

Expectations for child protection and safeguarding in the future

Perspectives on Section 31 trends

Over half (21) of the online survey respondents indicate they expect the current level of Section 31 applications to either be sustained (17) or to increase (four). A further eight respondents expect the level to fall. Four of the case-study LA interviewees expect the level to stay the same. Two LAs expect the level to increase before reaching a plateau in the near future.

Three LA interviewees hope the high level of scrutiny experienced by social workers following the Baby Peter case will contribute towards greater support and understanding from both external agencies and the public.

Expectations for child protection and safeguarding activity

Despite their ongoing concerns about the level of Section 31 applications, many of the LA case-study interviewees are optimistic about child protection and safeguarding activity in the future.

Three case-study LA interviewees suggest there is likely to be a greater and growing role for other professional agencies (for example, the police, health and educational services) to become involved in safeguarding activities, facilitated by greater use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) at Tier 1 and Tier 2.

Recommendations of the Laming Review

Many of the case-study LA interviewees welcome the findings of the Laming Review, in principle, and are reassured that the recommendations corroborate the existing practices and procedures within their social care teams.

Interviewees in case-study LAs report that the degree to which they can make changes is contingent upon on a range of workforce development and resourcing issues, and are clear that significant investment in additional resources would be required to implement many of the recommendations of the Laming Review.

These concerns are most keenly felt in relation to the protection of caseloads for newly-qualified social workers, and in changes to the volume of cases that more experienced social workers would be expected to hold.

Interviewees in two of the LAs said the recommendation to treat a greater number of 'contacts in'to social care team as referrals would have significant implications for their profession in terms of workload and resource issues.

References

DCSF. (2009). *The Protection of Children In England: A Progress Report*. Norwich: The Stationery Office [online]. Available: <http://publications.everychildmatters.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/HC-330.pdf> [28 May, 2010].



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research summary the impact of the Baby Peter case on applications for care orders

Introduction

Following the death of Peter Connelly in August 2007, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families commissioned Lord Laming to provide an urgent report on the progress being made across the country to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children. The report concluded: 'There now needs to be a step change in the arrangements to protect children from harm' (DCSF, 2009, p.4). And one year on from the report's publication, in March 2009, the government published a suite of guidance and action plans for improving and supporting the work of all those involved in safeguarding children.

This research was conducted between August 2009 and March 2010. Phase one, between August and November 2009, included an online survey of local authority (LA) directors of children's services in England and an analysis of the number of Section 31 and interim care order applications made between April 2007 and December 2009. In phase two, in-depth case-study work was undertaken in six LAs between November 2009 and February 2010. To ensure the comparability of findings from all stages of the study, the research concentrated on the impact of the Baby Peter case after 11 November 2008, the date the case was first reported in the UK's national media.

Key Findings

- There is clear evidence to indicate that the levels of Section 31 applications made by English LAs rose in the wake of the publicising of the Baby Peter case (in November 2008), and, in the period that followed, continued to rise to a level higher than any experienced since April 2007.
- The impact of the case on English LAs has been diverse, with variations in the intensity of this impact both between and within LAs.
- LA research participants describe different impacts of the Baby Peter case and give a number of different explanations. The case is perceived as significant and responsible for both a marked decline in morale and the increased communication of child protection concerns by the public and partner agencies.
- LAs are broadly optimistic about the future for child protection and safeguarding activity. Most welcome the findings of the Laming Review, in principle. However, this is tempered by a view that the degree to which they can make changes is contingent upon a range of workforce developments and resourcing issues. There is a clear view that significant investment in additional resources is needed to implement many of the review's recommendations.

What relevant changes have taken place since the case of Baby Peter?

Approximately six months before the case of Baby Peter was made public, there was a notable dip in the number of Section 31 applications made by LAs. In the quarter July to September 2008, however, the number of Section 31 applications began to rise. This trend continued following the case being made public in November 2008, before reaching a plateau in the last six months of 2009 at a higher level than experienced in any previous quarters since April 2007.

Just over two-thirds (25) of survey respondents reported an increase in the level of Section 31 applications made in their LA since the case of Baby Peter was made public in November 2008. In half (three) of the case-study LAs, interviewees feel strongly that there has been an increase in the number of Section 31 applications since the case was made public.

Just over two-thirds (25) of survey respondents said there had been no change in the types of cases leading to a Section 31 application since the case of Baby Peter. In LAs that have experienced such change, neglect is most commonly cited as the type of case in which they have witnessed most change.

Respondents to the online survey and those involved in the case studies reported a rise in public and practitioner interest in, and sensitivity towards, child protection issues following the case of Baby Peter being made public.

Five online survey respondents, and many of the LA interviewees, reported an increase in the tendency of partner agencies to make referrals to children's social care since the case of Baby Peter.

In three of the case-study LAs, interviewees reported a rise in the number of children being placed on child protection plans since the case of Baby Peter was made public.

In four case-study LAs, interviewees reported an increase in both the number of children within the looked-after population and the number of children requiring placements.

The impact of the changes

Survey respondents and case-study interviewees report a range of impacts. In some LAs these appear to be profound, although the data does suggest variation both between and, in some respects, within LAs. These impacts are of concern in themselves, not least because of the implications they have for outcomes for children.

In some LAs, social workers, their managers and legal advisers are contending with very high workloads. These have implications for both the quality and timeliness of their work.

The survey and interview data paints a mixed picture with regard to impact on practice and ways of working, but they do suggest that there may well have been some subtle changes in approach. Several references were made to the emergence of 'defensive practice', although this was always in 'other' teams, LAs or agencies.

There is considerable concern about actual or imminent shortfalls in resources, with LAs paying out substantial sums of money to agencies for staff and children's placements (due, in the latter case, to LAs exhausting their own pool of places) and to the courts.

There appears to be a widespread negative impact on morale, with this being most pronounced amongst frontline child protection social workers. Legal staff in some LAs also seem to have been affected.

Long-standing problems with retention and recruitment appear to have become more profound, with increased stress and overwork leading to long-term staff absences and the attrition of more experienced staff. Anecdotal evidence suggests that child protection social work may have become a less attractive career choice.

Where relationships between LAs and partner organisations are close and there is a well-developed understanding of children's services' remit, authorities appear to have been able to manage partners' anxieties and pressures. However, case-study data suggests that in some areas new tensions have developed and partners have become keener to 'pass on' responsibility for safeguarding activity.

Explaining the impact

The Baby Peter case is perceived as significant and responsible for both a marked decline in morale and the increased communication of child protection concerns by the public and partner agencies. However, there are doubts as to whether it offers a comprehensive explanation for the rise in Section 31 applications.

Research participants identify changes in both demography and parenting capacity over the relevant time period as possibly contributing to an increased volume of referrals.

There is data to suggest that there have been improvements in the identification of need in terms of more consistent detection and reporting of neglect and abuse. There is a widespread conviction that the Baby Peter case has been instrumental in this through the way in which it heightened public and partner sensitivity. However, the preventative agenda linked to Every Child Matters is also thought to be an explanatory factor.

There have been a number of changes to the way in which cases are worked in the period around and following the Baby Peter case. These changes include the review, in some LAs, of long-standing cases (these reviews are not portrayed as a response to Baby Peter). Two other major and broadly contemporaneous developments are the roll-out of the Public Law Outline, and the introduction of the Integrated Children's System. The convergence of these initiatives with the Baby Peter case is widely seen as 'unfortunate', and critical to explaining current circumstances.