

## Research Briefing N° 74

# Evaluation of Social Work Practices: do independent services improve care for looked after children?

This research evaluates a UK government experiment to move support services for looked after children from local authorities to the private or voluntary sectors.

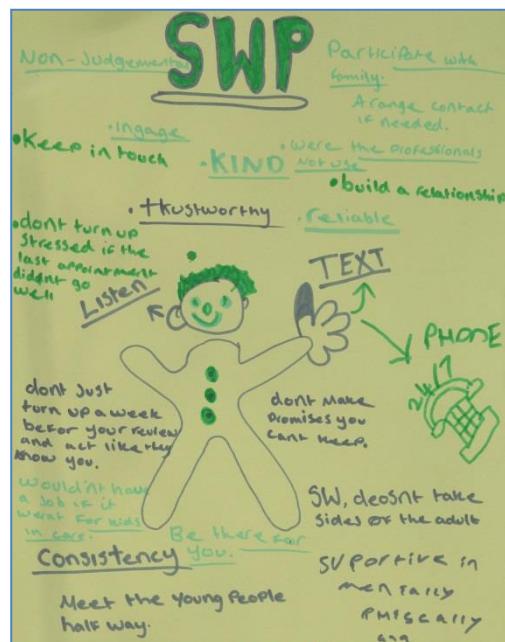
**Key words:** Social Work Practices; looked after children; care leavers; privatisation

### Key findings

The evaluation found the experiment had mixed success:

- The Social Work Practices (SWP) pilots varied greatly in their make-up and some were more successful than others. They worked best when they had a good relationship with the local authority who commissioned them, staff had limited caseloads and a tight remit which excluded child protection work, and there was a strong commitment to supervision.
- All the SWPs remained dependent on the local authority for many services and functions – none took on the budget for looked after children’s accommodation. So a good relationship was important. SWP staff reported more time than comparison site staff (from public sector children’s services departments) in face-to-face work with children and families, but attributed this to manageable caseloads rather than less bureaucracy.
- Most SWPs were seen as accessible and welcoming, but children and young people

held similar views in pilot and comparison sites about workers’ accessibility and responsiveness.



The cover image was produced by young people participating in the Evaluation’s Young People’s Advisory Group held in November 2009. Views about what they wanted from Social Work Practices

- Consistency and continuity for children varied between sites – regarding their key worker and where they lived.
- Children in SWPs were more likely to retain their key worker than those in control sites but they experienced disruption in the move out of the public sector and back in when SWP contracts were not renewed.

## What we did

In 2008, the Department for Education (DfE) established five Social Work Practices (SWP) pilots to see if smaller, social worker-led organisations, legally independent of local authorities, could help improve experiences and outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in care; improve morale and retention of social workers; reduce bureaucracy and bring decision-making closer to frontline practice.

The three-year evaluation of the pilot SWPs, commissioned by the DfE, ran from 2009 to 2012. It was carried out by researchers from the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), the **Social Science Research Unit (SSRU)** at the Institute of Education, and the Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London. Nicky Stanley, Professor of Social Work at UCLan, led the evaluation team.

## How we did it

The research evaluated the impact of the pilot by comparing data from pilot sites with data from six public sector social work departments selected to correspond to key characteristics of the SWP sites. The evaluation also looked at how the pilot programme worked in practice.

A wide range of data was collected and analysed, including interviews with: 225 looked after children and care leavers from pilot and comparison sites; 31 SWP staff; 11 young people involved in SWP governance; 19 parents of children looked after by SWPs; 22 professionals from a range of health and education agencies; and 21 Independent Reviewing Officers. Baseline and follow-up surveys were conducted with around 1,000 local authority practitioners and over 1,500 foster carers and residential home staff, in pilot and comparison sites. Forty-five care plans from pilot and comparison sites were analysed and compared, as were key measures from data that local authorities collect annually about looked after children.

## Further information

During the course of the evaluation of the pilot SWP programme, the DfE facilitated the establishment of a further, but separate, wave of pilots that were not a part of the evaluation. Currently five pilots are operating across England and the DfE intends to allow all local authorities to outsource social work support for looked after children and care leavers in the near future.

For the full and summary report see [‘Social work practices: report of the national evaluation’](#)

### Contact

Helen Austerberry, Department of Childhood, Families and Health, Institute of Education, University of London

**Email:** [h.austerberry@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:h.austerberry@ioe.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 20 7612 6099

**Other team members:** Principal Investigator – Professor Nick Stanley (University of Central Lancashire)

**Email:** [NStanley@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:NStanley@uclan.ac.uk)

Helen is based at the IOE's Social Science Research Unit (SSRU)