

# In defence of paperwork

**Colin Green** argues it's not increased record-keeping in social work that's the problem but the way it's done



**O**ver the last 20 years social work with children appears to have become increasingly bureaucratic. Academics, practitioners and politicians all comment on the need to free social workers from their “bureaucratic tasks” so they can spend more time face-to-face with children and families. This is nearly always well received.

One definition of bureaucracy from the Oxford Dictionaries describes it as “excessively complicated administrative procedure”. Are our procedures in children’s services excessively complicated? Based on widespread opinion the answer would seem to be ‘yes’.

But what do we mean when we talk about bureaucracy in the context of children’s social work? Essentially we are talking about the business of making and keeping records and writing reports which support various kinds of decision-making, whether within a local authority, such as requests for placements or other resources, or with partners, for example, writing reports for child protection conferences. This is what social workers spend their time doing in front of their screens.

When we begin to unpack this work it is possible to break the activity down into the following components:

**1.** A record of work done with a child and family which helps ensure accountability of the

worker and the agency to the child and family, the organisation and government. This includes recording key processes that help ensure consistency of approach and robust consideration of children’s needs. This type of recording enables the overall monitoring of the work.

**2.** Recording of information gathered to support the development of assessment, analysis and a plan of action to try to achieve good outcomes for the child and family.

**3.** Recording of communication with the child and family and others in their network so there is a chronology of the relationship and events available for professionals involved and the child and family if they wish to look back at what work was done with them and why. This record is important for professionals to see how the work is progressing. It supports reflection and analysis, not just at points of formal assessment, but as part of continuing thinking about the child and how best to meet their needs and achieve positive outcomes.

**4.** Writing reports which bring information together and support assessment, planning and decision-making. Given the life changing nature of the decisions made, these reports need to be developed with thought and care.

**5.** The plan for each child needs to be recorded so the child and their family and everyone with a role knows what part they play. The plan can then be reviewed, progress checked and amended as circumstances change.

6. Recording helps provide information for others involved in a child's care plan such as carers, teachers and health workers, enabling them to provide good care tailored to each child's needs.

7. Preparing reports to support case decisions which reflect how the organisation does its business – for example, accessing resources, or authorising for a service or change for a child. These internal requests are perhaps the kind of recording that comes closest to being bureaucratic as they are most likely not to be about directly progressing the child's plan. Where poorly understood and designed they can feel like they are obstacles to overcome.

8. Supervision and management decisions need to be recorded to show there has been proper oversight of the work and that there is clear accountability for decisions made.

9. Internal processes about managing staff require records. Some, such as appraisals and staff development plans, should support the development of good social workers and good social work practice. They can feel like they are feeding the corporate machine rather than a helpful process tailored to the needs of a children's social work service.

For children in need, or in need of protection or who are looked after, there is a clear professional expectation to record these nine elements for each child. They aim to ensure each child is viewed as an individual with an entitlement to their own plan and outcomes that reflect their wishes, needs and aspirations.

Is any of this bureaucracy in its negative sense? It seems to me they are nearly all essential to undertaking good social work in an organisational setting and therefore not bureaucratic. It is, after all, often stated that good recording is at the heart of good child protection practice.

So what has driven the development of much more elaborate expectations for recording and accountability over the last 20 years and fuelled this concern about bureaucracy?

There are a number of drivers. For a start, we now expect a much higher standard of recording than in the past, certainly than before the Children Act 1989. Expectations of accountability at practitioner, manager, director and organisational level are immeasurably higher and require detailed recording to support those expectations.

We also expect a much higher standard of work from social workers in terms of assessment, analysis, planning, implementation and review, all of which needs to be recorded. We record for each child and expectations about what we should know about children in our care and how this is used to help plan for their care are immeasurably higher and better for it.

Procedural requirements are much more exacting and there is constant pressure to

## **ULTIMATELY, THOUGH, WE MUST RECOGNISE THAT SOCIAL WORK REQUIRES DETAILED AND COMPREHENSIVE RECORDS TO SUPPORT GOOD PRACTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

elaborate these, for all the talk of cutting down prescription. These requirements appear as a key driver of record keeping.

These elaborations of policy, regulation and guidance are driven by the best of intentions. The reasoning behind more explicit policy, regulation and guidance has been to raise standards by setting minimum requirements and to provide a degree of consistency of approach to how children's social care is delivered. This was in response to numerous inspections that highlighted a lack of consistency and secure method of work in social work practice with children.

But how has this led to such a negative view of activity which, on the face of it, improves the quality of work with children, young people and families and accountability for that work?

There are four key reasons. Firstly, introducing more elaborate practice guidance in the pursuit of higher standards has changed the social worker's job without this ever being given adequate consideration in social work training or in how the job is characterised. In other words, the way the job is seen and constructed hasn't changed to reflect current requirements.

### **Caseloads**

Secondly, this development of practice, nearly all of it in pursuit of higher standards and better care for children and young people, has never been properly evaluated for whether it actually improves outcomes or cost. The changes in practice are taken to be a good thing – many have been launched with a strong consensus – but few are evaluated with any rigour. Their costs have never been considered and have been expressed in an *ad hoc* way through reducing social work caseloads.

It is evident that the more recording required, the more time this will take and if caseloads are high that 'must do' part of the job will come to dominate more and more. Where caseloads are lower the balance between recording and direct work can be much improved.

Thirdly, the tools to support the elaborate recording have been poor. The Integrated Children's System was set out as a conceptual framework to underpin the development of IT systems for social workers to use the framework to support and improve their practice.

However, what happened in reality was IT systems were developed which were over complex and not user friendly, either for social workers or in their outputs for children, young people and families. These system design problems, often combined with poor implementation, left social workers struggling with tools not fit for the job. They easily led to a focus on compliance and the following of process to the exclusion of concern about quality of practice and outcomes for children, young people and families.

The systems did improve the quality of management information available about service performance, but much of this was about timeliness and completion of process. Because this was what could be easily measured, it became the focus for management and inspection. It was a poor proxy for quality. Professor Eileen Munro's review of child protection began to challenge this approach.

Tools have improved and there are now better systems that are easier to use capable and of providing better outputs that support good practice.

The last reason for all the negativity around bureaucracy is that there has been very limited attention to training and developing social workers in how to use the tools to best effect.

Anyone who has done significant amounts of audit work knows that there is often a great deal recorded which did not need to be recorded and too little analysis and reflection on what the information means.

So what can be done to improve the situation? IT systems must continue to improve and social workers must be properly trained in efficient record keeping and report writing.

Ultimately, though, we must recognise that social work requires detailed and comprehensive records to support good practice and accountability. There is no going back to the days of thin case records. Spending significant time recording needs to be seen as a core part of the job of a professional social worker and among their core skills should be the ability to record and write reports that are concise, coherent and analytical. **PSW**

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