will have more autonomy within a system that promotes the exercise of professional judgement. Alongside this, an understanding of how the workforce views the role they play in child protection and the difficulties they face is vital in informing local service improvement.
Local workforce questions are recommended as a starting point for understanding workload pressures and staff perceptions of the support they receive. Staff should also be asked to their views on the quality of the service they are able to offer children, young people and families.

c) Timeliness and quality of decision making and planning

Local attention should be given to the timeliness with which children’s needs are identified and, the timeliness with which help is provided. Furthermore the quality of assessments carried out and the effectiveness of help provided should be subject to local scrutiny. Audits will need to be planned locally to assess these areas of work.

Ofsted’s recently issued inspection guidance (2012) also makes it clear that child protection does not begin at the point of referral to children’s social care, and inspections will be considering the effectiveness of all services in identifying children and young people who might be at risk.

Next Steps

The Department for Education has launched a consultation on the proposed changes, and asks for responses by 16 April 2012. Full details, including detail on the new proposed performance measures, can be accessed via the link below.

http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/index.cfm?action=consultationDetails&consultationId=1803&external=no&menu=1

Given the clear focus within both the ministerial foreword and Ofsted’s revised inspection framework on the importance of collecting (and acting on) feedback from children, young people and families, now would be a good time to review current methods of collecting feedback from service users, and to begin thinking about ways of developing this work further over coming months.

References


Department for Education [https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Munro-Review.pdf](https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Munro-Review.pdf)


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