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Do new policies influence practice?

A qualitative study of practice and change in relation to the new Welsh child sexual exploitation guidance

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Abstract

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a relatively new term within policy and practice. While policy responses have shifted from criminalisation to recognising CSE as child abuse, a review of the 2011 Child Sexual Exploitation Guidance commissioned by the Welsh Government found a growing, yet limited, understanding of CSE in professional contexts (Hallett *et al.*, 2017). In this paper, we explore practitioners' perceptions of how they work with young people experiencing, or at risk of, CSE and whether they believe the new Welsh CSE Guidance is effectively implemented in their practice. This small-scale qualitative study utilised small group interviews and semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of twelve participants in the initial phase of the guidance release. A thematic analysis of the data demonstrates a lack of professional awareness of the new Welsh CSE guidance, raising questions surrounding implementation efficacy. These findings highlight the complexity of implementation, illustrating a need for manageable caseloads and supportive cultures, which policymakers, senior management and frontline managers need to be aware of. Clear and effective implementation strategies that consider these factors, pre and post-release, are required to improve implementation efficacy in supporting best-practice

Key Words: Child Protection, Child Sexual Exploitation, Children's Services, Guidance, Wales.

Teaser Text

The Welsh Government's Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) 2017 guidance review found growing yet limited understandings of CSE among professionals. The 2021 updated CSE

guidance made several significant changes to practice, emphasising child-centred practice, participation, and strengths-based approaches. While research indicates what makes for effective child protection work, there is a gap in knowledge concerning how policies are implemented by practitioners. In this article, we explore practitioners' perceptions of how they work with young people experiencing, or at risk of, CSE and whether they believe the new Welsh CSE guidance is effectively implemented in their practice. This research found an unawareness of the new Welsh CSE guidance, compounded by dissemination failures and the time the study took place. Further, while most participants considered the new guidance as positive for practice, we report a gap between what practitioners believe they do and how they actually practice as per the guidance. Three key features were identified. Firstly, failings of dissemination. Secondly, the high degree of alignment between the values of workers and the guidance is, unexpectedly, a barrier to practice. Thirdly, meaningful change requires time, resources, and clear and coherent plans, pre and post-release, to ensure policies are implemented as intended.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the perspectives of twelve social service professionals on how they work with young people at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and the implementation of new Welsh Government (2021) CSE guidance. In March 2021, the Welsh Government published their updated guidance for Safeguarding Children at risk of CSE (Morgan, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021). The release of the guidance was originally scheduled to be in 2020 but was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the requirement to be signed off by the Home Office. The guidance (Welsh Government, 2021) made several significant amendments to CSE policy in Wales, most notably, empathising child-centred and strengths-based approaches to practice.

Although children's social care has much guidance and research on what works for effective child protection practice, there is a notable shortage of studies focusing on the implementation of policies by frontline practitioners in the UK (Usubillaga, et al. 2023). This research aims to better understand practitioners' perspectives on their practice in accordance with the child-centred and participatory approaches of new CSE guidance. In so doing, we consider whether professionals feel that this guidance is being implemented effectively and thus used in their practice. Therefore, the following research questions were explored in this study:

1. What are practitioners' perspectives on how they work with young people at risk of CSE?
2. What are practitioners' and managers' views of the new national Welsh Government (2021) CSE guidance?
3. How effectively do practitioners and managers think that they are implementing the new Welsh Government (2021) CSE guidance into practice?

2. Literature Review

Child Sexual Exploitation and the Child Protection System in the UK

The term CSE has existed within United Kingdom policy for over a decade (HM Government 2009).). In the UK, sexually exploited children and young people are considered victims of abuse with CSE established as a Child Protection issue. Safeguarding duties set out by Welsh Government (2021), under the Children Act (1989) and the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014), are therefore owed to all individuals under 18 years old at risk of, or experiencing, CSE.

Several studies have utilised vignettes to explore practitioners' understandings of consent, choice, and agency upon which CSE is conceptualised (Hallett *et al.*, 2017; Reisel, 2017; Hill and Diaz, 2021). In Reisel's (2017, p.1299) study, concern decreased sharply for 16–18-year-olds due to a "misguided link" between the individual's age and the age of consent, compounded by notions of choice, responsibility, and perceived willingness. This finding is reflected elsewhere (Lebloch and King, 2006; Pearce, 2014). Exploring the gender intersect,

Lloyd (2019) found prominent tensions between choice and blame. As the young females were framed as choice-makers, exercising agency, their choices were interwoven with blameworthiness, despite the social workers knowing the young people were not to blame (Lloyd, 2019). Similarly, Hill and Diaz (2021) found that young males experiencing CSE are less likely to be safeguarded because of gender stereotypes. Contradictory understandings indicate an internal conflict, echoing tensions within the children's rights paradigm (UNCRC) between the right to agency (Article 12) and protection (Article 19, 34). This tension is well documented (Hallett, 2017; Lefevre *et al.*, 2018).

The Child Protection system in the UK is underpinned by responding to families through addressing parenting to keep children safe (Firmin, 2020). The system has struggled to respond to the extra-familial aspects of CSE (Lloyd and Firmin, 2020), though CSE can occur within an intra-familial context (Welsh Government, 2021). CSE requires protective and long-term interventions that the Child Protection system fails to provide (Jago *et al.*, 2011). These issues indicate an individualised focus on addressing parenting as opposed to confronting all manifestations of abuse (Firmin, 2020), fuelling parental blame and disempowerment (PACE, 2014).

Individualising CSE, disregards broader socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, all of which create, and reinforce, the environmental conditions for exploitation (Melrose, 2010, 2013). Social workers often struggle to respond in ways which are valued by young people. Intervention can compound the problems that young people are experiencing (Hallett, 2016, 2017). Protective action may create "no-win situations" with protectionism reinforcing feelings of powerlessness, compounding exploitation (Hallett, 2017; Lefevre *et al.*, 2018, p.1850). Resource allocation results in those deemed high risk having precedence (Djupvik *et al.*, 2021) with urgent protective action therefore unavoidable (Hallett, 2017). While guidance has been given to improve practice (Munro, 2011), the impact of managerialism, bureaucratic constraints and time-scale pressures renders this difficult in practice (Diaz and Aylward, 2019). Parton (2016, p. 15) argues, the "scandal-driven politics of child protection" promulgates the view that child abuse

is the result of professional and system failings, as observed within CSE SCRs (Bedford, 2015; Griffith, 2013; Myers and Carmi, 2016). Fears about missing a safeguarding opportunity may add to a “tick-box culture” reinforcing a risk-adverse system (Franklin *et al.*, 2018, p. 992). Hence, an individual commitment to child-centred approaches requires organisational support (Lefevre *et al.*, 2018). Without this, Welsh Government (2021) guidance may not be practiced as intended.

Policy Implementation and Implementation Science

The integration of evidence-based research into practice typically relies upon “a unidirectional flow *from* research *to* practice”, which fails to consider contextual factors (Epstein, 2015, p. 499). This translation of intentions into changes in practice is something studied both in policy implementation research and implementation science, two fields that share a view of policies as complex phenomena that interact with the context in which they are implemented, and the actors involved in the process (Nilsen *et al.*, 2013). Research on implementation science is particularly relevant for this study, given how the new CSE statutory guidance was developed based on high-quality research (Hallett *et al.*, 2017), which provided an evidence base to introduce significant changes to practice.

Knowledge of effective child protection policy implementation strategies is so far limited, especially in the UK context. Studies on implementation science have primarily been conducted in the US and, although growing, the body of literature in the field in the UK remains small (Usubillaga, et al. 2023). This impedes the successful application and use of evidence, policy, and guidance within practice (Cabassa, 2016; Proctor, 2012).

Implementation science studies highlight an extremely complex process with organisations and individuals responding in different ways to new policies. Contextual factors are critical; organisational and funding circumstances all strongly influence policy implementation (Proctor, 2012). Implementation science studies the processes, strategies, and factors within

a system that influence the use, uptake, and sustainability of guidance, policies, and interventions in practice settings (Cabassa, 2016).

In this study, Implementation Science literature has informed our examination of whether Welsh Government (2021) guidance is implemented in practice, especially regarding how the existence (or not) of manageable caseloads and supportive cultures can facilitate (or impede) successful implementation.

3. Methods

Research Design

The research reported here is part of a wider study into Understanding the Implementation of Child's Social Care Policy in Wales. It utilised a cross-sectional design to provide a 'snapshot' into professionals' current comprehensions of CSE practice, and the related guidance (Welsh Government, 2021).

Sample

We interviewed 12 professionals currently working within children's services in Wales comprised of two support workers, five social workers, two social work managers, one senior practitioner, one principal officer and one consultant social worker. The sample comprised differing levels of seniority and practice experience. Practitioners were contacted by one of the authors and invited to take part in semi-structured interviews and small groups interviews.

Participants had varying levels of practice experience within social care. Support workers had two to five years of experience, whereas social workers ranged from newly qualified to 40 years of experience. Similarly, experience of direct work with CSE ranged from one case to daily work. Participants worked in different teams including early intervention and prevention, youth justice, care and support and frontline child protection teams, from 0 to 18 years old.

Although the sample size is small, it is important to highlight how it does provide useful insight into practitioners' perspectives on their practice and how the implementation process unfolded during the time the interviews were conducted. The aim, therefore, is not to generalise findings, but to provide a snapshot of perspectives on CSE practice and policy during the first months of the implementation of the new CSE guidance.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through two small group interviews (two participants per group) that took place in November 2021, and eight semi-structured interviews conducted between March and November 2021. All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Given the delays in the release of the new CSE guidance because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the approval process at the Home Office, interviews were scheduled throughout the year to assess how the policy was being disseminated and implemented in 'real time'.

Semi-structured interviews were selected for convenience to quickly gather initial understandings of CSE practice and the new CSE policy, particularly from practitioners' perspectives. Interview questions were structured along broad topics, including perceptions of CSE policy and guidance, implementation plans (primarily for managers), and understandings of CSE practice in relation to other forms of child abuse and exploitation. Small group interviews also included questions on multi-agency collaboration and organisational culture, to further investigate barriers and facilitators in the implementation process.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed as one data set through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. This model was cross-referenced through the "15-point checklist" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.101) to maximise consistency and rigour. The coding of interview transcripts was conducted by one of the authors with themes discussed at various points with all team members in relation to the wider study.

Due to the volume of data, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was utilised for manageability (Bryman, 2012). An amalgamated inductive and deductive data-driven approach was used, informed by existing literature knowledge and the research purpose. Initial codes were developed from coding each line of the transcripts, and subsequently merged or grouped to produce themes and sub-themes in an iterative process. Table 1 details the thematic framework, which is discussed in the following sections.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Factors guiding direct work with young people	The importance of relationship building	70
	Managing risks with young people	80
	The influence of assessment tools and frameworks	24
Participation of young people	Participation in multi-agency settings	56
	Participation in multi-agency meetings	39
Implementing the new Welsh Government (2021) CSE Guidance into Practice	Knowledge of Welsh Government (2021) CSE guidance	21
	Current implementation strategies	41
	What helps guidance implementation	30
	Barriers to guidance implementation	21

Table 1. Thematic framework. Source: author.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University. The primary ethical consideration related to discussing the subject matter of CSE. Working with human suffering exposes professionals to intense emotional experiences, increasing the risk of secondary harm (Lewis and King, 2019). The potentially emotive nature of the discussion thus had secondary harm potential. To mitigate this, participants were given a thorough information sheet and consent form detailing the project, their rights, and responsibilities. They were made aware that they were free to withdraw their consent and/or suspend the interview to decide whether to continue or withdraw from the study. All responses were anonymised, and participants were given a pseudonym (as seen in below extracts).

4. Findings / Discussion

Factors Guiding Direct Work with Young People

The new Welsh Government (2021, pg.38) CSE guidance states that “relationships matter”, demonstrating the importance of child-centre practice and participation of young people. While this statement was reflected by all participants, there were personal, organisational, and perceptual factors that aided or impeded upon relational practice and thereby child-centred approaches. Participants emphasised the importance of valuing the voices of, and understanding what is important to, young people and children:

You sit down and work with them, what do they like, what don't they like, what are they afraid of, why aren't they afraid of certain things and you build the plan with them **(SW5)**.

This approach to relationship-building corresponds with Hallett's (2017) research wherein young people discussed the significance of trust within the helping relationship. This point is reflected throughout the literature (Barrow *et al.*, 2021; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Palmer and Foley, 2017), with young people at risk of CSE reporting a lack of trust and consistency in the services they receive (Hallett, 2016). Relational security is, therefore, significant for longer-term outcomes (Shuker, 2013). Although participants sought a child-centred approach to their practice, through listening and understanding the young person's perspective, relational development requires time; a resource which was frequently perceived as a barrier in this study and within the literature (Ferguson, 2016; Hallett, 2017). One social work manager highlighted a tension between up-holding relational practice while adhering to the administrative tasks of the role:

For me, I'd say that we are more child-centred than other... teams within our local authority in terms of the time that we spend with kids. Even if that means that our paperwork is fucking months out of date, which I have a row for every month at performance. But I say, well, what do you want me to do? **(SWM1)**.

Social work practice has become progressively formalised with the administrative aspect of the role growing (Gibson, 2017). While Munro (2004, p.1081) describes social work practice in the 1970s as an "auditor's worse nightmare", the introduction of New Public Management in the late 1990s led to focus on process standardisation, performance, and targets (Diaz, 2020). Forrester (2016) has outlined how reforms to children's services have a heavy focus upon the managerial aspects, without adequately considering the underpinning values and purpose of practice. This has created an environment of "zombie social work" (Forrester, 2016, p.8), whereby procedural adherence is promoted at the detriment of meaningful practice and relationship-building with children and families. While time scarcity was frequently raised, only

SWM1 explicitly stated that young people are first, with administrative tasks viewed as secondary. Other participants desired to put young people first but felt impeded by administrative tasks that were viewed as a barrier to implementing the Welsh Government (2021) guidance into their practice

Organisational cultures based upon a technical rationale approach may result in senior managers prioritising administrative aspects (Diaz and Aylward, 2019). SWM1's account echoes an argument by Gibson (2017, p.1194) who argued that social workers "could be criticised for spending too much time with families", due to undermining the administrative aspects of the role (Diaz, et al. 2019). Consequently, social workers specifically perceived themselves as not the best people to build relationships with young people:

I think it's also realizing that you're not necessarily the best person to build that relationship with the young people, they're not, probably, going to be as open and honest with you as they are with other, with like some other workers, because you just don't have the time to sort of do that **(SW4)**.

A sense of frustration can be created where organisational, workload and structural challenges impede relationships (Diaz and Aylward, 2019, Diaz, et al. 2019). However, some participants in this study argued that having a trusted individual who can provide time and consistency was more important than the relationship between social workers and young people. Utilising intra and interagency relationships, to identify an individual with the best relationship with the young person was often discussed as aiding practice (Welsh Government, 2021, p.47).

Welsh legislation (Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014)) and CSE policy (Welsh Government, 2021) emphasise preventive action. Yet Djupvik's *et al.* (2021) analysis into children's services expenditure in Wales suggests that it is predominantly those who are deemed at high risk that meet the threshold for children services intervention. Participants'

accounts of being risk managers reflects this. While risk was often considered a primary focus, there is a perception that risk talk is neutralised by considering the positives and strengths of the young person. This is indicated within the Welsh Government (2021) guidance, whereby risk is considered alongside a child-centred care and support plan, accounting for the holistic needs of the young person. Personal qualities that are exhibited by listening and focusing upon positives and strengths, such as being supportive and listening non-judgementally, are key (Gilligan, 2016) especially in having conversations exploring risk (Hallett, 2017; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017). However, managing risks presents challenges between upholding a young person's rights to autonomy with that of safety and protection:

So especially with our young people, you know we know they take risks, we know some of the behaviours they're involved ..cause us concern, we know that sometimes their values don't match our values so I think that it is actually balancing risk; you can balance risk, you can't manage danger, that's when you know there's a fine line. **(PO)**.

The balance of protection and participation respecting risk created practice dilemmas, as found elsewhere (Hallett, 2017; Lefevre *et al.*, 2018;). Under the Children Act (1989), a child's welfare is of paramount consideration. Yet as children transition into adulthood, paternalistic safeguarding approaches begin to provide a greater emphasis upon autonomy (Huegler and Ruch, 2021). Young people, however, sit between these two approaches complexifying professional understandings of risk and vulnerability (Hanson and Holmes, 2014). Responses and perspectives of risk rest upon a continuum, influenced by contextual factors and the professional's ethical stance concerning rights, advocacy, and power (Lefevre *et al.*, 2018).

Where young people's actions transgress from normative notions of what is best for them, their agency is constrained and they are cast as vulnerable, requiring protective action of

control (Lefevre *et al.*, 2018; Morrison *et al.*, 2019). Such interventions conflict with young people's desire for increased independence, which risks young people becoming further alienated, inadvertently encouraging unintended risks (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Lefevre *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, working in a child-centred way presents a need to recognise that young people may not entirely understand the risks they face related to their perspectives (Welsh Government, 2021).

Furthermore, young people may not understand professional terminology. The use of age-appropriate language applicable to a young person's level of comprehension is thus significant (Gilligan, 2016; Welsh Government, 2021). Where decisions are made that counter the young person's views, professionals sought to explain why they were made, emphasising clarity, openness and honesty. While participants discussed listening and offering explanations to increase a young person's understanding of why certain risk management measures were implemented, suggesting practice is *done with* young people, the imposition of protective action meant that measures are typically *done to* young people. Hence, despite a commitment to listening and involving young people, the system frequently prevents meaningful participation of young people (Hanson and Holmes, 2014) that is contrary to the participatory intentions of the guidance (Welsh Government 2021) in practice.

Participation of Young People

As recommended by the 2017 CSE guidance review (Hallett *et al.*, 2017) the new guidance accentuates effective collaboration between professionals and families (Welsh Government, 2021). This includes services having clear roles and responsibilities, while simultaneously ensuring that young people are fully involved with their rights under the UNCRC protected. Although professionals felt they took steps to listen to young people and explain courses of action, influencing their direct practice, approaches to participation are hierarchical (Diaz, et

al., 2018). For example, discussing multi-agency meetings, one senior manager spoke about involving young people:

I think... a child experiencing CSE sometimes that puts them even more at risk because they sometimes get excluded from the conversations and they can actually tell us, as professionals, what keeps them safe... if you work with young people along that basis, that if they've got agency in their meetings and in the decisions...., they can actually inform us professionals who, quite likely, are not CSE experienced, how we can protect them. **(PO).**

Frontline professionals, however, seemed to have differing experiences:

The main thing as the social worker is making sure that you do just speak to the child and understand what they want. And I always say to them, you know "I've got a meeting coming up. These people are gonna be there, is there anything you want me to say for you at this meeting?" if they don't want to come to it **(SW4).**

While the account of the PO implies an ideal scenario, in which young people have agency and influence in the decision-making process, 'frontline' professionals (Naqvi, 2014) note the challenges of this. The social context, young peoples' perspectives of meetings as intimidating and unappealing, and structural aspects, including high workloads and the lack of consistency with their social workers, were reflected upon as barriers to young people's participation. Similar findings have been found elsewhere from interviews with young people and professionals (Diaz, et al. 2019), creating barriers in applying the guidance (Welsh

Government 2021) in practice. Participants did appear to be curious and wanted to provide young people with the opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision-making, upholding the ethos of child-centred and participatory approaches within the guidance (Welsh Government, 2021).. No participants talked of experiences where young people attended meetings. Despite an apparent desire for greater participation, gaining and incorporating young people's views in meetings was considered good enough.

The young person's age and perceived level of understanding also has bearing upon their participation within multi-agency settings. As one social worker reflects:

I haven't had any young people that want to come and take part in conferences. I do ask if they're.. at the age where they fully understand the concerns and why we're involved then I think they should definitely be part of it. They do have sort of their own views, wishes and right to make choices. However, because they are still young, we've also got a right to restrict some of those choices, because.. they may not be good choices **(SW4)**.

However, in discussing the application of the child-centred practice within the CSE guidance (Welsh Government, 2021) participants note an absence of young people's meaningful participation in decision making:

If the child's going to set their own goals maybe they need to be involved in some of the discussions and meetings more than they currently are. We never involve children in talks about their own risks, so we have the risk meeting, we identify them and plan for them and then the child gets told what's going to happen and they don't really engage **(SP)**.

We're trying to kind of develop things within our service at the moment which involves more child participation. I think very often we kind of have a view that we sort of tell children what we think they need and our policies and what kind of interventions that they think [we] need but we don't really ask them what they need **(CSW)**.

Young people at risk of CSE seem to be excluded from co-producing their own plans. Rather, plans are drafted by professionals with young people subsequently told what is happening. This corresponds with Berelowitz *et al*'s (2013) study into CSE. When young people are exploited, their voice and agency are constrained. A paternalistic position that inadvertently devalues participation by *doing to*, rather than *doing with*, reproduces harmful relational and power dynamics related to the experience of CSE (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Hallett, 2017). This likely contributes to young people not wanting to engage with professionals. Yet, despite the desire professionals have in working *with* young people, organisational and structural challenges render this difficult in practice. This fuels a practice dilemma between meeting the administrative aspects of the role with child-centred and participatory approaches of the Welsh Government (2021) guidance, impacting implementation in practice

Research by Hallett (2017, p.140) highlights how young people feel positioned as “objects of concern”. To have an active role in care offers young people a sense of control, which acknowledges them as an individual, supporting them to feel valued and encouraging them to feel they can experience positive change (Hallett, 2017). While the UNCRC rights to protection and participation are often viewed as dichotomous, Diaz, et al. (2019) argue that these rights should be considered equivalent to empowering young people and maximise their wellbeing and safety. Young people can therefore be *vulnerable* and *autonomous* (Firmin, 2020; Fox-Harding, 1997). Despite participants discussing an individual commitment to listen

more to young people with the desire for greater participation, as per the guidance (Welsh Government 2021), the Child Protection system frequently fails to allow young people and their families to actively contribute to decision-making (Hanson and Holmes, 2014).

Implementing the new Welsh Government (2021) CSE Guidance into Practice

Research into child protection policy implementation is limited. Following recommendations made by Hallett *et al.* (2017) the new CSE guidance (Welsh Government, 2021) places a strong emphasis upon child-centred and strength-based practice. This, rather than solely detailing standardised actions to follow, positions the guidance (Welsh Government, 2021) as a predominantly values-based policy. Participants considered values-based policy implementation:

Interviewer: The policy focuses more on values rather than procedures do you think that would make it easier or more difficult to implement?

SW5: More difficult.

Interviewer: Why is that?

SW5: Anyone, I really hope that any social worker that reads that goes yeah, I'm doing that anyway, for the most part, because I read that and went yeah, totally agree with everything in there, I try and do that as best I can.

As SW5 reflects, the Welsh Government's (2021) CSE guidance is based upon best practice. It is what social workers feel they ought to be doing, based upon the principles of the global definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2022). However, this belief is not necessarily translated into practice. Such disconnect is not unique to this study, rather this is an international issue within child protection systems (Bessant and Broadley,

2014). By believing they already practice in this way, the impact of the CSE guidance (Welsh Government, 2021) upon practice is likely to be limited (Usubillaga, et al. 2023).

While supervision is considered advantageous in improving practice (Bostock, et al. 2019), if used singularly, it will not solve the policy and practice disconnect. Implementation Science literature highlights the importance of the context in which policies are implemented (Proctor, 2012; Cabassa, 2016). Participants in this study considered external factors and structural constraints as limiting the overall application of the new CSE guidance:

I think that there are a lot of people who work in sort of in this line of work, who really care about young people and want to do a really good job and, um, and, you know, really want young people to succeed. But when people [practitioners] are just pushed to their limits it just makes the job even more difficult. So, I think like part of the issue is, um, it is like, it's just funding for services for young people (SW4).

Although context is a key aspect to consider in implementation assessment (Proctor, 2012; Cabassa, 2016), agreement on how to interpret contextual influence is limited (Nilsen, 2015). For example, staff retention and the availability of resources and funding have variably been described as challenges (Brownson and Jones, 2009; Proctor, 2012; Lefevre *et al.* 2020). Some of these contextual factors are shared among different Local Authorities in Wales and constitute structural elements to be addressed at the national scale to facilitate implementation processes.

Recognising the external macro factors can thus highlight the wider constraints of the system and thereby the broader context which impacts on policy implementation. However, acknowledging external macro factors on their own to ascertain implementation success is inadequate and instead should be considered alongside organisational, meso-level factors

(Usubillaga, et al. 2023). Atkins and Frederico (2017) further develop this argument, highlighting five pivotal forces that influence implementation in the organisational context including, the importance of clear implementation plans and communication. Participants considered the efficacy of current approaches:

It's just emailed to us, for example, and within WhatsApp group within the team

(SW3)

SW5: I think the alternative [to reflective discussions] is if you just get like emailed a copy of a policy and told to read it and implement it yourself, it's not going to be anywhere near as effective as if it's done that way.

SP: Unfortunately, (SW5), that's what tends to happen.

Although changes to policies and guidance are discussed in team meetings, this study found that practitioners are ordinarily emailed and expected to read about it in their own time. As the exchange between SW5 and SP indicates, questions of implementation efficacy are raised. Time is a scarce resource (Ferguson, 2016; Hallett, 2017), compounded by bureaucratic demands, significant caseloads (Diaz and Aylward, 2019; Diaz, et al. 2019) and the impact of COVID-19 on practice (BASW 2021), which participants raised as having an over overwhelming negative impact on practice. Such factors impact, and thereby reduce, the opportunity for social workers to read policies in their own time. Usubillaga, et al. (2023, p.274) echo this, asserting that it is “unrealistic” to expect social workers to read the new CSE guidance, understand it, then alter their practice because of the above constraints. Interestingly, despite management using emails to cascade information to their staff, those in senior positions also considered this approach ineffective:

CSW: I feel as if sometimes you just kind of get an email to say there's this new policy, have a read, and I'm going to be honest, don't always have time to read to read through it.

PO: And I'm guilty of that, I'm very guilty of that

Dissemination and implementation are separate concepts. Where dissemination involves the sharing of information, implementation requires integration of ideas over multiple system levels (Tabak *et al.*, 2012; Weisz *et al.*, 2014). Hence, disseminating policies or guidance in an email is not implementation. Considering these external and internal factors of the organisational context helps to explain why certain organisations (or Local Authorities) are more successful in their implementation undertakings (Glisson, 2007). While consideration is afforded to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the time at which this study occurred, ineffective communication and time scarcities have been found to be key barriers in successful implementation. It is therefore unsurprising that most participants were unaware of the new CSE guidance. As an implication, this raises the question of whether the CSE guidance (Welsh Government, 2021) is being implemented as originally intended.

5. Conclusion

Most participants viewed the new CSE guidance as encouraging for practice, valuing the emphasis upon the child-centred and strengths-based approaches. This is a positive finding as it demonstrates a desire for practice to be in line with principles, values and evidence about best practice. However, this study found a chasm between what practitioners believe they do and how they actually practice.

Three features of this were identified as important. First, most practitioners were not aware of the new guidance in the months following its release, when interviews were conducted. This is a failure of dissemination. It highlights that simply circulating a new policy, without time and resource to support professionals to read and understand it, achieves relatively little. Cascading information from those in higher and senior positions to frontline staff who are working in an arena of competing demands, compounded by organisational and structural challenges, does not create an environment for successful implementation. There is, therefore, a need for collaborative and supportive spaces to foster a shared responsibility for practitioners to be aware of and, importantly, understand changes to policy and practice.

Second, an unexpected finding was that the high degree of agreement between the values of the new guidance and the expressed values of workers was in itself a barrier. This was because workers felt that they were either already practicing in such a way, or perhaps more accurately that they were already trying to do so. The latter is a better explanation for the challenge as many workers and managers were open about the gap between actual practice and what they perceived as good practice. This relates to the third key finding, which is that implementation - that is moving beyond dissemination to create actual change - requires time, resources, and a coherent plan to address multiple factors at the contextual and organisational levels, pre and post guidance release

Proctor (2012) and Usubillaga, et al. (2023) have highlighted the multiple elements involved in effective implementation of evidence-based and evidence-informed reforms in practice. The importance of senior leadership understanding the changes and having a passion for change, for a plan to share this across the organisation, for initial training and for a plan to sustain change over time, including for instance through supervision, training and by measuring whether identified changes have been achieved were all important elements of successful implementation plans. Their absence so far in the implementation of the new statutory CSE Guidance highlights that making good policy is not enough. To create changes for children and families we need coherent plans to implement well intentioned policies. In the absence of

such plans, it is likely the only changes that become implemented will be ones that are easy to implement. For instance, it is easy to introduce a Key Performance Indicator or a new form for everyone to fill in. It is hard to introduce a focus on children and building relationships. It is therefore possible that some of the problems we face in children's social care, where procedure is widely argued to have become dominant, is because we have paid insufficient attention to how to implement complex change. It is hoped that this paper makes a small contribution to addressing this gap.

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