

1. Which areas of children's social care there is very robust research & evidence?

I consider there is very robust research and evidence on all aspects of children's social care – there is a very strong and active social work research community in England, and often with links to researchers in other countries (UK, Europe and beyond). This research often challenges the one-sided and misleading myths about social work practice and its outcomes. If it is possible to highlight three key messages, they are:

- That social work intervention, for family support, child safeguarding and child placement, is not nearly as bad as it is sometimes portrayed. There are some distressing cases, for sure, but many more where lives are changed for the better. Pain and loss are often part of the equation, but balanced by positive change and great determination from social workers, foster carers, kinship carers, adopters and so on. Using children in care as an example, there are much higher rates of placement stability than popularly believed, sometimes in the face of considerable challenges.
- The success or otherwise of social work intervention often relies on the actions of others – other agencies, other professions, other carers. It is not right to blame social work for deficiencies elsewhere, or the unhelpful knock-on effects of decisions made elsewhere (on a case or policy basis). We need to look, for example, at the contribution of health services, schools, police, CAMHS, courts, DWP and government policies. (A good example is the virulent criticism from the courts about the use of s.20 accommodation; whilst some improvements may be necessary and desirable, this criticism undermined an important feature of the help that LA can offer to families under the Children Act 1989, and has been seen as a factor in the increasing rates of care proceedings.)
- Above all, it is important to recognise there is great variation between local authorities, and even between areas within local authorities – eg in rates of children on child protection plans, children in care and so on. Deprivation is a vital underlying factor, but not decisive; policies and practice do make a difference. Of course we should try to reduce the 'post code lottery', but this variation gives a positive message, the potential for others to learn from the best. We need to promote ways for that to happen before introducing wholesale changes, because we know from many examples how costly and disruptive that will be.

I cannot comment on all the research, I am sure you will have heard a lot from others. I am going to summarise key findings from research that I have been involved with, about social work and care proceedings - that is, to include the pre-proceedings process, the court processes and the outcomes of proceedings.

2. What are the key findings from this research?

- a. On pre-proceedings work; research by [Masson and Dickens 2013](#): The pre-proceedings process has joint aims, of diverting cases from court if possible, or if that cannot happen, helping to reduce the duration of care proceedings by ensuring cases are well-prepared.
 - Over time, over 80% of the children who were subject to the pre-proceedings process in a sample in 2009-10 did go into care proceedings;

but as well as that, a significant proportion remained children in need and more than a quarter changed carers without going through proceedings (followed up in Masson and Dickens 2019).

- As for the subsequent duration of care proceedings, the pre-proceedings process made no difference because the courts ignored the work that had gone on during that stage.
 - So two key learning points: 1. the children stay vulnerable, long-term support is needed, and it is important to have realistic expectations of short-term change during the pre-proceedings stage; and 2. courts have to play their part if duration is to be reduced.
- b. Care proceedings; research by [Masson and Dickens 2019](#). Care proceedings have been dramatically affected by the introduction of the 26-week deadline in 2013; after initial success, timescales have crept up, and have become longer again in the last year in light of the Covid lockdown. But also, proceedings were affected by the Re B and Re B-S judgments in 2013, about adoption as last resort, and the s.20 criticisms, mentioned above. We compared the orders made in two samples, one for cases brought in 2009-10, before the 2013 reforms, the other from cases brought in 2014-15.
- There were dramatic changes in the orders made at the end of proceedings. Overall, the number of cases ending in care and placement orders (adoption plans) about halved; the numbers ending in kinship placements (SGOs) about doubled; and the numbers ending in supervision orders increased (the numbers ending in care orders stayed about the same). But there was notable variation between areas.
 - Another important finding is that we did not see any evidence that cases were coming to court 'sooner', or with lower levels of need – if anything, the cases showed families and children with higher levels of need. Some older children were coming into care with significant difficulties.
- c. Longer-term outcomes of care proceedings; research by [Masson and Dickens 2019](#); given the changing profile of court orders, but the essentially similar characteristics of the families and the children, it is important to ask 'what happened next?'
- We found that nearly all the kinship placements were on-going, but the carers were sometimes facing very great challenges from the child's needs and behaviour, the parent(s)' conduct, their own health, financial and housing situation. There is a need for skilled on-going support.
 - For the children placed with their parent(s) on supervision orders, about a quarter had broken down within two years. This raises profound questions about the decision-making in court, but also broader 'half full –half empty' type questions, and whether this level of breakdown is an acceptable consequence of a political and social settlement that favours family placements if at all possible (this quarter breakdown rate is a shared finding with other research too, over many years – studies by Elaine Farmer, Nina Biehal, Judith Harwin).
 - And finally, for the children in care, much more stability than one might have predicted, although the younger children benefited from this more than the older ones. For children who were over 10 years old when the CO was made, over half had only one or two placements in the five years after

the order, or when they left care; but 16% had three placements and the remaining 30% had four or more. The placement pattern was quite different for children aged under 10 years when the CO was made. Seventy per cent had two or fewer placements, and 30% had three or more in the five years after the end of the proceedings.

- We saw great challenges and anxiety in decision-making about whether placements were always suitable, and especially about whether siblings should be separated or not.
- d. Care planning and the role of the IRO, [Dickens et al 2015](#). The relatively positive finding about the outcomes of care proceedings and stability for children in care, reported above, reflects the findings of another study I have worked on, on care planning and the role of the IRO. This had a sample of 122 children in care (s.20 care, interim care orders and care orders). Key findings echo those of other studies.
- Care planning and placement decisions need to take account of the difficult backgrounds of many of the children. Carers need preparation and support for this.
 - Parents and family members often have very difficult histories themselves.
 - The age at which children come into care has major implications for care planning. For infants and pre-school children, there has to be an emphasis on timely assessments, and swift decisions about reunification or longer term substitute care. Children in middle childhood potentially face a long time in care. Identification of and support for kinship carers, and high quality long-term foster carers, is essential. For adolescents there may be particular challenges in taking account of their own wishes and feelings, but also ensuring their safety and wellbeing; and addressing current difficulties but also looking ahead, planning for independence and ongoing support.
 - Decisions about sibling placement (together or apart) and sibling contact can be especially demanding.

As regards the role the IRO, this has been subject to heavy criticism in the courts, but we found a rather more nuanced picture. They have perhaps been the subject of unrealistic expectations, and unrealistic workloads. There were examples of care plans not being followed up, but also many where IROs offered constructive challenge, where their input was valued as helpful and supportive, and where they showed sensitive and creative ways of involving children and young people in their care reviews.

3. In which areas are there evidence gaps or conflicting evidence

There is often conflicting evidence! It depends who you listen to, how you weigh one person's experience against another's, the experience in one local authority compared to another, what questions you ask, what answers you are prepared to listen to.

It's a serious point. This is difficult stuff, at a policy as well as practice level – there are conflicting goals: safeguarding children and supporting families; investigative duties and powers versus family autonomy; providing an excellent service for this family and saving time and resources for work with all the other families, and so on – all the well-known dilemmas. It isn't going to be possible to please all the people all the time.

4. Do you know of evidence, analysis or research that challenges current practices in children's social care

My point is that there is plenty of evidence, analysis and research that challenges misconceptions, stereotypes and clichés about children's social care.

5. Anything else you would like to share

There's so much great research over so many years from so many talented and astute researchers - do make the most of it! I am director of the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia and would be pleased to arrange a research seminar for the review team (have offered this in an earlier email).

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