



Rees Centre



How do we know if children's social care services make a difference? Development of an outcomes framework Summary

July 2019

**Ivana La Valle, Di Hart and Lisa Holmes with
Vânia S. Pinto**

Do we know if children's social care services make a difference?

Our study has found a consensus that children's social care services (CSCS) need better evidence to make well-informed decisions about service planning and delivery, particularly given the increased pressures due to a rise in demand for CSCS at a time of declining resources.

A first step to improve the local evidence base has involved the development of an outcomes framework for CSCS. The framework presented in this report is based on the views of those who plan, deliver and use these services, as well as the research evidence.

The outcomes framework is meant to complement, rather than replace, national administrative data collected by the Department for Education (DfE). If the framework proves useful locally, consideration could be given to adapting it for use with partner agencies and aligning it with DfE and Ofsted data requirements. This would provide a more cohesive approach to our understanding of the effectiveness of CSCS and their impact on the lives of children and their families.

Developing an outcomes framework for CSCS

Deciding which outcomes should be measured to assess whether services have the intended impacts requires setting out: first, what changes for users are expected from these services (i.e. user outcomes); and second, how these changes can be achieved (i.e. intermediate outcomes).

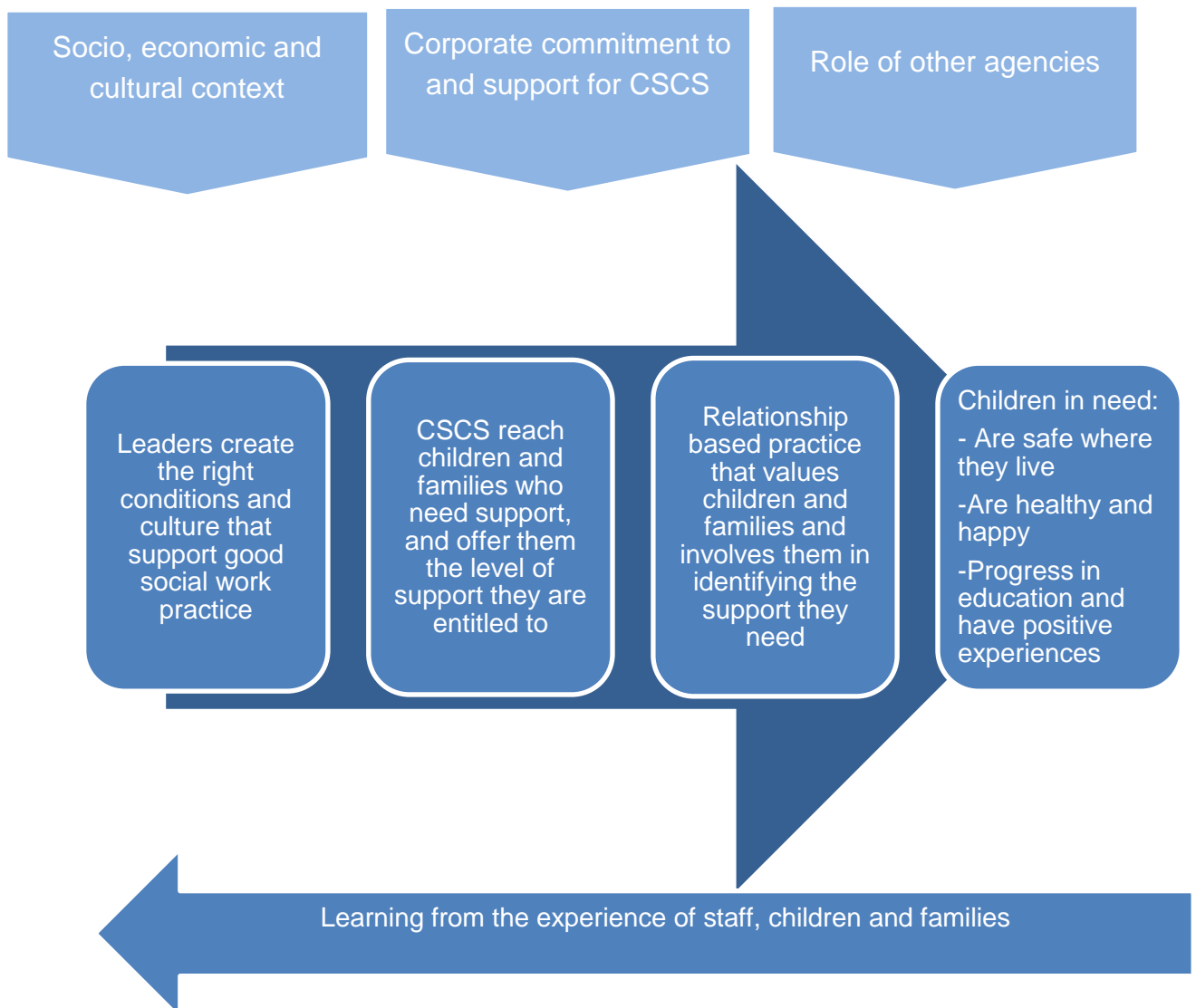
Our findings show that monitoring **intermediate CSCS outcomes** would require addressing the following questions:

- Do CSCS leaders create the right conditions and the right culture to support good social work practice?
- Do CSCS reach the children and families who need their help, appropriately assess their needs and provide the level of support they require and are entitled to?
- Do children and their families feel valued and empowered by services and the support they receive?

Assessing whether CSCS achieve the expected **outcomes for their users** (i.e. children for whom they have a statutory responsibility) would require addressing the following questions:

- Are children in need safe where they live, both at home and in their community?
- Have they been supported by CSCS to be healthy and happy, that is achieve developmental, physical, cognitive, social and emotional milestones?
- Have they been supported by CSCS to make progress in education and to have positive educational experiences?

Figure 1: Mechanisms through which CSCS make a positive difference to the lives of children in need and their families



As indicated at the bottom of figure 1, our findings show a growing consensus that service planning and provision must be informed by the views and experiences of those who deliver and use services.

Our framework focuses on the work of CSCS and how to measure its effects. There are, however, other important influences to consider in **analysing** the data that would be generated by this framework, including:

- The **context** within which families live and services operate. Contextual influences to consider include the pressures of poverty, homelessness and other disadvantages, and how users from different socio-cultural backgrounds may receive a different response from agencies
- The level of **corporate support**, which plays a key part in enabling CSCS to work effectively, primarily through the allocation of an adequate budget and by prioritising the needs of vulnerable children across departments
- The **role of other agencies** in helping to identify children and families who need help from CSCS. Furthermore, while CSCS must be effective ‘service co-ordinators and advocates’, much of the input that can make a difference to children in need comes from other children’s services and from adult services their parents and carers require support from

What outcomes from CSCS should be measured?

The following table shows in the last column the expected measurable outcomes for children, and in the other columns the intermediate outcomes necessary to achieve these ultimate goals. The outcomes framework covers all children in need i.e. children for whom CSCS have a statutory responsibility.

Table 1: Outcomes from CSCS

The right conditions and culture to support good practice	Reaching children and families who need help	Children and families are valued and involved	Child outcomes
<p>Effective leadership</p> <p>Commitment to social work values and ethics</p> <p>Culture that supports reflective learning</p> <p>Effective multi-agency working</p> <p>Adequate support infrastructure</p> <p>Shared understanding of what good practice looks like</p> <p>Stable workforce at all levels</p> <p>Motivated workforce</p> <p>Workforce with the right skills</p>	<p>Partner agencies are able to identify children who are potentially in need</p> <p>Effective identification of children in need</p> <p>Effective identification of children at risk of harm</p> <p>Effective identification of children who cannot be cared for safely at home</p> <p>Support is appropriate to meet a child's needs</p> <p>Care leavers continue to be supported by their corporate parent</p>	<p>Children trust staff and have a stable and supportive relationship with them</p> <p>Parents/carers trust staff and have a stable and supportive relationship with them</p> <p>Children are involved in identifying their needs and planning their support</p> <p>Parents/carers are involved in identifying their needs and planning their support</p> <p>Children think services are responding to their needs</p> <p>Parents/carers think services are responding to their needs</p>	<p>Children are safe where they live (at home/placement and their community)</p> <p>Children are settled and happy where they live</p> <p>Children achieve stability and permanence</p> <p>Children make good progress in their behavioural, emotional and social development</p> <p>Children have their mental health needs met</p> <p>Children engage in early years education</p> <p>Children engage in education</p> <p>Children have stable and positive educational experiences</p> <p>Children make progress in education</p>

To assess if the intermediate and child outcomes outlined above are achieved, it is necessary to identify specific, observable and measurable indicators, which are described in the report. Some of these indicators already exist (e.g. in the National Pupil Database), others could be developed with existing local data (e.g. from case files and audits), while some would require new data to be collected from CSCS staff and users.

Making sense of the data

It should be noted that none of the measures in the framework are designed to be used in isolation. **Triangulation** of multiple measures from different data sources is needed to capture the complexity in which CSCS operate and the support they deliver to the most vulnerable children and families in our society.

The framework could be used internally to **monitor business as usual**, as well as to identify areas for **improvement** and then assess if improvement plans have had the intended effects. The framework would also provide evidence that local authorities may find useful to share, for example, in the annual self-assessment for Ofsted or in the regional improvement alliances.

What next?

The framework is the first step in the journey required to improve the statistical evidence available to assess the impact of the complex context in which CSCS operate and the variable packages of support delivered by CSCS. The next stage would require a pilot to further develop and test the feasibility of compiling the proposed indicators and how useful the data is in informing service planning and delivery. With time, it may be possible to demonstrate which of the proposed indicators are reliably associated with improved outcomes and could form a sub-set of vital signs of the health of CSCS.

A full copy of the report can be found at <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CSCS-Outcomes-Framework-July-2019.pdf>

For further information please contact us at rees.centre@education.ox.ac.uk or follow us on Twitter @ReesCentre