INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF OUTSOURCING CHILDREN SOCIAL SERVICES ON THE WORKFORCE: A THREE-YEAR MATCHED-CONTROL EVALUATION OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN ENGLAND

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Funding & Research Team

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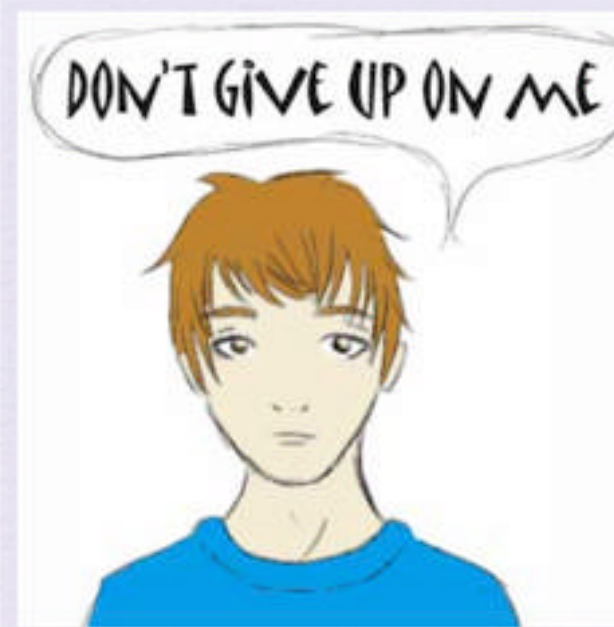   - Helen Austerberry

Outsourcing Children Services

Alongside other public services

Not a new phenomenon

Grew in prominence during the 'Thatcher era'

Key feature of the New Labour policy

Adopted further by the Coalition Government within a culture of cuts & austerity measures

DON'T GIVE UP ON ME

Public service privatisation

- Social care quasi-markets
  - Care as a commodity with no surplus value

- Macro-economics conditions

- The ability of the state to regulate the economy

- Debate steering away from 'selling public services' to the implications of delivering services by private for-profit organisations

- Impact on the workforce
  - Exploitation & insecurity Vs. autonomy & job satisfaction

Social Work Practice with children in England

- Emerged from the New Labour government green paper 'Care Matters'

- Policy aspiration to develop
  - Social worker-led organisations
  - Independent from local authority
  - Able to reduce bureaucracy;
  - Facilitate professional decision-making; and
  - Improve workforce and children outcomes

SWP implementations

- Five pilots started between December 2009 and May 2010

- Commissioned by local authorities
  - Contract agreements differed in each case

- Varied substantially in key elements
  - Organisational structure; size; origins; number and profile of children etc.

- DfE commissioned an independent evaluation alongside the pilots

Evaluation Design

- Matched control design

- Integral process and outcome evaluation

- Started at the onset of the pilots and continued for 3 years

- Measured pre-post effect with case-control arms

- Mixed-method data collection & analysis design

- Measured impact on different groups (children, workforce, carers etc.)
  - The focus here is on the workforce

Data & Methods

- Online survey at two time points
  - T1: Onset of pilots
  - T2: 12 months later

- Three groups of participants: Practitioners working in
  - SWP pilots (T2 only)
  - Host local authorities
  - Matched comparison groups

- Total of 1,101 responses at T1 and 949 at T2 (50% and 43% response rate)

- Standardized scales (Maslach burnout & Karasek); level of agreements with different statements and free text options

- Interviews with different stakeholders and analysis of children outcome data

Workforce analysis' aims

To establish if SWP models impacted on:

1- Practitioners burnout and job satisfaction

2- Levels of job demand and control

3- Changes in expectations of SWPs over time

4- Time expenditure

5- Workload

6- Quality of care and relationships
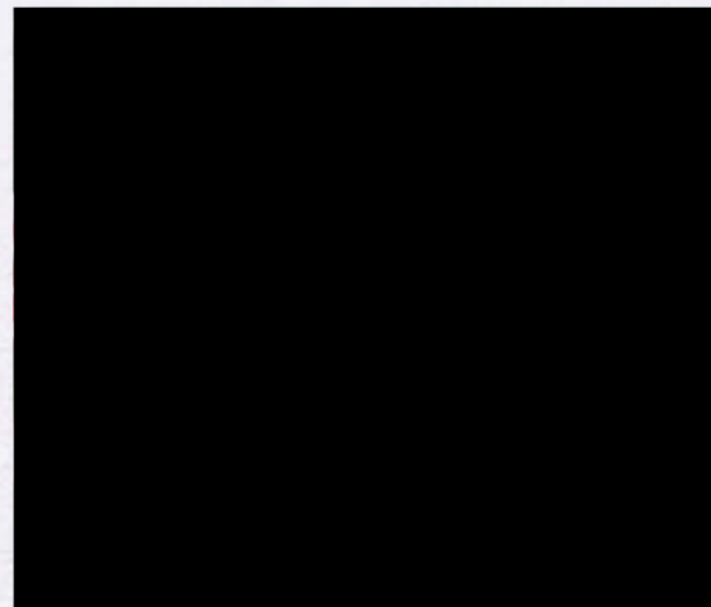
7- Autonomy, participation and support

This presentation focuses on aims 3-7

Expectations of SWPs

At T1 *most* participants agreed with all statements except for reducing paper work

Those in the comparison sites have the most 'improved' levels of agreement over time

Expectations from SWP	Host		Comparison		Pilots
	T1	**T2**	**T1**	**T2**	**T2**
Staff will stay in frontline for	67.01 197	53.23 124	57.72 123	53.7 108	65.45 55
Fewer changes for LAC	71.24 226	65.99 147	59.85 132	65.04 123	81.82 55
Improve relationships with other professionals	71.15 208	71.71 152	67.46 126	82.35 119	67.27 55
Improve relationships with carers	69.19 211	68.24 148	64.71 119	81.03 116	78.18 55
Reduce amount of time spent on form filling	40.7 199	37.3 126	31.03 116	36.61 112	22.22 54

Time Expenditure

- Asked how much time had been spent on different tasks during the past six month

- Close match in responses from host and comparison groups

- considerable agreement that
  - amount of time spent on direct work with LAC/care leavers was not enough or not nearly enough,
  - amount of time spent in completing forms and reports generally consumed too much or much too much time

- SWPs practitioners more likely to report spending the 'right amount of time' in direct work with LAC, their birth parents and foster carers.

Most important aspect of working with LAC

- Free text analysed thematically produced key themes as most important:

  1) Direct work with children and young people;

  2) Engaging and developing trusting relationships with LAC/care leavers; and

  3) Building relationships with LAC/care leavers, birth parents and foster families and empowering them.

What makes the relationship with LAC better

- *'Having a smaller caseload frees me up to work more directly with not only the young person but with foster carers, parents and other professionals to ensure a holistic approach/positive communication.'*

- (Practitioner, SWP)

- *'By working with the same young people from age 18 to 21 years I have been able to develop good relationships with most of them which means they are more receptive to accept support, advice and information.'*

- (Practitioner, Comparison site)

Perceived workload

- Collected at T2 only

- Asked if workload had changed over the previous 6 months

- No significant difference between the three groups

- A significant negative correlation between perceptions of spending the 'right amount of time in direct work with LAC' and perception of high level of workload

Perceptions of quality of care and relationships

- The majority of participants in all groups tended to agree/strongly agree that:
  - they worked with the same cases over time
  - they worked to ensure that LAC stayed in the same placement
  - their relationships with LAC were usually good

- There was positive change in participants' views over time in the host and comparison groups

- At T2, SWP participants were significantly more likely to agree with the majority of positive statements

Staff autonomy, participation and support

- SWP participants tended to significantly agree more with positive statements such as:
  - innovative practice is encouraged
  - frontline staff participate in decision making
  - mistakes are considered opportunities for learning

- Interview data explain some of this:
  - SWP staff being mostly supervised by a manager or external consultant
  - Formal peer supervision operated in only one SWP and had proved too time-consuming to continue in the others; but
  - informal peer support operating in all SWPs was fostered by the small cohesive teams

Overall findings

Continuity of work and spending the right amount of time in direct work are key predictors of better workforce outcomes

The new model, in its own, did not appear to improve workforce outcomes significantly

Most SWPs had a smaller caseload and 'difficult' decisions remained within the local authorities

SWP practitioners received more support and were more positive about the quality & impact of their work
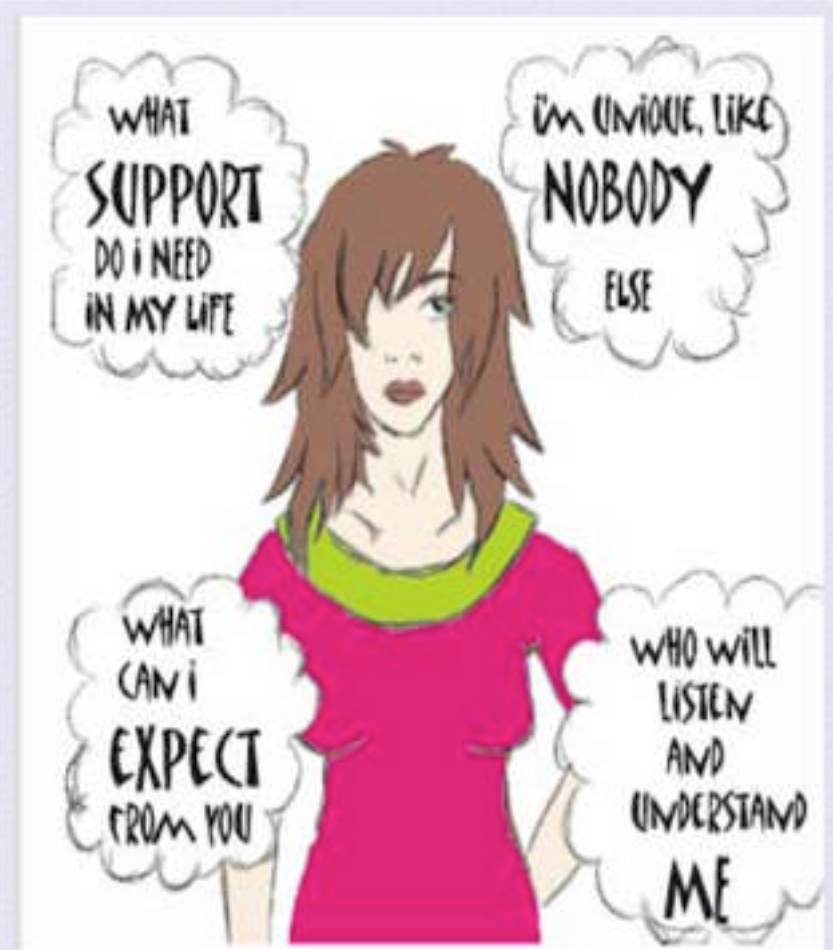
Discussion points

- Variability of SWPs with no coherent model

- Importance of the relationships between outcomes for LAC and the workforce in all settings
  - Good examples observed in all models of working no overwhelming improvements observed in SWPs

- Current policy climate with further drive for privatisation of care services

- Majority of SWPs practitioners 'believed' in the new model
  - what will happen when other practitioners are consequently employed to this model

- How confident are we that this model achieves its aims? And where do we go from here?

Thank you

References on request
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