## Evaluation of Social Work Practices

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### The Social Work Practice Pilots

Five social work practice (SWP) pilots started up in England between December 2009 and May 2010. These independent organisations were commissioned by local authorities to provide services for looked after children and care leavers. The pilots were introduced to discover whether smaller social work-led organisations independent of local authorities could improve the morale and retention of social workers and bring decision making closer to front-line practice.  These changes were expected to deliver increased consistency and stability of care for looked after children and care leavers. The pilots have differed substantially in their organisational forms and their origins and in the numbers and profiles of looked after children and young people they support (the Cohort). The SWPs comprised:

**SWP A**    An in-house SWP which has remained within the local authority as a separate and discrete unit. Cohort of 180 young people aged 14-21.

**SWP B**    A professional practice run as a private company by an organisation that already delivered social care training. Cohort of 80 children and young people aged 8-17 with high levels of need.

**SWP C**    A voluntary organisation already providing the local authority's care leaving service.  Taking on the attributes of an SWP was a gradual process for an already established service. Cohort of 582 young people aged 16-24 at start-up (increased to 727 by Nov 2011).

**SWP D**    An SWP run by a voluntary organisation with a long history of providing services for local authorities.  The SWP was a new venture for this organisation and staff were recruited specifically to this service. Cohort of 120 children and young people aged 0-17.

**SWP F**    A professional practice run as a social enterprise established by a group of social work practitioners who formerly worked for the host local authority and who moved out to form the SWP, taking with them responsibility for many of the children with whom they already worked.  Cohort of 148 children and young people aged 8 and above.

A sixth pilot failed to start as the local authority was diverted by an Ofsted inspection report that required it to focus on its core functions. At May 2012, three pilots looked set to continue until at least 2013 when contracts for those outside the local authority come up for renewal.  However, two of the pilots had learnt that the local authorities would not be renewing their contracts and plans for returning these children and young people to the care of the local authorities were in place.

### The Evaluation

An independent evaluation was commissioned by the Department for Education (formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families) to:

1. analyse the advantages and disadvantages of the overall Social Work Practice concept, and the specific benefits (or otherwise) of the different models employed and any lessons for alternate models;
2. identify the impact of SWP pilots on children, their carers and their families;
3. discover the impact of the SWP model on the children's social care workforce;
4. identify the impact of SWP pilots on statutory child care social work in the host local authorities and on the work of other agencies.

The evaluation employed a matched control design with integral process evaluation; the local authorities piloting SWPs were matched with six carefully selected comparison sites. A wide range of data has been collected and brought together for analysis including:

- 225 interviews with looked after children and care leavers – 121 children and young people were interviewed from the pilots (56 were interviewed twice) and 48 from comparison sites.
- 31 interviews with SWP Staff (in 2010 and 2011; 12 were interviewed twice), interviews with 7 SWP Project Officers, 10 Local Authority Commissioners and 13 interviews with members of the SWP Evaluation Advisory Group (EAG).
- Interviews with 11 young people involved in SWP governance at different points in time.
- Interviews with 19 birth parents of children and young people looked after by SWPs.
- Interviews with 22 professionals from a range of social, education and health care agencies and with 21 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in the five pilot sites.
- 45 care plans from pilots and comparison sites were analysed and compared.
- Data supplied by the pilots on their looked after children and workforce.
- Analysis of data on key measures included in the DfE's SSDA903 returns for the pilot and comparison sites.
- On-line baseline (1101 responses) and second (949 responses) surveys of local authority practitioners in the pilot and comparison sites
- Carers' baseline (1,782 responses) and second (1,676 responses) postal surveys of foster carers, kin carers and managers of residential homes and supported lodgings across the pilot and comparison sites.

## Key Findings

The evaluation has yielded mixed findings with stronger evidence in relation to some aspects of the pilots' work than in others. The views of stakeholders, such as IROs, other professionals, local authority commissioners and EAG members, as to whether the SWPs performed better than their local authority counterparts or whether they represented good value were divided. There were also variations found in perceptions of different pilots with some emerging as stronger performers than others.

Despite this variety, there is some evidence of positive change for children, parents, carers and the workforce that can be attributed to the pilots and this is highlighted below.

## The Role of the Local Authority

> *"If you were to analyse all the Social Work Practices that are working very well it's because they have a good relationship with the local authority."* (SWP Staff Member)

The partnership with the local authority was fundamental to the survival and achievements of the SWPs who were reliant on local authorities for a range of services, expertise and support. The in-house SWP, which was the pilot that was most dependent on the parent local authority, emerged as a viable model while the other pilots depended on the parent local authority for various key functions such as out-of-hours services, IT systems, rental of premises and equipment, training, supervision, legal services, access to psychological services for children and advice on complex cases and child protection issues. Reliance on the local authority constrained the autonomy of the pilots to differing extents: in particular, only one SWP had full control over the placement budget. In the light of this, it is difficult to see how SWPs would function were local authorities to move all their children's services out into SWPs as some local authorities  are

reportedly contemplating.  In the case of such a scenario, some of the core functions and expertise of the local authorities essential for the success of SWPs would be lost.

## Commissioning SWPs

> *'They were just finding the process difficult in terms of the amount of work and when they actually got the tender document and saw what they had do to produce in terms of getting everything ready, they baulked at that…'*  (Project Manager)

Commissioning was experienced as an arduous process for all concerned despite the support provided by government appointed consultants.  Small groups of social workers who came together to bid for a professional partnership were disadvantaged and dissuaded by the time required and their lack of business experience.  Larger organisations with the infrastructure to support the bidding process fared better.

## The Professional Partnership Model

The two pilots that were most frequently and consistently described as respectively successful and failing by stakeholders were both professional partnerships. That is, they were small organisations run by social workers themselves.  However, the pilot that was consistently identified as successful was a social enterprise established by social workers moving out of the local authority and the other was a private profit-making company run by social workers who already operated a social care business.  A key factor distinguishing these two pilots was the closeness and strength of the relationship with the relevant local authority.

## SWP Finances

While this evaluation did not include a full cost-benefit analysis, local authority commissioners did not consider that the pilots had reduced costs and, in some cases, costs were considered to be higher than those of the equivalent in-house service.  The impact of local government spending cuts on SWPs was discernible in decisions to terminate contracts while higher numbers of looked after children led to demands for them to add to SWP numbers resulting in larger caseloads for some pilots in the second year.

## Payment by Results (PBR)

This was a controversial aspect of the original SWP model that attracted considerable criticism.  In the event, only two SWPs used it and this was in relation to savings on the placement budget rather than outcomes for LAC and care leavers. Only three local authorities monitored pilot outcomes for children and young people systematically and it therefore seems unlikely that pilot staff were motivated to deliver a higher quality service by a system of rewards, although in the two sites that used PBR there was an incentive to select cheaper placements.

## Round-the-Clock Services

The requirement for SWPs to provide a round-the-clock service was identified as a disincentive for organisations bidding for pilots and impacted on the cost of the pilots. Only two sites were providing their own out-of-hours services by 2012. Children and young people reported making limited use of out-of-hours services and, when they did, this usually took the form of informal contact with their individual worker.  It was notable that this informal out-of-hours contact also occurred in some comparison sites.

## Small is Beautiful but Risky

> *'…even the receptionist lady, I can phone her up and she knows who I am, I can speak to her about anything.'*  (Parent)

In common with other studies, various benefits were associated with small size.  Children, young people and parents valued the flexibility and accessibility of a small service where they were known to staff.  Small size allowed SWP team members to acquire familiarity with one another's cases and was reported to facilitate decision-making.  Other professionals also found it easier to 'know' and collaborate with a small team.

However, the small size of the SWPs made for a reliance on individuals in key roles such as managers or administrators and acted to restrict pilots' autonomy with regard to finances since it was agreed that control of the volatile placement budget was too risky a proposition for a small organisation. Being a small venture also made SWPs risky for staff since reliance on a single contract made for threats to job security.

### Time Allocation and Caseload Size

> *'Having a smaller caseload frees up me to work more directly with not only the young person but with foster carers, parents and other professionals.'* (Practitioner, SWP)

SWP staff were more likely than staff in local authorities to consider that they spent the right amount of time in direct work with children and families and they explained this as a consequence of smaller caseloads. Most (but not all) pilots were able to ensure that staff had caseloads of less than 18 and the practitioner survey found that pilot staff were more likely than other respondents to report having sufficient time for direct work with children, families and carers. Likewise, some professionals and parents described pilot staff as having more time to devote to direct work with children and families. An exclusive and concentrated focus on looked after children and young people also appeared helpful. With the exception of the in-house team, SWP staff did not take full responsibility for complex child protection cases.

### Interprofessional Work

There was evidence from the analysis of care plans and from other professionals that the pilots worked well with a wide range of other professionals and agencies. In some cases, these relationships were fostered by having specialist staff such as mental health or Connexions workers located in the SWP teams.

### Choosing SWPs

> *'They had no choice, we all had no choice, we had to move over.'*
> (18 year old, female care leaver, SWP)

For many (but not all) the children and young people, the move to an SWP involved disruption in the form of a change of key worker. Most children and young people did not appear to have exercised choice in relation to transferring to the pilots and none of their parents were offered choices about the move. Children and young people had limited understanding of the role of SWPs although awareness was higher when staff had moved out of the local authority alongside the children and young people.

A small number of children and young people expressed anger about their lack of involvement in the decision and regarded the move to the pilot as yet another change that had been imposed on them. It is important that those children selected for inclusion in an SWP are fully consulted about the change, that the reasons are clearly explained to them individually and that their views are taken into account.

### Continuity and Consistency

Interviews with children and young people suggested that pilot children were more likely to have experienced continuity of worker in the last year and staff turnover figures supplied by the pilots confirmed this picture for three of the smaller pilots. However, in the SWP which was larger and in the SWP where there were ongoing difficulties, staff turnover was higher.

Furthermore, as noted above, the move to SWPs involved a change of worker for the majority of the children and young people and a further change of key worker was anticipated for most of the children and young people in the two SWPs where contracts were ending in 2012.

Most of the SWPs were successful in reducing placement change rates for children and young people in their first year of operation. Interviews with children and young people indicated that age and suitability of placement were key factors contributing to placement change.

### A More Responsive Service?

> *'…she'll always try and get that bit more if I need it for something, or if I ask for it, she always does.'* (17-19 year old, male care leaver, SWP)

> *'she just, she goes out of her way like for people.'*

Children's and young people's accounts showed no differences between pilots and comparison sites in terms of allocated workers' accessibility and responsiveness. Most found it easy to contact their worker, although there were some differences between pilots. Likewise, there were no substantial differences found between SWPs and local authority teams regarding the quality of children's relationships with allocated workers or their satisfaction with support. Some staff in both types of service were described as 'going the extra mile' in the provision of support.

SWP staff considered that shared responsibility for decision making made for speedier decisions and carers looking after SWP children were more likely than other carers to consider that the social worker had often been able to take key decisions in the previous six months.

Children's perceptions of SWP staff decision making were mixed. While most references to instant or quicker decision making came from SWP children and young people, there were also slightly more comments about delays in decision making from pilot children and young people than from those in comparison sites.

### Contact and Birth Families

> 'we chose what we wanted to do when we wanted contact and they all said it was our choice, and then they gave us some money and stuff so we could like do activities or whatever … they arranged like transport.'
> (18 year old, male care leaver, SWP)

In line with other research findings, contact with birth families emerged as a key preoccupation for children and young people and their parents. Some pilots adopted a particular focus on the needs of birth parents and the facilitation and support of contact. Carers were particularly positive about SWP staff's work with birth families in relation to some pilots.

Parents valued staff who acknowledged their needs as well as those of their children and were more satisfied with contact arrangements when they were involved in making decisions about contact. Slightly more children and young people in SWPs were satisfied with arrangements for contact than in comparison sites, but levels of satisfaction varied considerably between pilots.

### Children's Participation

> "I'm meeting lots of people, I'm …meeting new people and new experience…" (17 year old, male care leaver, SWP)

Most children and young people had no or very limited understanding of the role and tasks of SWPs; awareness was higher among children and young people in SWP F where staff and children had moved to the pilot together. SWPs involved children and young people in a range of participation activities which contributed to their personal development and sometimes offered them opportunities to contribute to the service development. The young people concerned enjoyed these activities and felt they had an impact on their social skills, and sometimes on service delivery. Such participation was not unique to the SWPs as young people in the comparison sites reported participating in similar activities.

Analysis of care plans showed that most children were involved in reviews and there were some examples in both SWPs and comparison sites of innovative approaches to involving children in these meetings. Children and young people in SWP D were more likely to feel that their reviews had improved since joining the SWP.

### User-friendly Buildings

> 'I just chill there and watch telly and like there's all these kids like, well not kids, like my age, playing pool' (14-16 year old, looked after girl, SWP)

Where a tightly-drawn catchment area made it viable for pilots to offer this, user-friendly premises that provided space and resources that young people could drop in and use as well as facilities for active contact sessions were appreciated by children, young people and their families. Knowing and being

'known' to other SWP staff gave children and families a stake in SWPs and contributed to a view of the pilots as accessible, personalised services; this perception was shared by IROs and other professionals. A central location was important as well as attractive décor and furnishings and offices that young people could access without encountering security barriers were particularly appreciated.

**Impact of SWPs on Carers**

Carers looking after SWP children were significantly more likely than carers looking after local authority children to view the support they received from their child's social worker positively.  They also felt better supported by SWP staff in assisting children and young people in the areas of health, education or leisure activities.

**Impact of SWPs on the Workforce**

SWP staff participating in the practitioner survey reported feeling more positive about their work and were more likely to feel that they spent enough time in direct work with children, families and carers. They also scored lower on 'depersonalisation' than staff from local authorities, an indication of higher morale. However, this difference was not found in relation to other aspects of job satisfaction such as staff satisfaction and decision latitude. SWP staff did however report higher levels of peer and supervisor support and this may be linked to their small size.

The survey findings also point to the risks of SWP staff experiencing job insecurity and this conflicts with an emphasis on continuity of support for looked after children and young people. Longer term contracts may be one solution and in-house SWPs offer another way forward; longer-term research would be helpful in this respect.

**Key Messages for the Development of SWPs**

- SWP set-up and operation are facilitated by a trusting relationship between the local authority and the SWP providers.  This could be promoted by sharing essential details concerning the nature of the proposed cohort as part of the tender process. The development of a checklist detailing transfer requirements such as up-to-date case files and functioning IT systems would assist both local authorities and SWP providers.

- Implementation has seen considerable dilution or adaptation of the original theoretical SWP model. Some controversial aspects of the original SWP model, such as payment by results and a round-the-clock service for looked after children, have not been consistently retained. Since these were the source of resistance and concerns about SWPs, continued insistence on their inclusion in the model seems inappropriate.

- It is important that those children selected for inclusion in an SWP are fully consulted about the change and that their views are taken into account.  Feelings of disempowerment and dissatisfaction might be avoided by ensuring that the possible risks and benefits of a proposed move to an SWP are fully discussed with children and young people on an individual basis beforehand.

**Key Messages for Services for Looked After Children and Young People**

- User-friendly buildings can play a role in eliciting higher levels of engagement from children and young people who live locally.  Children and their families value being recognised and welcomed by staff; sharing information about cases within a social work team can facilitate this sense of being known to the organisation.

- Small teams appear supportive and make for a flexible and personalised service.   Co-locating specialist staff such as mental health workers in these teams promotes interagency communication and collaboration.

- Reduced caseloads and an exclusive focus on looked after children both have the effect of freeing up time that can be used to improve the quality and focus of work with looked after children and young people and their families. Reduced caseloads also have a positive effect on staff morale.

- A focus on contact and the needs of birth parents reflects the concerns of children and their families and contributes to satisfaction with the service. This does not necessarily mean increasing contact, but rather providing the practical and emotional support required to meet the difficulties that are associated with contact.

## Summing Up

The achievements of the SWP pilots can be summarised as increased opportunities for direct work with children and young people; good quality support for carers and small integrated teams offering a personalised service and in some cases creative work with birth parents and/or the use of accessible and user-friendly premises. In most pilots, but not in all, a reduction in the rate of placement change was achieved. However, continuity of key worker was not consistently achieved, particularly since the contracted out nature of the service involved some children and young people experiencing disruption as a consequence of transfer both in and out of SWPs. The lack of information and choice children reported in relation to such changes was concerning. Children and young people in SWPs did not appear to find staff more responsive or accessible than their counterparts in the comparison sites.

A number of confounding factors make it difficult to attribute positive outcomes solely to the SWP model. This is particularly the case given that the SWP model was implemented in diluted form with the dilution becoming more pronounced in some sites where numbers of children and young people increased during the life of the pilot. SWP staff and other stakeholders identified reduced caseloads as salient and the level of support from the local authority was found to be crucial in many respects. A tight remit and a clear focus on the looked after/care leaver population without responsibility for child protection work also emerged as factors contributing to increased opportunities for direct work.

Although the SWP model's characteristics of a flattened hierarchy and staff involvement in decision making were unevenly implemented, this approach, together with higher levels of supervision, more opportunities for direct work and the sense of being a new and 'special' project engendered by pilots appeared to contribute to SWP staff's positive perceptions. However, higher levels of morale may have been offset by the increased risk of job insecurity in the context of a short term contracted out service.

## Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.