

Reflecting on preparedness for child protection practice: what are the messages of newly qualified child protection social workers and their managers for social work education providers and their curriculum? Interim Report.

Funded by NIHR through CMSWTP (grant award number: CMSWTP-NIHR CM22)

Timeline of project:

6th May 2022 Funding awarded from NIHR via CMSWTP.

9th May 2022 Ethics application submitted.

18th August 2022 Ethical approval granted by Edge Hill University's Health-Related Research Ethics Committee (Ref: ETH2122-0267).

24th August 2022 Application to Association Directors Children's Services (ADCS) for project consideration and approval (required for circulation of research questionnaire).

30th August 2022 Invoice from ADCS for consideration and approval received (forwarded to research office).

1st September 2022 Application to Association of Child Protection professional (AoCPP) for project consideration and approval.

11th September 2022 Formal letter of approval and endorsement received from AoCPP (Ref: EHUCM0223).

5th October 2022 Data collection – focus group 1.

11th October 2022 Data collection – focus group 2.

14th November 2022 ADCS invoice paid.

23rd February 2023 Formal letter of approval and endorsement received from ADCS (Ref: RGE220824).

24th February 2023 Data collection – Questionnaire launched (5 weeks duration, due to close 31st March 2023.*

*Please note, significant delay was caused to the project both by the length required to approve ethics and time to pay and then receive endorsement from ADCS.

Data Collection to this juncture

Overview of participants

Focus Groups:

- Recruitment of participants came via a letter of invitation sent around the CMSWTP and North West Principal Children's Social Worker Network.
- 8 participants (6 social workers, 2 team managers) from 8 different child protection teams across Greater Manchester, Merseyside, and Cheshire.
- Experience ranging from 1 – 11 years qualified.

Questionnaire (as of 29th March 2023):

- Recruitment of participants came via a letter of invitation sent around the CMSWTP, Greater Manchester Social Work Teaching Partnership; ADCS; AoCPP and North West Principal Children's Social Worker Network.
- 139 participants from 55 different local authorities around England.
- Qualification length, less than 1 year (24%); 1-3 years (53%); 3-5 years (23%).
- Qualification type, BA (40%), MA (28%); PGCert/Step-Up (17%); Frontline (10%); Other (5%).
- 75% employed directly by local authority, 25% via an agency.
- Hours worked in average week, up to 37 (24%), 37-50 (58%), 50+ (18%).
- Caseload range 9 – 41 children (Mean, 31 children).

Findings:

Focus Groups:

Focus groups led to 52 areas identified where participants thought social workers had been either 'well' or 'ill-prepared' for child protection practice. These were incorporated into the questionnaire as Likert Scales.

Questionnaire (as of 29th March 2023):

Areas where generally (over 65% responded that they were either 'somewhat' or 'extremely' ill-prepared) participants felt 'ill-prepared for practice':

1. 'Producing written evidence for Court' (70%)
2. 'Providing Verbal Evidence in Court' (91%)
3. 'Being cross examined in court' (96%)
4. 'Advocates meetings' (86%)
5. 'Cold-calling' (including telephone calls and doorstep visits) (78%)
6. 'Financial pressures' (84%)
7. 'Caseload pressures' ('high caseloads') (90%)
8. 'The mismatch between demand for services and available resources' (87%)
9. 'Other organisational challenges (i.e. high staff sickness and vacancy rates)' (88%)
10. 'Managing competing time demands (diary management)' (74%)
11. 'The 'bureaucratic burden' / 'amount paperwork' (87%);
12. 'Using organisational recording systems (i.e. Liquid Logic)' (71%)
13. 'Being the recipient of threats and/or intimidation' (90%)
14. 'Encountering negative attitudes/stigma about social workers' (75%)
15. 'Pressures to work over contracted hours' (86%)
16. 'Pressures to take work home/work in the evenings and at weekends' (86%)
17. 'Balancing work and personal/family life' (90%)
18. 'The emotional toll' (87%).

Areas where generally (over 65% responded that they were either 'somewhat' or 'extremely' well-prepared) participants felt 'well-prepared for practice':

1. Identifying and assessing risk (84%)
2. Writing case notes (77%)
3. Writing Assessments (85%)
4. Direct Work with children (84%)
5. 'Integrating social work theory and research into practice' (86%)

6. 'Searching for and identifying research, theory and other academic sources to use in assessments and writing' (76%).

In response to the question 'Can you tell us anything else about where you felt 'ill-prepared' for child protection practice?' frequently occurring answers pertained to:

- Court work; court processes; 'PLO' (n8)
- Size of caseloads/caseload pressures (n10)
- Emotional impact/toll (n7)
- Level of 'paperwork' (n13)
- Level of 'demand'/'need'/'poverty' (n12)
- Staff absence/sickness (n7)
- Limited resources (n12)
- Threats/intimidation/ level of abuse received (n9)
- Need to work over contracted hours/take work home (n13).

In response to the question 'Can you tell us anything else about where you felt 'well-prepared' for child protection practice?' frequently occurring answers pertained to:

- Direct work with children (n7)
- Assessment and analysis of risk (n6)
- Using social work theory/research (n19)
- Writing assessments (n13)
- Child protection terminology (n7).

Next Steps:

As of 29th March 2023, 27 respondents to the questionnaire have expressed an interest in being interviewed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of where they felt either

'well' or 'ill-prepared' for child protection practice. These interviews will take place May-June 2023.

Dr Shaun Liverpool has recently joined the research team to offer his skills in terms of statistical analysis of the questionnaire data. In particular, Shaun will be examining if there are statistically significant differences in the answers given according to the qualifying route of the practitioner.

Further analysis of questionnaire data will continue throughout April (2023), to inform the interview schedule.

Transcription and analysis of interview data will take place between July-Aug 2023.

Write up of the final report and journal articles will take place from Sept-Oct 2023.

The research team understand that no further money can be drawn from the NIHR award after 31st March 2023.

The research team would also like to thank the NIHR and CMSWTP for the funding awarded and the opportunity to carry-out this exciting project. We look forward to publishing our findings in the near future.

Signed:

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30th March 2023