Canary in the Cage?

Lead Indicators and their potential use by Local Safeguarding Children Boards and partner agencies

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Summary

- The work of Kaplan and Norton (1996) has popularised the use of Balanced Scorecards as a way of presenting feedback on organisational performance in both the business and public sectors.

- The approach encourages the use of both lag and lead indicators. Lag indicators track progress towards desired outcomes whilst lead indicators track the activities that are expected to 'lead to' these outcomes.

- This way of thinking about performance measurement complements the ideas of Outcome-Based Accountability (OBA) proposed by Friedman (2005).

- This review sought the views of a range of senior managers in 6 local authority areas within one region in England, with responsibility for the management and oversight of local child protection systems on the potential value of using lead indicators.

- Although the review found support for the idea, it was clear that questions of how things were measured and why they were measured were as important as what was being measured. There was support for the idea of developing measurement systems within local partnership arrangements, rather than as an extension of a national performance management system.

- Managers reported that past experiences of excessive use of external performance measurement had had a negative effect on creating a shared culture within agencies and partnerships where feedback data is routinely used to support reflection, improvement and innovation.

- Generally it was thought that lag indicators (outcomes) were better suited to external reporting and lead indicators (process) were better suited to local management and oversight.

- Three areas emerged from the interviews on which lead indicators could focus: capacity and capability of workforce (e.g. staff vacancies, turnover, sickness etc), the quality of professional decision making (re-referral rates, conversion rates etc), and levels and quality of partnership engagement (monitoring of attendance at meetings).

- The review highlighted the difficulties that front-line staff and managers face in getting relevant, accurate, timely, comprehensive and accessible data from their systems to support their daily work.

- Managers expressed concern about the lack of opportunity to routinely review feedback data alongside other sources of evidence for the purpose of learning and improvement.

…night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.

And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Waiting for the Barbarians
Constantine Cavafy (1864-1933)

Introduction and Aims

The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) has encouraged us to view local child protection arrangements as complex adaptive systems which, when given the right conditions, are capable of self-organisation, learning and self-improvement. The Review also reminds us how over-ambitious performance management frameworks and external inspection regimes can inadvertently stifle this capacity for learning and creativity (Munro, 2010).

In the final report, the Review proposes that, in future, any national performance indicators should focus on tracking overall progress towards better outcomes for children and young people whilst Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) should focus on developing their own local performance management arrangements to support shared learning and systems improvement (Munro, 2011). This brief report summarises the views of a number of professionals, involved in managing and overseeing local child protection arrangements, on the value of including a set of 'lead indicators' within these local performance management arrangements.

The term 'lead indicator' is used here to describe indicators that track the key drivers of organisational and inter-organisational effectiveness. The term describes a class of indicators that give feedback on the evidence-informed processes that are expected to 'lead to' improved outcomes for children and young people. Because these indicators are largely concerned with internal processes ('work in progress') rather than demonstrating outcome ('the difference we made'), they are normally better suited to internal rather than external reporting. It must be stressed that the idea of lead indicators does not necessarily mean the introduction of new indicators.   Instead, it suggests a different way of developing and reporting many of the indicators that are already in use.

The study aimed to explore and provide information on the following three areas:

- the potential value of having a defined set of lead indicators within the LSCB performance management arrangements;

- the conditions in which lead indicators were likely to work best to support the proactive management of the local child protection system; and
- some examples of lead performance indicators[1].

Method

The findings in this paper are based on semi-structured interviews with:

- eight experienced senior managers working in Children's Social Care Services, the Police and the NHS within six local authority areas;

- the Chair and Manager of a Local Safeguarding Children Board;

- a Training Manager with lead responsibility for child protection training within a local Children and Young People's partnership.

With one exception, all of the managers interviewed had at least 25 years experience of working within their chosen profession. In order to contain travel costs, all of the interviews were conducted with managers working within one region in England. It is worth noting that this study was undertaken at a point when agencies were in the process of finalising plans for the implementation of unprecedented budget savings. Many of these plans involved substantial job losses. This meant that the interviews were conducted at a time of considerable anxiety and uncertainty about future resources.

Background

The idea of identifying a class of 'lead indicators' has been popularised by Kaplan and Norton's work on the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Kaplan and Norton argued that businesses relied too heavily on financial measures to judge their performance and that they needed to develop a more 'balanced' view by looking at performance through a range of interdependent perspectives. They recommended four perspectives: financial; customer; internal processes; and, employee learning and growth. Although the idea was originally conceived for use in the private sector, the approach has subsequently been adapted for use in the public and not-for-profit sectors (Niven, 2008). A number of public sector bodies in the United Kingdom now use the Balanced Scorecard as their performance framework of choice – notably the Ministry of Defence, a number of English local authorities,

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[1] For the sake of brevity and in order to avoid repetition, the term 'lead indicator' is used as shorthand for 'lead performance indicator'. This follows the convention recommended by Friedman (2005) of distinguishing between measures of agency performance (performance indicators) and measures of partnership effectiveness (outcome measures).

and a number of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Attention has also been drawn to the potential use of the Balanced Scorecard within local partnerships working to improve outcomes for children and young people (Friedman, Garnett and Pinnock, 2005; Percy-Smith, 2005).

Kaplan and Norton recommended that scorecards needed to contain a mix of both lag and lead measures. In the private sector, lead indicators are used by businesses to track areas of activity that are seen as critical to the organisation achieving its mission – and ultimately to securing its future profitability (for example, see Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). Likewise, in the public sector it is proposed that lead indicators should be used to track the progress of those critical processes that are expected to 'lead to' desired outcomes (Niven, 2008).

Whilst there is agreement that the underlying logic of the Balanced Scorecard can be applied to the work of not-for-profit organisations, both Niven and Moore recommend the careful adaptation of the ideas, rather than its wholesale adoption. Moore points out that this is necessary because of the fundamental difference between the purposes of for-profit and not-for-profit organisations:

> *For profit managers need non-financial measures to help them find the means to achieve the end of remaining profitable. Non-profit managers, on the other hand, need non-financial measures to tell them whether they have used their financial resources as effective means for creating publicly valuable results* (Moore, 2003).

Moore and Niven both suggest a re-ordering of the four perspectives within the scorecard so that improved outcomes become the focal point of the measures rather than improved profitability.

Using the Balanced Scorecard approach, lag indicators are used to track progress towards the actual desired outcome itself – the lag being the time elapsed between a partnership's efforts and the outcome being detected and reported. Whilst these lag indicators play a vital role in helping us to judge the public value being created (Moore, 2003), they have limited value in supporting managers in the routine management of the service[2]. As Marshall MacLuhan famously observed, 'We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future' (MacLuhan and Fiore, 1967).

Ideally, lead indicators should provide managers with data that enables them to

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[2] In some instances it is necessary to use process-based data as a proxy for data on actual outcomes. Whilst in some cases this might be unavoidable, the preferred approach would be always to use outcome data for the purposes of public accountability and process information for local operational management and local oversight.

manage the key processes that available evidence suggests will lead to better outcomes. This idea of focusing on key processes potentially supports wider efforts to move towards the commissioning of evidence-informed practice and service design. The distinguishing feature of lead indicators is that they allow managers to manage critical processes pro-actively by alerting them to the emergence of changes within the systems. For this reason, lead indicators have been likened to the 'canary in the cage', used by miners to alert them to the presence of toxic gases in their work environment

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Box 1: Attributes of Lead Indicators

- *Focus on evidence-supported features of process - 'the things that must go well'*
- *Encourage foresight and pro-active decision-making*
- *Minimal lag between operational events and report*
- *Based on a valid cause/effect relationship*
- *Focus on activities over which managers have operational control*
- *Sensitive enough to detect changes*
- *Readily available and cheap to produce*
- *Have credibility with professionals involved*

Distinguishing between outcome measurement and performance measurement
is also a key feature of the approach recommended by Friedman in his influential work on outcome-based accountability (OBA) (Friedman, 2005). In Friedman's approach, outcome measures are used to track the effects of the collective efforts of a partnership towards improved outcomes at a population level. Performance indicators are then developed by each partner agency to track their individual contribution for specific 'programs, agencies and service systems'. He also recommends that performance indicators should be organised into three simple groupings: 'How much did we do?' 'How well did we do it?' and 'Is anyone any better off?'. Feedback suggests that managers and stakeholders find the clarity of this approach a refreshing change from the sometimes arch and jargon-laden language of the performance management industry (for example see National College for Schools Leadership, 2011). Like Moore, Friedman insists that performance accountability must be based on a hierarchy that favours outcomes over the other two domains of productivity and service quality. Although Friedman does not explicitly refer to the term 'lead indicators' in his work, his advice on selecting performance indicators is unequivocal in giving preference to measuring things that lead to 'customers being better off' (see Friedman, 2005, p.79).

Good progress has been made over the past decade on developing measures of children's wellbeing. Not only do we have a better understanding of what to report, we also have a

growing body of knowledge on how to use these measures to best effect (Ben-Arieh and Goerge, 2006). Whilst this progress is to be welcomed, it has been accompanied by a tendency to almost denigrate the idea of process – and the data that goes with it. For example, it is not uncommon to hear people commenting on 'meaningless output data'. Clearly, for the purpose of accountability and understanding 'what works?', outcome data will always be the data of choice. However, managers need accurate, accessible, timely and comprehensive data to understand what is going on within a service system, to process data and to respond to events with confidence. For example, data on the number of families attending a particular family support service might, at face value, look like 'meaningless output data' but to the managers and staff involved in that service, such data can yield important information about their reach within specific target sub-populations or their success in attracting families that hitherto had proved difficult to engage. To these staff, the fact that they have managed to engage a family successfully might be seen as the first step that 'leads to' improvements in family life. Seen in this way, the take-up of service could be one of a number of lead indicators that the manager and staff use to monitor their service.

It is worth noting that the term 'lead indicator' is used here to describe measures that track the key drivers of organisational effectiveness. However, the term 'leading indicator' is also used to describe measures that track cross impacts within macro-economic systems. In this context, lead indicators are used to track changes in activities that are seen as reliable predictors of future economic trends, for example business start-ups and failures, fuel prices, planning applications and new starts on house building. Whilst accepting that there is a valid relationship between the wider social and economic determinants and their impact on the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families, this way of conceptualising lead indicators was thought to have less practical value for operational managers. However, it was suggested that such an approach has value for the work of local Children's Trust arrangements and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) that play a strategic role in leading local efforts to tackle issues such as health inequalities and family poverty. For this reason it was thought that analysis of this sort could more usefully be included in a partnership's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA).

Writers in the field of organisational resilience regard this ability to demonstrate environmental awareness and foresight in the face of adversity as a key attribute of resilient organisations. Organisational resilience is defined as:

the ability of an organisation to survive, and potentially even thrive in an environment of change and uncertainty. Resilient organisations are those which are able to monitor the internal and external environment for changes which help them to continuously adapt, before the case for change becomes critical to their survival and continuity (Stephenson, et. al. 2010)

The concept of resilience lies beyond the more conventional notion of organisational adaptability. It is sometimes referred to as an organisation's capacity to 'bounce-back' from

extreme events such as natural disasters and terrorist attacks. For example, studies are currently underway in New Zealand to assess the resilience of agencies following the recent earthquakes in Christchurch.

Although the focus of this study is not specifically on resilience, it is noticeable how the habits and routines around the use of data can vary from one agency to another; and one could speculate how these habits might serve them during a crisis such as a high profile child protection tragedy or a natural disaster such as flooding. Two of the agencies approached during the course of this study have clearly made longstanding use of data to support the routine management of their services, whilst others viewed data as something they collect simply to comply with the requirements of external bodies.

Some examples of possible lead indicators

During the course of the interviews, three areas emerged as possible ones on which lead indicators could be focused. These were:

- the capacity and capability of the workforce;

- the quality of professional decision-making; and

- levels and quality of partnership engagement.

Seen from an LSCB perspective, lead indicators could be used by the Board and its constituent agencies to track those critical processes and activities that are likely to secure better outcomes for children and young people.   Managers talked about the importance of using these measures to support the day-to-day management of means rather than ends.

To be of any practical value to managers, lead indicators must focus on activities for which they have individual or shared responsibility. Partnerships are normally formed where there are high levels of interdependence between agencies to achieve a shared goal. In these circumstances, lead indicators could focus on the specific actions that an individual agency needs to get right – or on the joint management of shared processes.

It must be stressed that managers believed that the process of designing and agreeing indicators was one that needed to involve local stakeholders. Feedback from managers also echoed the point made by Tilbury (2004) that neither performance indicators nor the practice they claim to measure are value free. They pointed out that the actual process of selecting indicators could usefully help to surface and resolve differences in agency perspectives on the means and ends of local child welfare practice.

The following are presented as examples that arose during the interviews with managers.

The capacity and capability of the workforce

Indicators that allow managers to make judgements about the current and future availability and quality of staff were a popular choice for lead indicators. Child protection is a staff intensive process – the staff are the primary resource of the service. This makes staff recruitment, retention and development critical processes within all partner agencies. For this reason, the Social Work Task Force (2009) has also drawn attention to the need to make better use of local data on the workforce for forward planning.

During the course of the interviews, all key agencies demonstrated that they were able to report on a wide range of factors that affect the availability and capability of front-line staff in health services, the police and children's social care. The following performance indicators were thought to be useful as lead indicators of staff capacity and capability:

- Staff vacancies: a weekly census of the proportion of posts which work to protect children and support families that are unfilled; and the number of staff who had given notice of their intention to leave the agency either on a permanent or temporary basis.

- Time to fill vacant posts: a rolling average of the number of weeks taken to fill posts where the main duty is the protection of children and the support of families.

- Staff turnover: the number of staff leaving the service within a given period expressed as a proportion of the number of established posts.

- Staff sickness: this should include length of sickness absence and reasons for short term and long-term sickness.

- Use of temporary staff: the proportion of established posts filled by agency and staff in other forms of temporary employment.

- Staff development: the numbers of qualified staff and staff engaged in early professional development, post qualifying courses and staff undertaking local child protection training.

- Staff morale: analysis of annual individual staff development interviews and exit interviews and results of internal staff surveys.

- Continuity of care and relationships: the rate of changes of key worker and lead workers.

It was clear that in many cases these sorts of data were already being used proactively. For example, a police inspector described how she used a standard staffing report to manage the availability of specialist child protection staff across a countywide force. A local authority gave a good example of how it routinely reports on staff recruitment and retention to its scrutiny committee. This report included a full commentary on the data. Similarly, a unitary authority gave examples of how routine data on the workforce were being used to manage and shape child protection training. All managers believed this sort of information was going to be even more important in the future in order to ensure that staff reductions did not compromise capacity at the front-line, one manager pointing out the importance of providing a narrative and not just data so that issues such as the impact of council-wide staff recruitment 'freezes' and vacancy management exercises could be fully understood.

The idea of using staff workloads as a potential lead indicator was explored in the interviews. Managers from two agencies (one health and one social care) described how they had developed useful tools in order to manage the distribution of workloads across teams. In the health example, the system was based on a *per capita* weighting, taking account of levels of deprivation within particular neighbourhoods. In the social care example, the workload management scheme had been developed specifically as a support to front-line social care staff and was seen as a way of helping to structure and focus discussions between a social worker and his/her line manager. Managers acknowledged that differences in caseload mix made it difficult to use aggregated workload data to manage and compare system performance between teams and areas.

Managers thought that local analysis of the Ofsted/Ipsos MORI survey of children's social work practitioners (2010) had the potential to provide useful data on workforce – even though in its current form it is based on an annual survey and restricted to one partner agency. However, poor completion rates limited the value of the results. Managers agreed that the survey was asking the right questions – but that potentially it could dig deeper into areas such as the relationship between workloads and professional development and views on the effectiveness of business support functions and ICT. Two managers suggested that one way of increasing the completion rate of the survey would be to link it to the General Social Care Council registration process. Another suggested that the local implementation of the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force presented an opportunity to improve the collection and use of workforce data.

Continuity of agency representation was acknowledged to be a valuable dimension of the case management process. High staff turnover in any of the partner agencies was identified as being likely to lead to disrupted relationships with children and families – and a lack of continuity between professionals[3]. To illustrate just how challenging this could be, a health services manager explained how difficult it was for health visitors to maintain this continuity, citing a school where every child had had a change of address within the past 12 months, one child alone having 23 recorded changes of address.

Managers in both health and social care commented that qualitative feedback from workforce processes should also be routinely reviewed in order to interpret the headline data. For example, a health manager described how she used feedback from exit interviews and from inter-professional disputes alongside standard statistical reports.

Box 2: Good practice example: Using Lead Indicators to monitor the capacity and capability of the social care workforce

Bradford's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee is routinely presented with high-quality data on a range of lead indicators. This includes staff vacancy levels, use of agency staff, qualifications and experience of staff, workload analysis and workflow measures.

Commenting on this work, the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care said: *'We think it's vital that elected members are routinely provided with relevant and accurate information on children's services'. 'Of course, the data is not an end in itself – we see it as a starting place for what can sometimes be quite challenging conversations about what's going on in the system'.*

The quality of professional decision-making

Managers agreed that measures such as re-referral rates and conversion rates opened up important discussions about the quality of professional decision-making between partner agencies and could therefore act as lead indicators. Data that gave them a dynamic, rather than a single point view of the system was seen to be useful. However, all of the social care managers stressed that these indicators did just what they were supposed to do, namely to 'indicate' those areas that needed further scrutiny. Managers were clear that using these indicators gave them a starting place for further analysis. All of the authorities participating in this study had also been involved in a regional study commissioned by the Association of

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[3] It was noted that for this reason, 'preserving connections' was already included as a measure in the federal performance monitoring system in the United States.

Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) into how professional decision-making shapes the outcomes of the referral and assessment process (Thorpe, forthcoming). Although some managers admitted to being sceptical of the value of the research, all agreed that it had generated the sort of debate and reflection that they had hitherto struggled to create. The research had given them data from across the region that they could use to undertake simple statistical comparisons as well as shared 'mental models' (Senge, 1990) for exploring the reasons behind these differences.

All of the managers interviewed believed that conversion rates made good lead indicators because not only did they give them important insights into the workings of their local systems, they also gave them timely feedback to support the day to day management of the system. During the course of the study, good illustrations were provided of the use of data on conversion rates for both single loop and double loop learning in action (Munro, 2010). For example, one authority showed how it undertook a weekly review of the rate at which expressions of child concern were being converted into referrals. As well as being used to gauge and manage the pressure on the entry point to the system (the 'front door'), this authority was also using quarterly aggregated data to challenge agencies about their referral practices.

The interviews for this study were timely in that managers had recently received an authority-level analysis from the ADCS study. It was clear that the conversations that this had provoked were of a very different order to the ones that might have been witnessed if they had been looking at a crude 'league table' of results. For example, one manager pointed out that by reducing the opportunity cost of unnecessary assessments, they had the potential to increase the contact time in other areas of practice. Another drew attention to the damage that unnecessary intrusions had had on family life and the effect that this had on local perceptions of the service. This observation underlined the importance of creating the right conditions in which partnerships can shift from 'single-loop learning' to "double-loop learning (Testa, 2010). The conversations were no longer about the latest contrivance for hitting a target but instead had moved to a far more fundamental debate about the beliefs and practices that shaped the outcomes of their local assessment process.

In addition to the conversion rates at the point of referral, managers involved in the regional ADCS study also described how the same style of systems-based thinking needed to be applied to each node in the decision-making process. For example, they suggested that the same logic could be applied to:

- the number of re-referrals for cases taken and not taken as referrals;
- conversion rates from referrals to initial assessments;
- conversion rates from initial assessments to core assessments;
- conversion rates from core assessments to plans;

- outcomes of subsequent plans;
- child and family perceptions of processes; and
- substantiated/unsubstantiated section 47 enquiries.

Ethnographic studies (see Thorpe, forthcoming) and practice-based observations (Moore, 2010) suggest that the visualisation and scalability of both child-based data and aggregated data is critical to its acceptance and use. For example, the funnel graphic used by Thorpe to show the conversion rate through the child protection system turns a difficult concept into a practical management aid. Likewise, Moore's experience of developing a web-based reporting system also underlines the importance of presenting data in a way that makes it accessible to lay users.

> **Box 3: Good practice example: Collaborating to advance practice knowledge and to develop practical approaches to systems management in local children's partnership working**
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> The Association of Directors of Children's Services, Yorkshire and Humber commissioned Professor David Thorpe and his colleagues to undertake research in order to extend knowledge about how different local practices at the "front door" of local safeguarding systems led to different kinds of outcomes and the effect that these differences had on a child's journey through the system. The output of the research is intended to help local partnerships to develop an approach to designing lead indicators to monitor the system and to support the development of a partnership-based approach to evaluating crucial local aspects of local professional practice.
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> Commenting on the research, the Chair of the Yorkshire and Humber ADCS and Corporate Director for Family Services at Wakefield MDC said '*This was the first time that partnerships from across the region have come together and collaborated with academic researchers in this way'. 'The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive – people feel that the process of the research itself and the follow-up events have really deepened their understanding of the systems management of child concern reports and it's given them a shared language and shared meaning to talk about it"*.

Levels and quality of partnership engagement

Managers talked about how data on partnership working could form the basis of simple lead indicators on levels of partnership engagement. This view is echoed by Moore who regards the capability of public sector organisations to engage in effective partnership work as a key competence that should be included on every Balanced Scorecard (Moore, 2003).

Managers in children's social care services expressed concerns that typically, measurement tended to focus on their service alone. They considered that this perpetuated an unhelpful and outmoded view that they alone were accountable for the effectiveness of local child protection services. In some areas, this view was reflected in non-attendance at child protection conferences and reviews and at partnership meetings more generally. Simply recording attendance at meetings, whilst crude, was often a useful way into a conversation with other agencies. The Chair of the LSCB agreed that this was a report he valued and that he was prepared to use it to challenge other agencies where necessary.

The Chair of this LSCB also expressed concern about the long-standing low levels of engagement from general practitioners, an issue identified by studies in the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative (see Davies and Ward, 2011). Managers within the NHS believed that potentially more weight should be added to this within the requirements of the Quality and Outcomes Framework. Currently GPs are only required to attend basic training and ensure access to local child protection procedures. Another local authority talked about the difficulties they had had in getting police officers to attend meetings about individual children. Fears were expressed that the current round of spending cuts would exacerbate this position.

Respondents believed that reporting on partnership engagement could help track the impact of future changes within the NHS and of public sector spending cuts more widely. Typically, the practice is to collect data at two levels:

- attendance at initial/review child protection conferences by partner agencies; and
- attendance of a named-partner at partnership meetings.

Two managers gave examples of how they had used the data from the monitoring of attendance at meetings as a starting place for 'difficult conversations' with partners about poor attendance. They acknowledged that whilst simply recording attendance was a crude measure that said nothing about the quality of an agency representative's actual contribution, the data gave them a way of legitimising their concerns.

During the course of the interviews, managers talked about the various possibilities for assessing the health of local partnership working. Although strictly speaking this would not be a source of data for a lead indicator, the idea of using an evidence-based partnership assessment tool had widespread support (Watson et al, 2000).

Use of lead indicators within a partnership setting

It was clear from the interviews that managers' views of performance measurement had become jaded and cynical. Those from health, the police and children's social care all spoke frankly about how the so-called 'target culture' had distorted local practices, stifled innovation and dispirited staff. Put bluntly, their response to the question 'Could lead indicators be helpful to you?' was 'It depends who's asking…'.

Despite these misgivings, all the managers expressed support for the idea of developing measurement systems within their local partnership arrangements. Indeed a number of partnerships had already made good progress in that direction. However, their support was conditional on lead indicators being used to support the management and oversight of the *local* system, rather than being an extension of a national performance management system.

One senior local authority manager suggested that poorly implemented performance management systems, together with concerns about the integrity of some agency data, had already done a great deal of damage to partner relationships, and that it would take a fundamental shift in culture to restore confidence. An experienced senior manager from another authority said how she now worked with a whole generation of managers and performance staff 'who knew nothing else but targets and league tables – it's the only game they know!'. Like the Romans in Cavafy's poem, inspections and performance management regimes had come to define their purpose. The question for them was what would they do if these arrangements were no longer in place or were substantially scaled down?

Managers also expressed reservations about lead indicators being seen as 'magic measures'. Their views echo those of Collins (2006) who reminds us that there are no 'perfect measures'. Rather, the skill is in how people understand and work with the inherent weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative data, and use it rigorously and consistently to inform judgement (Collins, 2006).

The managers interviewed in this study were clearly mindful of the potential distortions brought by the external reporting of data, but fully accepted and understood the need for public accountability. Their view was that the public were best served through the reporting of actual outcomes, rather than internal organisational processes. One manager observed that whilst social care agencies needed to be more business-like in their approach, banks and supermarkets did not have to routinely publish comparative data on the minutiae of their internal processes. Another pointed out that in child protection, the time lag between effort and effect is not that long compared with other areas of policy (for example, health inequalities, social mobility and so on) and that it was reasonable and practical to use actual outcome measures as part of a 'twin-core' data set in the way that the Munro Review has proposed (Munro, 2011).

Overall, the managers interviewed believed that there was value in the idea of lead indicators. A number of them gave examples of where they were already using lead indicators – but not necessarily classifying them in that way.

The following paragraphs summarise the main points made in support of the use of lead indicators:

- Crucially, managers believed that lead indicators were something that local partnerships needed to design for themselves, rather than have imposed upon them. This could lead to a greater sense of ownership of the indicators as well as a better understanding of the questions they were intended to help to answer. The recent publication by the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency, and the London Safeguarding Children Board was seen as providing a useful framework through which to approach this task (Worlock, 2010).

- It was clear that the national emphasis on outcome-based performance measurement systems had led to a rather short-sighted view of process. There was a common perception that some managers had lost sight of the fact that it is through better processes that we get better outcomes (Friedman, Garnett and Pinnock, 2005). During the course of the interviews, managers gave good examples of both input indicators (i.e. workforce) and process indicators (i.e.workflow). However, the demand for outcome-based data by corporate systems and government has led to a position where the reporting of process data is now under-developed. One manager pointed out that because their corporate performance and ICT teams were responsible for the development of information systems, they had tended to give priority to data outputs that satisfied the requirements of the National Indicator Set (NIS), rather than the needs of operational managers. There were fears that this tendency would continue because local authority children's services were losing their specialist 'in-house' ICT and performance teams as part of budget savings. These teams were being replaced by smaller, generic, council-wide teams with an untested capacity for developing the specialist knowledge needed to provide the level of analysis required by managers in children's social care services.

- Process-based indicators are often criticised because their value is not widely understood. Quite understandably, they often evoke a 'so what?' response from both politicians and members of the public. However, process indicators do have meaning to managers. One manager observed that she could 'read' process data like an accountant can 'read' a financial report. Other managers commented on how the further 'upstream' process data took them, the more useful it was in helping them anticipate and respond to emerging events.

- Managers welcomed the focus that lead indicators brought to critical organisational processes, but pointed out that such processes were often outside their immediate control. For example, staff recruitment and training were seen to be critical process inputs. However, organisationally, human resources (HR) policies and day-to-day priorities were often managed by a corporate HR team. Some managers expressed concern that these functions (along with other key services such as ICT and administrative support) are increasingly likely to be out-sourced as part of budget savings, giving them less control over key organisational processes. Although some managers reported that these new forms of organisational arrangements had so far worked well, others considered that they had damaged the local capacity for learning.

- One local authority demonstrated how it had used lead indicators to good effect as part of a directorate-wide recovery plan. This was a good illustration of how services could be improved through a well thought out plan, intelligent use of feedback data and dogged perseverance. Despite having inherited an aging and rather awkward ICT system, the authority had developed an effective paper-based system that allowed managers to produce aggregated reports that they could then break down into lists of individual children and families. The Head of Safeguarding sat down with her managers every week for 18 months and used these reports to analyse what was 'going on at the front door' (sic). What was noticeable in this example was that despite the remorseless external pressures to demonstrate improvement, the actual tone of the conversations between the managers remained on 'families and not figures'.

- Managers welcomed the focus on using data to advance learning. This had enabled them to build a single conversation around the principle of evidence-informed practice and service design. The emphasis on the use of data for the purpose of external accountability had put performance management and evidence-informed practice in different places on the structure chart – and in people's minds. Performance data tended to belong to the world of corporate performance systems and teams, whilst the responsibility for advancing evidence-informed practice seemed to have become orphaned. If anywhere its home was in training and staff development. Again, this echoes the findings of the Munro Review and stresses the need to create the conditions within and between agencies where evidence-informed practice and systems design become the norm.

- All of the managers interviewed concurred with the observations of Broadhurst on the difficulties of routinely creating the space and opportunity for honest and open critical reflection (Broadhurst et al, 2009). One manager commented that, '...with 26,000 contacts each year, it is very difficult to do anything but manage the front-door...'.

These conversations serve as a reminder of just how difficult it is to create the conditions required for evidence-based practice, even within the most research-minded agencies, (Research in Practice, 2006). The difficulty in supporting critical reflection within busy child welfare agencies is also reported elsewhere (for example, see Moore, 2010).

- Two managers reflected on how their professional reputations as leaders had changed after over a decade dominated by league tables and targets. Instead of being associated with 'doing the right thing for children', they reported they had become increasingly associated with 'doing the right thing for inspections'. They believed this had undermined their credibility as leaders. They saw the move towards using feedback data to support learning and improvement as an opportunity to re-engage with the world of professional practice and build more authentic dialogue with practitioners whilst at the same time respecting the need to be accountable to service users and tax payers for progress towards the desired outcomes of the service.

The following paragraphs outline the concerns and reservations managers had around the use of lead indicators.

- There was a strong sense of caution from all agencies about the distortions and false sense of security that national performance monitoring systems has encouraged. Some managers were quite candid about what they believed were actions by others to simply 'cook the books'. They pointed out that pressures on managers to present their agency in a good light might even put children at risk of harm rather than protect them. As one manager put it, '…if lead indicators are to be useful, they should be for professionals, not politicians and accountants'.

- Even when they were honestly reported, some managers were concerned about the potential distortions that lead indicators could bring. An experienced manager from the police said 'We constantly get told that what gets measured gets done – but does that mean that what doesn't get measured, or can't be measured gets ignored?'. Whilst the Police Force had very comprehensive data on domestic burglary (what, where, how – and sometimes who), there was virtually nothing on child protection. Other respondents were noticeably reluctant even to take ideas about performance measurement forward because of the behaviours that they anticipated they would encourage.

- All of the managers interviewed expressed their doubts about the future capacity of their agencies to blend, analyse and present qualitative and quantitative feedback data. Budget cuts to 'back office' staff meant that experienced staff were being lost

and the remaining posts downgraded. Moreover the existing skill-set of their performance staff was around database management rather than evaluation. Managers recognised the importance of involving operational staff in these conversations. As Seeley Brown and Duguid (2000) have shown, critical information is often held in the day-to-day conversations of operational staff rather than on computer databases - no more so than in social work which has long been known to prefer informal methods of communication – particularly face-to-face contact (Steiner, 1923).

- Managers complained that it was often difficult to get data reports out of their systems. This finding concurs with previous studies of the use of information systems in children's services (Gatehouse and Ward, 2003, CCFR, 2004). Ideally, information systems need to be able to automatically produce standard reports that can be disaggregated down to child level for locality managers.   Local authorities complained that software houses often demanded excessive fees to 'customise' their systems to provide reports that managers believed should come as standard. As one manager put it; 'It's a bit like buying a car and being told you have to pay extra if you want a speedometer'. However they did acknowledge that as their understanding of their information needs improved, they would need to continue to update their systems.

- Members of the LSCB commented on how the data presented to the Board was predominantly based on local authority children's social care inputs and processes and needed to reflect a more balanced view across the wider partnership. They believed that this imbalance tended to perpetuate the view that child protection was a responsibility of local authority children's social care staff rather than all partner agencies. For example, managers from both the police and health community trusts agreed that a lead indicator on staff vacancies should also include specialist police child protection teams and health visitors and not just social care staff. Furthermore, managers from all agencies agreed that this sort of information was already available and could potentially be reported to the LSCB.   It was noted that a more ambitious approach to performance management would probably require additional capacity within the infrastructure of the Board itself.

- It was clear that the shift in the use of data away from external accountability back towards internal shared learning was revealing the limitations of performance data. One manager pointed out that the performance data could only ever be a starting place for exploring 'known unknowns' and that it was never intended to do anything more than 'indicate'. This reminds us that the purposes of performance measurement are different from those of evaluation. As has been pointed out, they are based on different logics:

…one logic has developed from a home base in input auditing, focusing on the regularity of transactions, towards the audit of measurable outputs. The other, though not without problems and much less coherent than audit as a practice, is traditionally more sensitive to the complexities of connecting service processes causally to outcomes (Power,1997).

- The use of lead indicators and outcome indicators could potentially encourage a more joined up conversation between performance and evidence-based practice. It was clear that these are still seen as separate worlds – run by separate teams. Typically indicators should draw attention to those areas of practice that require further investigation. For example, the original Quarterly Performance Review (QPR) process in North Lincolnshire Children's Services (see Pinnock and Dimmock, 2003) had a "Data development agenda' as well as a 'Research agenda' in the way that Friedman recommends (Friedman, 2005). This gave managers a way of noting where data quality needed to be improved (so they were not having the same conversation at the next meeting) and where they needed to gain a deeper level of understanding around a particular concern.

- Managers from all agencies were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to find a quiet space to simply 'stand still' (Wesley et al, 2007) and take stock of the implications of the feedback data available to them. They wanted to use the questions that the data threw up as entry points into more challenging conversations about what was working and what was not. Even though these managers were clearly highly motivated in their desire to make this happen, the reality invariably fell short of their ambitions.

Conclusions

This brief study found widespread agreement that carefully selected lead indicators could serve a useful purpose in alerting managers to emerging conditions in the operations of a local safeguarding system that, if left unattended, might compromise its future capacity to safeguard children and young people. The idea of lead indicators was seen as a useful classification and in particular, gave purpose and meaning to the measurement of process - something they believed had been overlooked in the desire to report progress on outcomes. Lead indicators were also seen as a useful feature of the formal risk management processes both within partner agencies and at the actual LSCB itself.

Managers discussed the various perspectives from which they judged their performance and gave examples of activities that might usefully be the subjects of lead indicators. Perhaps not surprisingly, these perspectives almost mirrored a typical Balanced Scorecard, covering finance; internal processes; employee learning and growth and customer benefits (service user outcomes). This suggests that the primary task may be to develop a Balanced Scorecard for LSCBs – not just the lead indicators that would sit within it.

A number of issues arose during the course of the interviews that would need to be borne in mind if the idea of lead indicators was to be developed further.

- It was clear that managers from all partner agencies believed that the critical issue was not just what was to be measured, but why and how it was measured.

- Support for the idea of lead indicators was conditional on the reports being used to support the internal day-to-day operational management of the system, rather than as proxy indicators for a national accountability framework.

- Lead indicators are better suited to the task of day-to-day systems management whilst outcome measures are better suited for external accountability and governance.

- Managers were instinctively cautious in their use of simple statistical counts. Although experienced managers could usually 'read' what quantitative data was telling them, they were cautious in drawing conclusions from it. Their habit seemed to be to assess data alongside their own practice wisdom (Testa, 2010) as well as other forms of local evidence and intelligence. We need to encourage conversations that are about people and systems, not numbers and maths.

- It was suggested that future inspection processes could focus on judging the fitness of local measurement systems and on evidence of the thoughtful use of the outputs of

such systems. For example, they might ask how successful agencies are in creating effective opportunities for critical reflection and shared learning and how this learning is reflected in their actions.

- The value of using both lead indicators and outcome measures to support 'double-loop' learning would be advanced if these indicators were based on standard definitions and protocols for sharing and comparison. Managers expressed concern that one of the drawbacks of scaling down national performance monitoring would be the loss of opportunity for statistical benchmarking. However, the benchmarking of data on lead indicators could be facilitated through a national agency such as the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) which has already produced some excellent data analysis tools.

- Managers were pessimistic about the capacity of their agencies to undertake all but the most basic level of data analysis.   They reported how over the past decade they had gained data processing skills but lost research and evaluation skills. The current round of budget cuts meant they were losing the capacity that could have been developed to support data analysis. This could potentially limit opportunities to use data for practice development and service improvement.

- The review found promising examples of specific local and regional collaborations between local authorities and universities and other research-based agencies. For example, this review coincided with the reporting of the findings of research commissioned by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (Yorkshire and Humber region). Their shared purpose was to gain a better understanding of social work practices and their outcomes for children and families during the reporting and referral taking stage of the child protection system (referred to as 'the front door'). The shared learning that followed this substantial piece of work is being used to guide local strategy shaping and budget setting. Potentially these types of collaborations could provide a way of building non-partisan research capacity around local agencies and partnerships. There are excellent models elsewhere of more advanced forms of partnerships between practice and academia that could be drawn on (for example, see Zlotniz, 2010).

- All of the managers interviewed agreed that any lead indicators that were reported to the LSCB should cover all of the main partner agencies and not just children's social care services. In this sense, lead indicators can be seen to play a role in the formal risk management processes of partner agencies – and the LSCB board itself. Indeed, one LSCB chair described how he intended to develop a risk register for the Board and to use the sorts of indicators described here as a way of detecting and assessing organisational risks.

Areas for further development

The findings of this brief study emphasise the need for local partnerships to be engaged in developing their own performance management arrangements. To this end, support could be given to piloting the approach developed by the Local Government Improvement and Development and London Safeguarding Children Board (Worlock, 2010). Consideration could also be given to the development of a scorecard approach within this work that would meet the requirements of a LSCB and its partner agencies. The partnerships involved in the pilots should be encouraged to develop a mixture of both lead and lag indicators within their local framework.

Using data to support internal learning will require many existing data management staff to acquire new knowledge and skills. In order to establish the training and development needs of staff working in local authority research and data teams it would be helpful to have an update of the survey undertaken by the Education Management Information Exchange (EMIE) (Woolmer, 2009). The findings of this assessment could then be used to design a regional development programme aimed at helping staff develop the analytical skills and knowledge to support the use of feedback data in systems improvement.

Over the past three years developments led by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) have improved the accessibility of data relating to children's services and given local partnerships some excellent tools for undertaking basic data analysis. Further work could now be done to demonstrate how local feedback data on safeguarding can be routinely integrated, analysed, interpreted and presented in ways that support the process of service improvement.

Local authorities could collaborate to produce a standard data output specification that they could use as a template when developing their existing ICT systems or purchasing a replacement system. The specification could cover all of the set of outputs, at both aggregate and record level that would be required to give managers access to routine reports on lead indicators as well giving research and data staff the capacity to undertake a more detailed analysis.

Recent work commissioned by the Yorkshire and Humberside Association of Directors of Children's Services has given managers methods for gaining insights into their local child protection systems and practical ideas for improving the quality of professional decision-making within these systems. Further support could be given to understanding how this approach can be embedded within the everyday practice of partner agencies and to testing the performance indicators that have emerged from this work so far (Thorpe, forthcoming).

The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services has recently set out the key competences for effective leadership in children's services (National College for School Leadership, 2011). The National College could build on this work by undertaking a more detailed study of the habits of leaders in children's services who have been successful in engendering a culture of inquiry and in leading evidence-informed change.

Local partnerships could be supported in sharing examples and promoting good practice in the areas referred to in this paper. For example:

- Web and paper-based data presentation and visualisation of data and analysis;
- Examples of child care information systems that produce automated and scalable data on lead indicators;
- Local partnerships and councils already using lead indicators to good effect;
- Examples of 'learning' collaborations between local authorities/local partnerships and universities.

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