

Briefing paper

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A comparison of child protection practice in four local authorities in England

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About the research

The *Hestia* research project compared child protection systems in England, Germany and the Netherlands in order to investigate different approaches to child protection and the impacts of these approaches on children and families. The project was undertaken by researchers at the University of York in collaboration with the University of Groningen and the German Youth Institute. The project was funded by NORFACE, a partnership of several European research funding agencies, and was approved by the Social Policy and Social Work Research Ethics Committee at the University of York.

Information was gathered on the following aspects of child protection systems in each of the three countries:

- **Child protection policy** and how this has developed over the years;
- **Child protection practice** including referral, investigation and decision-making processes and services offered to children and families;
- **Perspectives of parents** who have been in contact with the child protection system.

This briefing paper focuses on the data collected on **child protection practice in England**.

Information on referral, investigation and decision-making processes and services offered to children families was gathered from the case files of 400 children who were subject to Section 47 (S.47) enquiries in England between August 2013 and February 2015. These 400 case files were drawn from four local authority areas (100 per local authority), referred to here as LA1, LA2, LA3 and LA4. These local authorities varied in terms of their geographic location and socio-demographic profile. This briefing paper identifies key similarities and differences in child protection practice between these four local authorities.

Headlines

- Thresholds for S.47 enquiries differed between local authorities, with a focus on more serious forms of child maltreatment in LA4.
- The types of maltreatment investigated during S.47 enquiries varied between local authorities, with physical and sexual abuse being investigated in a higher proportion of cases in LA2.
- More risk factors including caregiver mental illness and substance misuse were identified in LA4, where support for these problems was also more likely to be offered.

Findings from the research

Children were older in LA2

Children subject to S.47 enquiries were older in LA2 than those in the other three local authorities. In particular, a higher proportion of cases investigated in LA2 involved children aged 10-15 years and a lower proportion involved unborn children. This finding appeared to be due to a higher proportion of referrals being received from secondary schools in LA2 than in the other three local authorities.

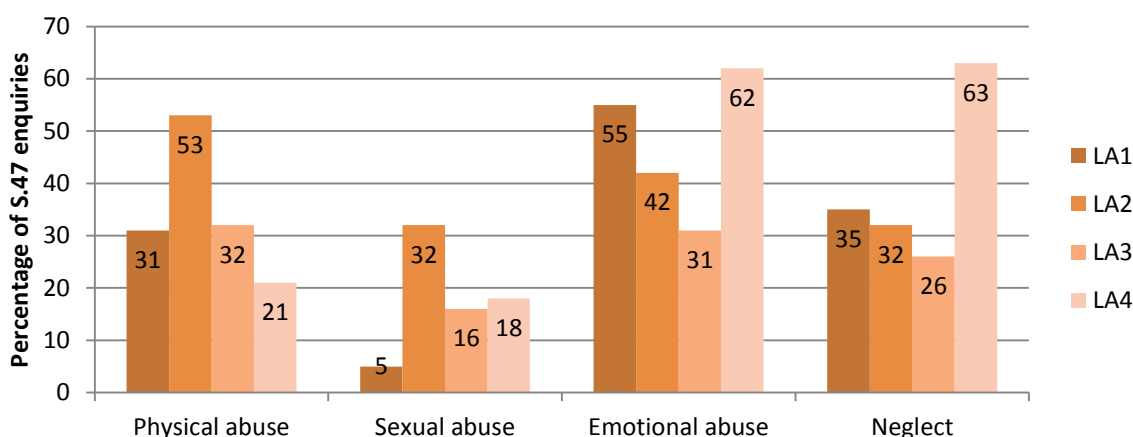
Referral sources differed between local authorities

Children subject to S.47 enquiries were more likely to have been referred to child protection teams by children's social care or early help services in LA4 than in the other three local authorities. Meanwhile, referrals were more often made by education services in LA2, health services in LA1, and other local authority services in LA3. There were no differences between local authorities in the rates of referrals by police or individuals.

Types of maltreatment investigated varied between local authorities

The types of maltreatment investigated during S.47 enquiries were captured for the research using a standardised measure called the MMCS¹. The data revealed that physical abuse was investigated in a greater proportion of S.47 enquiries in LA2 than in the other three local authorities, and sexual abuse (including sexual exploitation) was investigated in a greater proportion of S.47 enquiries in LA2 than in the other three local authorities. Meanwhile, emotional abuse was investigated in a greater proportion of S.47 enquiries in LA4 than in LA3 and LA2, and neglect was investigated in a greater proportion of S.47 enquiries in LA4 than in all three other local authorities (Figure 1). Multiple forms of maltreatment (i.e. two or more types) were investigated in 40 per cent of all cases.

Figure 1: Types of child maltreatment investigated in S.47 enquiries, by local authority



More serious forms of child maltreatment were investigated in LA4

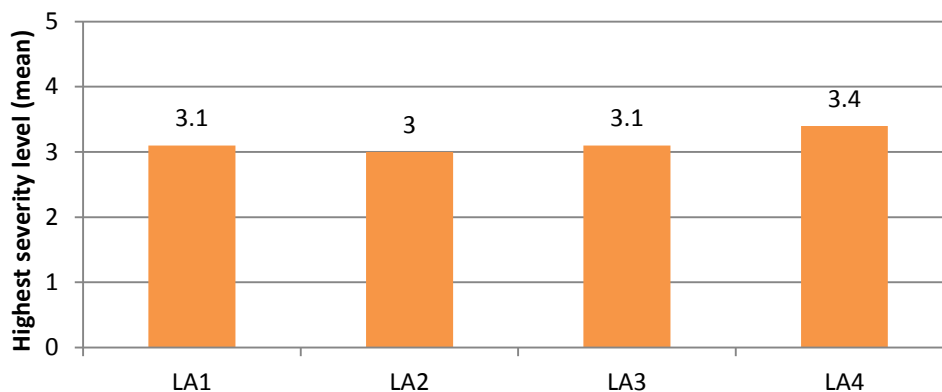
The severity of child maltreatment investigated during S.47 enquiries was also measured using the MMCS. Types of maltreatment investigated were rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest severity level. It was found that S.47 enquiries conducted in LA4 typically concerned more serious forms of maltreatment compared to the other three local authorities. This indicates that the threshold for initiating S.47 enquiries is highest in LA4.

¹ Modified Maltreatment Classification System, English and the LONGSCAN Investigators (1997).

Thresholds for child protection plans were similar across all local authorities

A closer look at cases in which children were made the subject of a child protection plan revealed that the highest severity level of the maltreatment investigated in these cases was similar across the four local authorities, indicating similar thresholds for implementing child protection plans (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Highest severity of maltreatment investigated in cases where children became the subject of a child protection plan



Consistent with the finding that more serious forms of child maltreatment were investigated in LA4, a far greater proportion of S.47 enquiries conducted in LA4 resulted in a child becoming the subject of a child protection plan (68%), compared to the other local authorities (21-29%).

More risk factors were identified in LA4

Data on various risk factors for maltreatment were collected from case files. The proportion of S.47 enquiries during which at least one caregiver was identified as having a mental health problem was greater in LA4 than in the other three local authorities. Drug or alcohol misuse by at least one caregiver was also identified during a larger proportion of S.47 enquiries in LA4 than in the other three local authorities. Furthermore, the total number of risk factors identified per case was higher in LA4 than in the other local authorities.

There was evidence of greater inter-agency working in LA4

The total number of different types of professionals contacted during S.47 enquiries was higher in LA4 than in the other three local authorities. This was largely due to social workers in LA4 being in contact with mental health services and substance misuse services more often during S.47 enquiries than social workers in other local authorities.

More contacts were made with children in LA4

Children who were the focus of S.47 enquiries were contacted by social workers during enquiries in 90 per cent of cases (excluding cases where children were unborn). The proportion of cases in which children were contacted during S.47 enquiries did not differ between local authorities, however of cases where children were contacted, the total number of contacts social workers had with children was higher in LA4 than in the other three local authorities. Meanwhile, at least one caregiver was contacted during S.47 enquiries in almost all cases (97%).

Children and caregivers in LA4 were offered more support

Where there were professional concerns about specific child or caregiver problems, support for these problems was more likely to be offered in LA4 than in the other three local authorities. The types of support more likely to be offered in LA4 included support for mental health problems, domestic violence and financial, work-related or housing problems.

New Section 47 enquiries were least likely in LA4

Children in LA4 were less likely to become subject to new S.47 enquiries within 12 months of a previous S.47 enquiry, than children in the other three local authorities. This may in part be due to the higher threshold for investigation in LA4. The likelihood of children being placed in care during the 12 months following S.47 enquiries did not differ between the local authorities.

Conclusions

Thresholds for S.47 enquiries appeared to differ between local authorities; S.47 enquiries were used mainly in cases of more serious maltreatment in LA4. This finding is likely to reflect LA4's unique approach to processing child protection referrals, whereby upon receiving a referral, initial enquiries are undertaken to establish the seriousness and risk of harm to a child, and where no risk harm is established, cases do not progress to S.47 enquiries but instead a single assessment is completed under Section 17. The threshold for implementing a child protection plan following S.47 enquiries was however comparable across all four local authorities, in terms of the severity of the maltreatment investigated in cases where children became subject to child protection plans.

The types of maltreatment investigated during S.47 enquiries varied between local authorities, with physical and sexual abuse being investigated in a higher proportion of cases in LA2. This finding is consistent with official statistics on types of maltreatment identified at the end of assessments, which also indicate that physical and sexual abuse are more often assessed by child protection teams in LA2, relative to other local authorities. Meanwhile, 40 per cent of all S.47 enquiries concerned multiple types of maltreatment, highlighting the overlapping nature of different forms of maltreatment. This information is not captured by official statistics on children in need in England.

More risk factors including caregiver mental illness and substance misuse were identified in LA4, where support for these problems was also more likely to be offered. This finding did not appear to relate to the severity of cases investigated or the prevalence of risk factors in the general population in each of the local authority areas. Instead, this finding may reflect better recognition of risk factors in LA4, which may in part be due to social workers in LA4 having more contact with numerous other types of professionals during S.47 enquiries.

Further information

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