The Integrated Children's System and Disabled Children

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The Integrated Children's System (ICS) is currently being implemented in Children's Social Service Departments (SSDs) across England and Wales. The ICS aims to provide a single approach to assessment and review for all 'children in need', based on electronic information recording and sharing amongst different groups of practitioners. Despite its holistic aims, questions have been raised about the use of ICS with disabled children. This research explores the use of ICS with families of disabled children in four local authorities who were piloting the system.

Key Findings

- Social workers recognised the potential of ICS to improve information collection and recording, creating a more efficient and effective system of electronically held information.

- Knowledge of ICS and of storing family information electronically was limited amongst parents. Parents and social workers expressed a range of views about confidentiality and access issues.

- Social workers hoped information sharing with colleagues would become easier and quicker. Parents also hoped that ICS would improve information sharing amongst different practitioners.

- All authorities provided some initial ICS training for staff, however social workers working with families with disabled children had received little, if any, disability specific ICS training.

- Social workers expressed concern that ICS duplicated disability related problems of previous assessment tools, including a bias towards child protection issues. The adequacy of ICS recording forms (exemplars) when recording disability specific information was also questioned.

- How to incorporate 'other' forms of information (such as information based on symbol communication systems or children's drawings) into electronic records was not clear. Two systems of recording often co-existed, paper records and electronic records.

- Concerns were raised about the appropriateness of using age related exemplars based on standard developmental milestones when working with disabled children and their families.

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Background

ICS is part of a wider government policy aiming to re-shape children's services and improve outcomes, especially for 'children in need'. ICS has three strands: 'Data', specifying data local authorities must collect for future planning; 'Process', linking data to specific assessment/review processes; and 'Exemplars', standardised recording forms.

ICS has arisen as a result of past problems: for example, concern that social work was too risk and child protection focused, marginalising some groups of children such as disabled children; and past inquiries highlighting poor communication and information sharing amongst practitioners. The ICS records were developed from materials which support the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need. This study explores the introduction of ICS and its appropriateness for families with disabled children.

Findings

These findings focus on 16 social workers' and 22 parents' views of their experience of the use of ICS for disabled children and their families in the four local authorities that took part in piloting ICS.

The potential of ICS

ICS aims to aid information sharing within and between agencies, electronic recording is central to this. Three-quarters of parents hoped ICS would help practitioners share information more quickly and efficiently. Moving to electronic records raised both advantages and disadvantages for social workers. Half felt electronic records had the potential to make sharing information with social work colleagues quicker and easier, a quarter looked forward to automatically transferring basic client data across different exemplars. It was hoped ICS would cut down multiple data entry and so save time, effort and inaccuracies. However, due to ongoing technical problems all four authorities continued to keep both paper and electronic records. This was felt to be necessary but also potentially confusing, with information held in different places, and time consuming for practitioners.

ICS training

All four authorities provided some form of introductory ICS training for staff, largely on how to access the electronic system, input and retrieve data. None of the authorities provided their own specific disability related training for social workers working with disabled children but 15 social workers would have welcomed this. The ICS website (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ICS) provides a range of information and support, including a list of tools for practioners working with disabled children. Three-quarters of the social workers did not know about or had not looked at the ICS website and very few had actually used the tools suggested.

Knowledge of ICS and electronic recording

Most parents had little or no knowledge of ICS, none of the parents could remember receiving a formal letter about ICS from their authority and none of the social workers could recollect a formal letter being sent to families. Parents expressed different views about how much information they wanted about ICS, almost half did not want any more information.

Parents also knew little about their records being moved to electronic storage and expressed mixed views about confidentiality issues. A third did not have any real confidentiality fears; they trusted professional integrity and hoped or assumed their authority had safeguards in place. A third were concerned about who could access
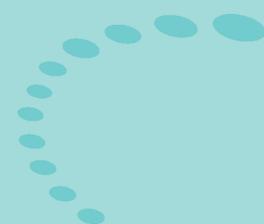
their records and the degree of information on view. The remainder were pragmatic, feeling that both paper and electronic systems could be abused and neither was totally secure. Social workers expressed a similar range of views but it was clear authorities had not, as yet, developed agreed confidentiality/access procedures.

ICS exemplars

All 16 social workers had completed ICS exemplars but experiences varied in length of time the exemplars had been used and the type of exemplars completed. This was due to varying levels of progress in implementing ICS in the four authorities. A number of issues were raised about appropriateness of the exemplars for disabled children.

Over half felt a child protection bias persisted, as exemplified in the use of terms such as 'parenting capacity', and ICS exemplars were not viewed as a radical improvement on previous assessment tools. Disability information was viewed as peripheral rather than central in the ICS exemplars. Almost half of social workers felt ICS exemplars produced generalised information which did not highlight a child's specific care needs and/or families' caring strategies.

Concern was also expressed about how to include alternative forms of communication in electronic records, such as drawings produced by disabled children. Social workers continued to use paper files, but were concerned as paper files were not always read and so children's wishes and feelings may not be heard. This was recognised as a wider issue associated with electronic recording rather than ICS specific.

Amongst social workers able to make pre and post ICS comparisons, it was feared ICS would reduce rather than increase disabled children's participation. More time spent inputting data could lead to less time spent listening to children, especially those with learning and/or communication impairments. However, most parents interviewed were satisfied that their social worker had listened to or involved their child as much as practically possible. Parents able to make pre and post ICS comparisons could not see any differences in their social worker's practice.

Over half of the social workers felt age specific exemplars were inappropriate for disabled children whose development differed from standard patterns and milestones. Concern focused on Core Assessments, especially which age specific exemplar to use when a child's cognitive ability does not match their chronological age. Standard age-related questions in areas such as independence and educational achievement were often seen as 'unhelpful', with the potential to be a negative experience for families. A small minority of practioners did not view these exemplars as negative, and suggested that social worker skill and sensitivity in the way they were used was more important.

Social work practice

Standard ICS timescales, especially for Initial Assessments, were viewed as unrealistic by most social workers. Working with disabled children and their families, and collecting information from the different agencies involved with these children, was felt to be more time consuming than working with other groups of children. Collecting good quality information rather than meeting standard timescales was prioritised.

None of the social workers able to make pre and post ICS comparisons felt ICS encouraged more discussion of disability issues during assessments/reviews. However, social workers did not feel their practice had changed, as disability issues had previously been discussed. Parents able to make pre and post ICS comparisons similarly did not feel their social worker's approach had changed.

Implications for policy and practice

The study was carried out in the very early stages of implementation of ICS in two of the pilot authorities, so some views were clearly initial impressions, and this must to borne in mind when interpreting the results. However, a number of disability specific issues were common. Although social workers and parents could see potential benefits attached to ICS, especially more uniform electronic information collection and sharing, social workers in particular felt that ICS also raised a number of disability specific issues and problems. The appropriateness of having one standard set of exemplars for all was questioned. Social workers frequently employ different approaches when working with disabled children and their families, but ICS exemplars do not always accommodate these different practices or the needs of disabled children. They suggested that modifications to exemplars should be considered in the following areas:

- Moving away from a child protection focus and providing more space for recording disability specific information, such as a child's medical information and care needs, and the caring strategies adopted by families.

- Providing clearer opportunities in Core Assessment Exemplars to record alternative milestones for disabled children.

- Further consideration of how to attach 'other' information into electronic records, especially visual information produced by disabled children; making it easier for social workers to scan this information into electronic records and providing training on how to do this.

- Providing more disability related ICS training for staff; and more active publicising of the ICS website, highlighting it as a useful practical resource.

- Extending standard ICS timescales for social workers working with disabled children.

Methods

The disability study was part of a wider study of ICS implementation. Families with disabled children and their social workers were interviewed from four pilot authorities, two in England and two in Wales.

Twenty two families with children with a range of disabilities agreed to participate. Sample diversity was dictated by the limited number of families experiencing ICS in all four authorities. Parents, mostly mothers, were interviewed at home. Interviews explored parents' experiences and knowledge of the ICS system and the information collected as part of the assessment/review process.

Social workers who had conducted ICS assessments/reviews with participating families were invited to be interviewed, all 16 agreed to participate and telephone interviews were conducted. Time spent working in disability teams varied amongst those interviewed. Interviews explored practitioners' knowledge and experiences of using the ICS when working with families with disabled children. Social workers also completed a questionnaire about the exemplars they had used.

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