

Perspectives on hope



Working with the Social and Economic Circumstances of Children and Families: Developing Local Policy and Practice in Barnsley

Summary Report

Introduction

The work with Barnsley frontline social workers and managers was a result of senior management engagement with the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP). More details about this project can be found at <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/inequalities-in-child-welfare-intervention-rates/>. The project established the link between rates of poverty and deprivation and the chances of children entering the care and protection system. Barnsley is an area of high deprivation with 21.8% of areas being amongst the 10% most deprived in England. Thus this link was of particular interest, and service leaders were keen to support staff to think carefully about children's social and economic circumstances and how this might be affecting professional decisions.

Barnsley (compared with its statistical neighbours) does not have a high level of care and protection interventions, however, because of the levels of poverty experienced by families and professional concerns about the relationship between poverty and neglect, it was agreed that the CWIP team would work with social workers and their managers.

The programme of work

Professors Brid Featherstone (Huddersfield University) and Kate Morris (University of Sheffield) led a series of practice focused workshops with children's services staff.

An initial workshop was held with managers, and this focused on building their familiarity with data about the social and economic circumstances of Barnsley families, and the CWIP findings. The group was introduced to the CWIP App <https://www.cwip-app.co.uk/>. This allows staff to interrogate the data about their service (funding and intervention rates) and about their locality (deprivation rates and demographics) and to compare this data to other similar local authorities.

Following this workshop with managers, a series of workshops were held with frontline staff. These aimed to:

1. Ensure staff had up to date knowledge about the relationship between child abuse, neglect and poverty (see <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review> for a free report)
2. To share the CWIP research and the implications for practice (see <https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/publications/the-child-welfare-inequalities-project-final-report>)
3. To support reflective analysis of existing practices and make recommendations for future developments

Reflections from the workshops

For staff working with families where there were care and protection concerns, the workshops identified common issues:

1. Poverty was reported to be endemic, and the families that were worked with experienced degrees of economic hardship, often over many decades and generations, including in work poverty. The CWIP research resonated strongly with the experiences of frontline staff.

2. Changes in work (such as the closure of the mines and deindustrialisation) had left many families in uncertain and unstable work situations with the loss of traditional roles and working practices resulting in communities that were often lacking a sense of hope.
3. However, while there was recognition of the endemic nature of poverty and a high level of understanding of the particular issues within Barnsley as a result of its history, practitioners struggled to make links between these wider issues and the harms faced by, and within, families.
4. Child protection practice is focused at the level of the individual family and the risks within that family; it is not always sighted on the poverty in which the family is living.
5. It also operates with assumptions that parents (especially mothers) are making 'choices' about spending resources unwisely without drilling down into what might be lying behind the choices.
6. When families are in crisis, practitioners struggled to integrate practices that recognised the constraints posed by poverty with practices that supported the taking of appropriate levels of responsibility to protect children.
7. Entry into care often led to profoundly unequal experiences, with birth families struggling to offer the social and economic resources foster families and kinship carers could offer and reflections within the workshops revealed a level of ethical unease about this. It was not clear, however, whether opportunities to reflect on the ethical implications of practices, such as paying foster parents or kinship carers but withholding financial support from birth parents, were routinely available within the organisation.
8. There was a recognition of the need to strengthen opportunities for collaborative working across the Council, and with the community sector, in order to meet the needs of families.

Making a difference: recommendations for next steps

All these recommendations need to be underpinned by an ethically enquiring organisational culture where the following questions are routinely posed:

1. How can we hear from, and listen to, families living in Barnsley about their perspectives on their lives, hopes and aspirations?
2. How do we draw on their perspectives of what good systems and practices look like?
3. Within Children's Services are there enough opportunities to talk across the organisation about the hopes of Children's Services staff for children and families in Barnsley? Is there congruence between these hopes and those of families? How are such conversations facilitated across the Council and embedded within consultations with other agencies and local communities?
4. What stops us committing to realising these hopes?

Policy Developments

1. Supporting actions to help build aspiration and hope for families.

Next step? Organising fora within the community to discuss the Anti-poverty strategy and linking such fora with 2 (below)

2. Service leads should ensure all SWs are aware of the existing local alliances to support families. This should include partnerships with income maximisation services, housing advice services, food banks, anti-poverty agencies, employment and careers agencies. Children's services will need to build trust with anti-poverty agencies and communities, who may be cautious about family responses to partnerships between agencies.

Next step? A roundtable meeting of Barnsley anti-poverty and welfare rights organisations hosted by Children's Services to start planning a shared strategy focused on children at risk of harm

3. Using the CWiP App and other local data resources staff could be supported to become familiar with the social and economic circumstances of the families and communities they serve, and will then be able to build a data informed analysis of local needs.

Next step? Train a 'data champion' to use the CWiP App and to work with staff to improve data literacy as an ongoing practice development role

4. In order to recognise the impact of social and economic circumstances on rates of care and protection interventions, the alliances built above should result in enhanced service provision by extending the support available to families. Families referred to children's services should automatically access income, housing and employment advice

Next step? Local negotiations between Children's Services and Income Maximisation services to pilot advice surgeries for families entering the care and protection systems

5. Joint training should be developed for staff working directly with families with input on core benefits and welfare rights.

Next step? Large group training sessions on current income and benefit rights for families with children under 18 years as a core training requirement for frontline staff

6. An internal audit of child protection plans should be conducted to capture the extent to which children's socio-economic circumstances are addressed in plans, in particular, how these circumstances affect the well-being of the child

Next step? A CP chair to audit a sample of CP plans from the preceding 12 months to arrive at a detailed understanding of how children's socio-economic circumstances are / are not addressed as part of tackling neglect and abuse

Practice Developments

1. All assessment reports for care and protection meetings should routinely set out clearly the families' social and economic circumstances and chairs of planning meetings and decision-making panels should monitor this development and report progress to senior service managers

Next step? Amend the protection conference report templates to include socioeconomic circumstances

2. Supervision should routinely include reflections on the socio-economic circumstances of children (and where helpful could use the supervisory prompt sheet developed by CWIP and produced by Research in Practice) A prompt sheet developed by Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and White can support supervisors to develop poverty aware practices (<https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Using-a-social-model-of-child-protection-in-supervision.pdf>)

Next step? Build on the prompt sheet support poverty aware supervision in Barnsley

3. Local managers should review existing local practices to 'poverty proof' these, and to avoid further shaming of families. This will include, for example, access to financial support to attend child protection and care meetings and contact, access to resources (such as appropriate clothing, travel costs) to engage with formal court proceedings.

Next step? Operational managers to audit practices and arrive at common best practice standards

4. Local training for social workers so that they are confident in discussing with families their financial circumstances and specific needs in order to work with care and protection plans, this should include input from family led organisations such as ATD Fourth World.

Next step? The Staff Development programme should incorporate annual anti-poverty training delivered by families and family led organisations to raise awareness of the consequences for children, families and communities.