

Briefing paper

May 2018

Parental perspectives on the English child protection system

Helen Baldwin & Nina Biehal, University of York

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 **perspectives of parents** interviewed in two urban local authorities in **England**. Interviews were conducted with 17 parents (11 mothers and six fathers) whose children had been the subject of section 47 enquiries in the past year. The sample varied in terms of parents' ages and the ages of their children, the reasons for and extent of their involvement with children's services, decisions made following investigations and the support they received. Thirteen of the parents had faced allegations of child maltreatment, while in the other four cases such allegations concerned another parent or someone else. Ten parents had experienced children being removed from them, four parents had been required to leave the family household, and the children of five parents had been made the subject of a child protection plan. Interviews were conducted between November 2016 and June 2017 in children's centres and Council offices.

Headlines

- Parents reported a mixture of positive and negative experiences.
- Positive feedback included parents feeling well informed about processes, having a say in what happened, receiving appropriate support and getting on with social workers.
- Negative feedback included not feeling listened to, disagreeing with actions taken, receiving limited or no support and feeling judged by social workers.

Findings from the research

Information received

Many parents felt that things hadn't been explained to them and that they had not been involved in what was happening. They felt that social workers should explain things more clearly to ensure that parents understood what was happening. A few parents said that social workers had lied to them. Meanwhile, other parents said that they had been kept well-informed throughout the process.

Having a say

Many parents felt that they weren't given a voice and that they weren't listened to. In some cases, parents believed they had been 'fobbed off' while professionals 'took sides' or made their minds up before consulting them. In other cases, parents felt they had said what they had wanted to say and believed they and their child were listened to. Some parents said children's services had done as they asked or had at least given them options.

Several parents felt that children's services were perhaps too child-focused and that they should consider the needs of the parent as well as the child, and be more family-oriented.

Need for help

Some parents felt that they didn't need children's services; several believed that child protection action shouldn't have been taken or continued for too long. Some parents thought that the actions that had been taken didn't make sense or were unfair, particularly where they believed the allegations to have been untrue. Many parents were upset and angry at actions taken by children's services. Meanwhile, several parents said that children's services had done what they wanted and in some cases parents believed more action should have been taken.

A number of parents said they recognised that children's services do what they do for 'good reason'; to ensure children weren't at risk. They said there was a stigma around being involved with social workers and that many parents were frightened of them, but they believed children were only removed from parents when it was necessary.

Support received

Many parents felt that the support that had been provided by children's services had been limited or non-existent. Several parents explained how social workers had not done things for them which they had promised to do, and some parents felt they had been failed by children's services. To the contrary, several parents spoke highly of children's services and found them to be a good support for them and their child. Many had accessed further support via referrals made by social workers. While some parents felt that social workers were always available and that they had worked around them, other parents said social workers were hard to get hold of and that appointments had been too far away.

Perceptions of professionals

The majority of parents didn't like the way that children's services related to them. They described some social workers as judgemental, patronising and insensitive, and several parents said they had been blamed and criticised by social workers. Many parents said they felt intimidated, intruded upon and under pressure by children's services, and believed they should be more understanding and

supportive. Meanwhile, a smaller number of parents viewed their social workers as friendly and professional.

Relationships with social workers

Many parents described how they got on with some social workers better than others. While some described the positive relationships they had built with certain social workers, who they had found to be supportive, others described how they didn't like certain other social workers. Several parents had wanted new social workers, while other parents found that changes in social workers were disruptive. A few parents thought that social workers in different local authorities did things differently.

Inter-agency working

Many parents found agencies had worked together to help them. In many other cases, parents found that agencies didn't work well together and that there was a lack of communication between agencies. A few parents felt that too many different people had been involved.

Willingness to co-operate

Many parents described how they were willing to work with children's services, though some had been reluctant to at first. Some parents said that they hadn't wanted to work with social workers and a few admitted to being dishonest with them. Several parents advised other parents to work with social workers in order to get the help they need.

Changes following intervention

Several parents described how they had come to realise that things needed to change. A few said they were given repeated chances to change, while some others felt they weren't given a chance at all. Some parents said that social workers had helped make things better for them and they were very thankful to them for what they did. In some cases parents said they were still taking steps to change. Conversely, many parents described their involvement with children's services as having been 'a nightmare'. Some of these parents believed that children's services had made things worse, and they felt failed by them.

Conclusions

The parents interviewed for this study reported a mixture of positive and negative experiences of the English child protection system. Positive elements included being well informed about processes, having a say in what happened, receiving appropriate support, getting on well with social workers and being helped to make positive changes. Meanwhile, many parents reported not being listened to, disagreeing with actions taken, receiving limited or no support, being judged by social workers and feeling failed by children's services. While high levels of satisfaction among all parents involved with child protection services is unlikely to be achievable, services might improve parents' experiences of involvement by addressing some of the issues highlighted by these parents.

Further information

Helen Baldwin, Research Fellow
Social Policy and Social Work, University of York
helen.baldwin@york.ac.uk / 01904 321972