The Looking After Children in Scotland Materials

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Introduction

It has been increasingly recognised that effective planning and meaningful participation are vital for young people in residential care to help ensure that their physical, emotional and social needs are met, not only currently but also in future. The *Looking After Children* materials were devised to provide a comprehensive aid for these purposes. Originally developed in England, their use has now spread to many other countries (Ward, 1995; Owen et al., 1998; Kufeldt et al., 2003). This article examines current usage in Scotland and draws out implications for residential practice and the wider service system.

The *Looking After Children* materials comprise two sets of forms, intended to promote information sharing, communication and decision-making among all the key people involved with a young person in residential or foster care. One set of forms mainly records *essential information, plans and reviews* required for daily care and understanding of the child's background and identity. The other set of forms is concerned with *assessment and action* in order to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. These are divided into sections which cover seven dimensions key to the development of all children and young people: health, education, identity, emotional and behavioural development, family and social relationships, social presentation and self-care skills.

The materials were adapted to fit the Scottish context and legislation, then piloted in 1997-8. An evaluation of the pilot showed that the broad principles were welcomed by most staff involved with implementation. Usage of the materials, however, was only partial, especially the *assessment and action* records, which were seen as very time-consuming (Wheelaghan et al., 1999). Residential workers in particular thought the records provided more comprehensive information than hitherto right from the start of placement. They also believed the records gave them an opportunity to take a larger role in case assessment and planning. In Scotland, as elsewhere, the prime responsibility for the *Looking After Children* materials has normally been given to field social workers, who often do not

have adequate time to use them fully. In contrast, most residential staff were not usually given the opportunity to take on a central role in discussing and completing the forms, but were keen to be involved in a more substantial way.

By 2004, thirty out of the thirty-two local authority social work departments in Scotland had adopted all or part of the system, as had over 90 per cent of social services departments in England and Wales. Copyright licences have been available from the Crown Copyright Unit since 1999 to allow local authorities to reproduce the *Looking After Children in Scotland* materials as word processed templates to aid the integration of the system within local organisations. Since 1999, nineteen licences have been issued.

During 2002-3, the authors undertook a survey of local authorities to assess how the materials were being used in practice (Scott and Hill, 2003). A questionnaire was sent to a senior manager responsible for looked after children in each Scottish local authority and an audit was conducted of the electronic templates used in most authorities. Nineteen questionnaires were received (59 per cent) and analysed. They represented a spread across large, small, urban and rural locations across Scotland.

The organisational context

The majority of survey respondents reported that services for children and families have recently been subject to major changes. Most organisations also experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining staff. Low staffing levels and significant vacancy rates have impacted on the allocation of social workers to cases and increased the workload of many frontline staff and managers. The combination of time pressures and adapting to organisational change affected the capacity of frontline staff and managers to take on board this new initiative, as this quote illustrates:

> *Following local government re-organisation (our authority) also staged a complete internal re-organisation of Children and Families Services…In a climate of ongoing vacancies/understaffing for local teams and waiting lists for the allocation of statutory work including looked after children living at home, the LAC paperwork has not always been given a priority.*

Training and Preparation

At the time of introducing the *Looking After Children in Scotland* materials, training events were held to familiarise staff with both the principles and the

details. Some agencies held separate events for field and residential staff, while elsewhere joint events were held (Wheelaghan et al., 1999). The involvement of health, educational and other professionals in the training was variable and often limited. The survey indicated that ongoing training has been much less common. Some authorities provided induction or familiarisation sessions for new staff which included information about the *Looking After Children* materials. Generally, new staff were informed about the *Looking After Children* materials through support from the team or through induction from the line manager. A few social work departments provided information on the system as part of formal induction courses for new employees joining children's services or through multi-agency training; however, no authority provided ongoing training to explore and assist with issues raised by use of the materials in practice.

Nearly all the survey respondents (92 per cent) reported that the Practice Guidance on the materials issued by the Scottish Executive was useful in their implementation; however, several made suggestions that additional support would have been helpful. This included a standard training pack, greater fiscal resources and more guidance on evaluating and monitoring the implementation and use of *Looking After Children in Scotland* materials. Sixteen organisations did provide their own additional training and materials such as handouts, revised practice guidance, new or amended existing child care procedures and some had developed information/implementation packs.

Experience of using the materials within the organisation

The questionnaire asked about overall usage of the *Looking After Children* materials, as well as about each type of form. The *Essential Core Record and Placement Agreement*, *Essential Background Record*, *Day to Day Placement Arrangements*, *Care Plan* and *Review Record* should include the information required by care staff in residential units and residential schools or by foster carers, to provide care appropriate to the young person's situation, characteristics and needs. These also help identify the issues that ought to be considered in planning for a child's future. The more detailed *Assessment and Action Records* concentrate on the quality of the child or young person's everyday experience and were designed to assess progress in relation to the care young people receive and to plan future actions. The *Assessment and Action Records* promote assessment, dialogue and action about matters grouped in relation to the seven developmental dimensions mentioned above (Ward, 1995).

Authorities reported that the information, planning and review forms were used regularly in practice, but this did not apply to the *Assessment and Action Records* with three-quarters of respondents indicating little or no use (see table 1):

Table 1: Use of *Looking After Children Materials* in practice		
Form	Full or partial use	Little or limited use
Essential Core Record and Placement Agreement (n=17)	17	0
Essential Background Record (n=17)	13	4
Day-to-Day Placement Arrangements (n=16)	15	1
Care Plan (n=16)	16	0
Review Record (n=16)	16	0
Assessment and Action Records (n=17)	4	13

The principal reported reason for incomplete use was lack of staff time, which usually meant constraints on the input by fieldworkers.

The Information, Care Planning and Review Forms

The reported strengths of the information, planning and review forms were the structure that these records brought to the processes of recording. They also provided assistance in setting out clear plans, linked to a regular timetable and process of reviewing care plans and the progress of a child or young person. The difficulties reported in using these forms, however, were the length of time they took to complete, the amount of information asked by certain of the materials, and some duplication. As in previous research (Wheelaghan and Hill, 2000), there was a tendency to complain about the length of forms, yet also ask for additional points to be included.

Respondents saw the *Day-to-Day Arrangements* record as providing a useful structure for clarifying a child's accustomed daily routines in order to assist continuity and identify corresponding tasks for care and fieldwork staff. It encouraged carers to consider and discuss issues of identity and self-care. Residential staff had received the form positively at first, but now thought it required more detail on issues relating to the care of a young person within a residential setting. Examples included the importance of logging reports to the police when a young person absconds, and the measures taken during a violent incident.

The information and planning records are meant to be updated prior to reviews, but the indications were that this was not uniformly happening, as an internal

quality assurance exercise and an audit of the materials in two authorities demonstrated. One person commented:

> *In practice, most social workers appear to be revising the care plan but not the core records.*

Another stated:

> *In theory [the materials are updated] after each child care review – in practice less often.*

However, six authorities did report that the forms were regularly updated for reviews.

The review record itself was valued for the clear setting out of decisions, timescales and responsibilities of all concerned. One authority reported that the carer/key worker reports had been well received, but the young person's contribution needed to be more age-related. In some cases, the narrow focus of the *Review* report made it difficult to understand why decisions had been taken. Some respondents commented on a lack space for narrative discussion that made it difficult for review chairs to obtain a clear and holistic picture of the child or young person.

Respondents recommended the following changes:

- rationalise the forms to reduce duplication and make effective links to other information systems (e.g. related to Child Protection and the Hearings System);

- combine the two key information gathering records into a single document;

- give a higher profile to rehabilitation and permanency throughout the forms, particularly in the *Care Plan*;

- strengthen the focus on the overall and future plan for the child or young person;

- adapt the *Day-to-Day Arrangements* record so that it better reflects residential settings;

- alter the review documentation to provide a fuller picture of the child and young person and the circumstances resulting in the child being looked after away from home;

- more suitable consultation material for older children and young people.

One of the reasons why the planning and review materials have been widely used is that legislation and guidance requires local authorities to develop care plans for looked after children and review these at regular intervals. Also, most authorities previously had planning systems in place and had developed their own formats. The ideas and concepts underpinning the planning and review forms were already familiar. This, however, did not apply to the *Assessment and Action Records*, which represent more of a departure from established practice.

The Assessment and Action Records

Generally, the *Assessment and Action Record* was considered in the survey to be potentially very useful, but difficult to implement in practice. The following statement reflected the views of several respondents:

> *The best component of the LAC system but we have in reality been unable to implement.*

The record was seen as an excessively lengthy document covering too much detail. Also it was difficult to obtain some of the requested information from other professionals. Interestingly, this contrasts with experience in Canada, where implementation has concentrated on these Records and their value has been recognised by staff and Crown Ward Reviewers. They have also proved popular with carers and young people (Kufeldt et al, 2003). In Scotland too, there has been evidence that a minority of young people welcome the *Assessment and Action Records* (Wheelaghan et al., 1999).

Experience of using materials with other agencies

Multi-agency co-operation is central to meeting the multiple needs of young people in residential establishments and to the complex range of tasks undertaken by managers and key workers (Berridge and Brodie, 1998; Whitaker et al., 1998). The feedback in the survey about agencies like health and education came from social work practitioners and managers, so was indirect. Responses suggested that many colleagues from other agencies were often unaware of the *Looking After Children in Scotland* materials and did not expect to take on a role in helping to complete the records, whether as background information or as a contribution to care plans and reviews.

As a result of the perceived reluctance of other agencies to become involved, social work staff tended not to send a form, or part of a form, to colleagues from other agencies for them to complete. Instead, particular pieces of information

were requested for a particular purpose and usually provided in the existing formats of other agencies. The exceptions occurred where the local authority was purchasing care services from another agency, which then filled in the *Care Plan*, *Day-to-Day Arrangements* and *Review Record* as part of their responsibilities for caring for a child or young person.

A similar process occurred when other agencies required information from the social work department. Copies or excerpts were taken from the *Looking After Children* documentation and transmitted to other agencies, for instance when reporters requested a Social Background Report for a children's hearing.

A significant minority of respondents reported no difficulties in working with colleagues from other agencies; however, some difficulties were reported in working collaboratively across the key child welfare agencies. Incompatible formats and systems hampered information exchange. Particularly in relation to education, the number of different establishments made it difficult to identify key personnel within each school. Different competing priorities between agencies were also reported. Respondents felt there should be increased levels of awareness of those working in education about the issues for looked after children. Although teaching staff with dedicated responsibility for looked after children have been designated in some areas, it was suggested that most teachers still tended to see the management of children with behavioural difficulties in school and those excluded from school as the responsibility of social workers. Hence there was not a corporate approach to information sharing, planning and reviews.

Education should be a central feature of care plans and reviews. It is also one of the key dimensions of the *Assessment and Action Records*. Many had tried to resolve the difficulties with education through identifying a link person in schools as recommended in the *Learning with Care* report (Furnivall and Hudson, 2003; McLean and Gunion, 2003). Other methods reported included: planning to use the introduction of Part V of the *Review Record* to increase communication between agencies; developing inter-agency training; beginning to link IT systems; and continuing to raise and discuss the issues. However, authorities reported different experiences:

> *Procedures are in place for schools/designated teachers to complete education pages of the Essential Background Record which they would then return to the social worker. This is not yet working well in practice but is expected to improve with the appointment of new business managers.*

But the experience of another was far more positive:

> *A pupil support manager devoted considerable time and energy to this issue to get the necessary infrastructure and procedures in place. Initial focus groups were held with a small number of teachers to clarify issues, a hospital and outreach teaching officer was seconded for a short time to draw full education procedures and guidance. A full set of briefing documents were drawn up. Training sessions for designated teachers were held. A looked after children and education co-ordinator has been appointed.*

The picture was similar with colleagues from health, but in addition to *Looking After Children* materials being viewed as the social worker's responsibility, two further challenges in engaging with health colleagues were reported through the questionnaires:

- the different geographical boundaries between local and health authorities often resulted in delays and difficulties in accessing services; and

- issues of confidentiality and consents for medical treatment limited the sharing of information between health and social work professionals.

As with education, joint protocols for information sharing and the appointment of the Looking After Children Development Officers were means of helping to resolve these problems. The vital importance of good communication about health needs is highlighted by evidence of high rates of mental health problems and of risky health behaviours among looked after children (van Beinum et al., 2002; Ridley and McCluskey, 2003).

IT Systems

Fifteen of the 19 local authorities reported that they had IT systems in place for handling the materials: nine were supplied through a software house and six had developed systems in-house.

Local authorities may manage use of the forms electronically and introduce changes and updates, subject to conformity to certain stipulations made by the Scottish Executive to preserve the essential contents. As part of the audit reported here, a sample of templates from six authorities were re-examined. The main types of changes or additions made to the forms were as follows:

- amendments were made to the language and presentation of the materials to fit with local terms and usage: for example, "unique reference number" was replaced with "client number", the name and logo of the authority was added;

- new margin notes were inserted to reflect local practice and procedures.

However, changes in relevant national policy and practice had not been introduced to several of the forms. For example, in half of the six submissions re-examined no account had been taken of the introduction of the Meningitis C immunisation. This suggests that once the original templates had received approval through the quality assurance process, the content of the templates was rarely updated to take account of changing policy and practice at either local or national levels. Furthermore, feedback from some authorities suggested that their independent software supplier was reluctant to make customised changes requested by individual authorities, though the supplier was prepared to consider standardised modifications that would apply to all customer authorities.

Only six local authorities gathered information from the materials for the purposes of generating management information for its own use and statistical information for the Scottish Executive, although one authority reported difficulties in extracting data from the IT system. This information was used to monitor and prioritise workloads, to monitor and manage services, to provide evidence of unmet need and to inform local management reviews.

Developments in IT and moves at local and central government levels towards integrated information and assessment systems may in due course help to resolve problems that apply not only to the *Looking After Children* materials but to all systems of record keeping on children. This includes the time required recording the same details in different formats for different purposes and across agencies or parts of the same agency. It is hoped that in time most IT systems could either transfer information through single data entry, data linkage or "cut and paste" information common to various records. It will be essential to ensure that residential establishments have access to integrated computer held records, on a need to know basis and subject to safeguards concerning consent and confidentiality.

Implications for the care of young people in residential settings

The *Looking After Children* system has multiple purposes, but two of the key ones are to:

- provide care staff with adequate information to carry out their roles as regards daily care, guidance, advocacy, planning, optimising family and peer contacts, and liaison with schools and other agencies;

- facilitate effective communication and participation by young people and care staff in care planning and reviews.

The audit described here confirms previous evidence that the materials are having partial success but that there are major obstacles to achieving full implementation. This might not matter if adequate, alternative modes of information-sharing and assessment were in place, but evidence from audits in England indicates this is rarely the case (Moyers, 1996; Peel, 1997; Scott, 1999). One benefit of the introduction of the system is that essential information in a standard format is generally being supplied when young people become looked after. In addition, the care plans and reviews are generally seen as helpful tools, although there is a need for them to include qualitative accounts of the young people, their circumstances, needs, strengths and problems. The records also require some adaption to take account of the specific circumstances of residential care. In particular, linkage with daily logs and incident records is desirable. More effective supervision and monitoring would promote better usage.

The evidence from this survey supports data from elsewhere that it is very difficult to make usage of the *Assessment and Action Records* universal. Indeed, as a practice tool that may not be necessary, provided that the forms are used when young people wish to take advantage of them as an aid to communication and that alternative mechanisms are in place for others. It appears that, in many instances, managers and fieldworkers are not capitalising on the motivation and capacity of residential workers to engage with the *Assessment and Action Records* along with young people. While these do not suit some young people who see them as being too intrusive or cumbersome, other young people find the structure and prompts a very helpful means of aiding communication and ensuring that adults are aware of actions that need to be taken and that they can be held to account (Wheelagahn and Hill, 2000; Kufeldt, et al., 2003). Effective use of the *Assessment and Action Records* in dialogue with young people requires sensitivity as regards the process and timing. Often a key worker will have a close, trusting relationship and be in a position to identify and respond to the opportunities to explore the relevant issues that arise from daily living. On the other hand, when a young person has a well-established relationship with the field social worker, perhaps covering a number of family changes or placement moves, then there may well be matters that are better dealt with in the context of that relationship. The important thing is to have open discussion among the parties to agree which parts of the Records are best dealt with by one or other worker or indeed jointly.

The wider context and implications

The analysis of templates showed that the use and development of the *Looking After Children in Scotland* material has been a static rather than dynamic process. It is necessary to ensure that updating of fields and questions takes account of changes in legislation, policy and practice. That is not easy when it is usually IT or administrative staff who have the responsibility for word-processed templates

(as occurs with the *Looking After Children* materials), whereas the knowledge about the desirable content is held by a range of fieldwork teams, residential establishments and policy units. Problems in communication and divergent priorities can also result when authorities use external software suppliers, who find it hard to take into account local needs and changing circumstances.

IT systems have the potential to improve aggregate information about all children looked after and the services provided, but only if frontline staff are motivated and have the time and knowledge to input the data required. All levels within social work departments should have access to accurate information that is relevant to their practice and management of cases and teams. There is, though, a tendency for organisations to view management information as flowing from the ground floor and front line workers up to senior managers for their use. Unless information is useful to practitioners and managers at all levels, the importance of recording accurate information on individual child will be lost. This is summed up by the comment from one large authority:

> *Prior to LAC, policy and procedure had not been revised for a decade. This coincided with implementing an integrated client and management information system and this has perhaps had as much of an impact; staff are aware that whenever a child's record [is] updated this information is immediately available via reports to assist with planning and monitoring services.*

Clearly there is room too for improvement in the perennial issue of inter-agency and inter-professional co-operation. The information necessary for all agencies to work collaboratively needs to be identified and more discussion is required about what processes would facilitate sharing information. Some organisations had resolved some of the difficulties through the good relationships that existed between individual colleagues across agencies. Inter-agency working cannot and should not depend solely on individual practitioners working collaboratively. It is essential that individual relationships are supported by more formal arrangements between agencies such as inter-agency management boards, inter-agency protocols or joint funded posts. Shared priorities should be agreed strategically across agencies to enable practitioners to put these priorities into practice and build on the good collaborative arrangements already in place. This needs to be linked to a greater understanding of the culture of the different agencies, and of the priorities, expectations and roles of key staff within each agency. There needs to be a common language and agreed definitions for terms such as *disability* or *informed consent*. Again, residential staff have a key role to play in attuning managers to the factors and processes that facilitate or hamper their communication with, for instance, doctors, police and schools.

Conclusion

This survey builds on existing evidence to show how the *Looking After Children in Scotland* framework for assessment, communication, planning and action has proved valuable, but serious challenges remain as regards use in practice. A tremendous amount has been achieved since 1999. For the first time, a national system is available to record and follow the development of all children and young people who are looked after. A great deal of creativity and imagination has been invested by authorities in implementation and training strategies, and a wealth of knowledge and practical advice has been shared between authorities.

Few respondents in this survey and previous ones have criticised the underlying principle of the *Looking After Children* approach (though see Garrett, 1999); or that the seven developmental dimensions and concept of "reasonable parenting" should be the cornerstone for child care services. Rather, time and other resource considerations made full usage of the materials impractical, while some elements were seen as inappropriate, either in general or for particular circumstances. It seems sensible to reserve the *Assessment and Action* forms as an option to be used when they appeal to individual young people, when staff are available with time to gather the requisite information, or when a thorough assessment is needed. By and large, the information, planning and review forms are applicable more generally, with a few modifications, and are already being used on a widespread basis. There will always be a tension between completing this set of forms (or indeed any set of forms) in order to meet individual needs and the desire to collect and record as much accurate and standard information as possible to plan for services more widely. This tension should be recognised, managed and supported.

There remains a need to engage residential staff more fully in the communication processes surrounding the materials, especially with regard to those elements that require knowledge or trust, or the sensitive use of opportunities in group living. Also, the records could readily add in or link with certain items that are important in the residential context, especially related to the handling of incidents and absences.

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