Hampshire County Council

The Role and Impact of Enhanced Administrative Support to Social Work Teams

Rapid Research Review

July 2015

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1   Introduction

The Institute of Public Care (IPC) at Oxford Brookes University has prepared this summary review of evidence for Hampshire County Council. It forms part of their Innovation Fund 'Active Agents for Change' Evaluation.

Hampshire County Council and the Isle of Wight (IOW) were successful in an application to the Department for Education (DfE) for a share of the Innovation Fund in order to undertake a major change programme relating to the way in which social care services for children, young people and families are delivered.

The overall objective for the programme is to create the right conditions and capacity for professionals to work more effectively and cost effectively with vulnerable children and families in order to **get it right first time** and therefore to reduce the demand for more remedial or repeat interventions – in other words, to become 'active agents for change'.

This review has been prepared to inform the activities of the programme work stream concerned with introducing Personal Assistants to work alongside social workers to improve the quality of the offer to children and families in need of support and, specifically, to generate more time for social workers to undertake direct work with families. It has also been prepared to support lines of enquiry for the evaluation of this work stream.

A number of key assumptions and implications are associated with the prospective outputs and outcomes of the 'Enhanced Administrative Support' work stream and these are summarised within the relevant Theory of Change (Appendix One). In turn, the Theory of Change document has also suggested particular lines of enquiry for the review and critical assessment of available evidence.

The source material for the review was obtained through a literature search comprising four main strands:

1. Thomson Reuters Web of Science and Google searches using appropriate search terms.
2. A search of the following academic journals (using the same search terms as above) for the period 2005-15: British Journal of Social Work; Child & Family Social Work; Journal of Social Work; Research in Social Work Practice; Child Welfare; and Journal of Children's Services.
3. A search for relevant articles within two practice-focused publications: Community Care and Practice (BASW).
4. A search for relevant materials within the SCIE online resource.

The overall picture set out below derives from a mix of academic research-based evidence, government commissioned reviews, and best practice guidance.

2   Context

The relationship of administrative tasks to the proper function of social work has become an issue attracting increasing attention and concern over recent years. A number of factors appear to be responsible for this. For example, Garrett (2008) refers to the 'electronic turn' and Gillingham (2014) to the 'informational turn' in social work resulting in a focus on monitoring and information exchange potentially at the expense of understanding, problem-solving and client engagement.

In a study involving twelve local authorities, Holmes et al (2010) found that social worker concerns about a drift towards indirect or administrative activities have been evident since the introduction of performance assessment and the development and implementation of structured recording programmes, both of which formed responses to earlier child death enquiries. Other potential causes of these shifts include issues of practice quality and the erosion of trust in professional social work (Pithouse et al 2011).

Electronic case management systems themselves, and particularly the Integrated Children's System (ICS), have been criticised as poorly designed from the end-user perspective, unreliable in practice and generally unfit for purpose. In any event, desktop technologies have made it possible for front line practitioners to engage in more administrative tasks and in the view of some (e.g. Gillingham 2014) this has led to a gradual change in priorities and culture within social work agencies.

At the same time, as local authorities look to retrench, cuts to administrative staff often feature early in downsizing operations. There has been speculation also that such cuts have produced, over time, a shift in the balance of social worker time spent on indirect activities – such as case administration - and direct activities such as contact time with families.

In the view of Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers (NIASW, 2013, p. 2) and many others, this has all led to *"an over-bureaucratised system which burdens social workers with unnecessary levels of paperwork, duplication and excess use of proforma."* It is now a widely held view that the overall impact of this increasing administrative burden is to deflect social workers from working directly with children and families i.e. identifying and meeting their needs.

Perhaps the most familiar example of enhanced administrative support is that provided by the Reclaiming Social Work (RSW) or 'Hackney model' of social work pods or units, an approach endorsed both by Laming (2009) and Munro in her final report (2012). Within these arrangements, the whole social work unit is trained in the use of systemic theory and uses this to underpin its work with children and families. Rather than being assigned to one individual, cases are allocated to the Consultant Social Worker and worked by the team collectively. Key administrative functions are undertaken by Unit Coordinators who are described as:

"Unit Coordinators were far more than administrators: they coordinate the work of the team. They almost always had a good understanding of what was going on in every case (they took the notes for the weekly case discussions and actively take part). They dealt with many practical arrangements." (Forrester et al, 2013, p. 96)

Unit Coordinators are more like a "Personal Assistant" or PA for the unit than a conventional administrator as they cover a wide range of tasks. Unit Coordinators were often well known to children and parents involved with units. They dealt with emergencies, providing back-up and support for workers and families from minor issues such as problems with transport through to staying late supporting workers in emergency proceedings.

The Hackney model incorporating these administrative features has been deployed, often in a modified and adapted form, by a number of authorities although the original developers, Goodman and Trowler, have expressed some concerns at the lack of fidelity to key overall design features and the implications this may have for overall impact.

3   Key Findings from Existing Research

3.1   Does enhanced administrative support make a difference?

Evaluations of the Hackney (or RSW) model and its derivatives have been generally positive. For example, Baginsky et al (2012) found that shifting to a form of practice which valued shared responsibility for cases, administrative support and high quality training was rated highly by participants. Cross et al (2010) found that in the RSW model:

"… administration had been re-established as a legitimate supporting function and its burden on practice was significantly reduced. We were able to compare social work practice in new social work units with that in traditional teams and in every case we found significant differences between units and old-style teams. Social work units were consistently better." (Cross et al, 2010, p. 4)

The improvements described related to business processes, reflective learning and service culture. One of the few specific findings for the individual contribution of administrative support to overall impact of Systemic Unit Models is the observation of Forrester et al (2013, p. 96) on the role of Unit Coordinators that "*these provided in some senses the "glue" that kept units together.*"

However, in the review of approaches taken by English authorities 'with a record of success' in support of this Innovation Fund (Department for Education, 2014, p. 8), it is suggested that a common characteristic of these successful approaches was social workers having "*access to high quality and flexible administrative support – an all-round trouble-shooter who gets the practical things done for families.*"

Atkinson et al (2007) in an earlier review of the literature on multi-agency working identified funding of management and administrative functions as a key factor for effective multi-agency work. This endorsed even earlier and comparable findings for example from Townsley et al (2004).

Finally, McFadden et al (2014) have identified that addressing levels of 'excessive paperwork' may be a factor in reducing worker burnout.

3.2   What are the principal qualifications to these findings?

There are some important caveats to these key research findings as well as more ambiguous evidence about impact, as summarised below:

- **The precise contribution of enhanced administration to improved performance and better outcomes from children's social work is not well-developed within the literature**. In part this is due to the obvious challenges in separating out multiple influences on results. Given the emphasis this factor has had within the professional literature over many years, the relative lack of detail is somewhat surprising.

- **No compelling evidence has yet been found to support claims about the cost-effectiveness of increased specialist administrative support**. A study by Holmes et al (2010) on the cost implications of implementing the Laming report (2009) recommendations doesn't identify the specific cost-benefits associated with administrative support which formed part of Recommendation 24: Recruitment and case-loads. Evaluations of the Hackney model and derivatives have found that, in

terms of value for money, the overall cost of children's social care fell by just under 5% during the course of the programme. This fall was directly affected by a decline in the numbers and rate of looked after children over a period of time. Both measures were deployed as critical indicators of success and achievement of Reclaiming Social Work against its objectives, but do not tell us much about the contribution of the administrative 'element'.

- **While there are ongoing expressed concerns at the extent of the 'administrative burden', published evidence shows considerable variation.** Much of this is likely to be accounted for by definitional differences making comparative analysis difficult. For example, a NIASW study (2012) found that 78% of respondents reported direct client work accounting for less than 30% of time in any average week. 96% of respondents cited 'report writing' and 90% highlighted 'recording in client files' as the two key activities which directly impact on their ability to see clients. Arguably, both of these activities are core to social work practice rather than purely administrative. Certainly, it seems unlikely that they could be undertaken by an administrator acting alone. Other studies report lower figures and an overall caveat to the debate is provided in a review by Holmes and McDermid (2013) on the use of social work time. While they find some reports suggesting that social workers spend between 60 and 80 per cent of their time on administrative activities they identify others indicating that the proportion of time spent on administrative tasks might be much lower. A Baginsky study (2010) found that the proportion of social workers' time allocated to administrative tasks has remained consistently at around a quarter since 1972.

- **While increased administrative support has been identified as one improvement factor in terms of routine practice, others have also been identified** for example: reduced caseloads; improved IT systems; fewer targets; and improved post-qualifying training (LGA 2014). Forrester et al (2013) acknowledge that, whilst administrative support that is closer to a PA than a 'bureaucratic filer of forms' is most helpful in carrying out the social work role, other factors within Systemic Units have also influenced the quality of practice including: smaller teams; a high ratio of supervisors to staff; limited workloads; and wider practical organisational support for children's services.

- In a systematic review of the literature by McFadden et al (2014), **the contribution of administrative support to increasing or reducing rates of social worker retention did not surface as a significant feature** within their conclusions. This contrasts with an earlier review by Baginsky (2012) involving forty-nine local authorities who identified 'improving administrative support' as one of eleven key elements to a recruitment and retention strategy. At the same time, however, responses concerning this option when weighted for significance and

ease of implementation indicated that while it was desirable it was not a priority and that it would be very difficult to introduce when faced with reduced budgets.

Other research findings also suggest caution in relation to applying generalised assumptions across all aspects of social work with children and families. For example:

- **The balance of administrative and non-administrative tasks is not a constant across the social work task** i.e. the proportion of time spent on direct and indirect activities varies according to the types of process or activity. Holmes and McDermid (2013) found that factors associated with higher levels of ongoing administrative support were: child subject to a Child Protection Plan; child under six years; child with emotional or behaviour difficulties – and a combination of any / all of these factors.

- **An increase in indirect activity cannot be solely attributable to the introduction of electronic recording systems including the Integrated Children's System.** There is evidence for example that, while time spent on some activities increased following implementation of the ICS, time was also saved in others (Holmes et al 2010). Baginsky et al. (2010) found no differences in the proportion of time spent on administrative activities between those workers using electronic recording systems and those using paper records, suggesting that the extensive implementation of electronic records has not produced the efficiencies originally anticipated, but neither has it contributed to the burden. While evidence suggests that e-enabled performance systems can sometimes constrain practice, Pithouse et al (2011) found many instances of expedient manoeuvres and 'workarounds' designed for example to satisfy the ICS or other system and also enable the workers and team managers to get on with the core task of helping children and supporting families.

- **The welcome increased emphasis on multi-agency working has also increased the amount of indirect activity** by requiring that more time be spent in liaising with other professionals (Holmes et al 2010).

- Munro and Lushey (2012, p. 8) report that **views are mixed about whether more flexible assessment processes provide greater opportunities for direct work with children and their families**. *"While some social workers perceived that the single assessment had reduced the time spent on case recording, thus freeing up more time for targeted work where appropriate: others thought that the flexibilities meant they were collecting more information which in turn needed to be analysed and recorded, thus offsetting any gains from a streamlined assessment process."*

4   Summary of Key Messages

Although there are some clear indications of the potential value of enhanced administrative support within social care, particularly within child in need teams, research has not yet clearly extrapolated the particular value or value for money of appointing administrators into these newer roles – particularly outside of a 'Systemic Unit' or Hackney model.

Key outstanding questions about the role and use of administrative support within social work, particularly child in need teams appear to include the following:

- What are the tasks that can and should be undertaken by non-social work qualified staff with an administrative background?
- What specific value can be achieved by transferring these tasks in terms of improvements to both the volume and possibly also the quality of social work as well as the cost effectiveness of the overall team? We note that causality linked with the quality of social work practice and the outcomes of it for children and families is likely always to be tenuous – not least because of a range of other factors likely to heavily influence these, for example: the ability and confidence of social workers to make best use of greater availability of time for 'direct work'.
- Can tasks currently described by social workers as administrative in nature, but that are none-the-less core (for example writing up assessments or case notes), become less of a burden or more efficient via means other than increasing administrative support, for example by improving IT skills or increasing worker typing speed?

5   References

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Appendix One

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Theory of Change: Administrative Support

What's the problem? What needs to change?	What do we need to do to effect change?	What will look different by November 2016 if we do these things?	What longer term outcomes will result if we succeed?
Social workers are currently spending too much time (approximately 60%) on administration and not enough time on direct contact with children in need and their families. Social workers need to have the capacity to change what goes on in the family in order to improve outcomes and reduce demand for care.	• Create capacity / add capacity by ensuring that there will be an administrator / coordinator for every 3 social workers. • For the purposes of the innovation programme, this will be piloted in some areas. • There will be a total of 32 coordinators / administrators in Hampshire and 10 on the Isle of Wight.	• A significant increase in social worker time for direct work with families and a significant reduction in the amount of time spent on administrative tasks. • More timely and accurate information about families recorded.	• Better quality social work with children in need and their families. • Better outcomes for children in need and their families.