

Exploring data use and outcomes tracking in children's social care

February 2024

Frontline



A statement from the CEO

At Frontline our vision is of a society where no child's life chances are limited by their social or family circumstance.

We know that social workers can have a life-changing impact on the lives of the children they support. Through this research project, we were seeking to deepen our understanding of the different methods local authorities use to measure and track outcomes for children and families.



The results provide a clearer understanding of some of the challenges that exist in demonstrating good outcomes, as well as some interesting learnings to take forward. This work sits within the context of the recommendations from the Care Review and the National Framework. We will continue to listen to local authorities in order to understand how Frontline can best support the learning and sharing of best practice in this key area.

We look forward to focusing on how Frontline can build on and share the insights from this research more broadly to continue this important conversation.

Mary Jackson (she/her)

Frontline Chief Executive Officer

Introduction

Efforts to understand, track and measure the impact of children's social work are increasing within the sector, in academic research and at a national policy level. This shift has been influenced by broader systemic pressures faced by local authorities across England as they have attempted to manage rising demand for their services with tight budgetary constraints. In this context, understanding the effectiveness of the services provided becomes increasingly important.

Research into current local authority practice for measuring and tracking outcomes for children and families who have the support of a social worker highlights a lack of standardisation in the data collected, indicators used, and outcomes tracked across children's services (La Valle et al, 2019). More recently, the issue of standardisation and consistency of outcomes has come under greater focus following the publication of the Care Review in 2022 and subsequent response from the UK government, announcing the development of a national framework and dashboard for children's social care.¹

Against this backdrop, Frontline commissioned Renaisi, with the support of philanthropic funding, to conduct qualitative research into practices for measuring and tracking outcomes for children and families who have the support of a social worker. Between April and August 2023, we conducted interviews with 17 social workers, senior service managers and performance leads across seven local authorities in England.² In addition, we convened four peer network discussions and two co-analysis workshops with social work practitioners. To answer our core research objective – to understand current practices for tracking outcomes for children and families working with a social worker – our approach was underpinned by four research questions:

1. What forms of data are collected and valued in children's social care?
2. How are data collected and used within children's social care to support work with children and families?
3. How can data be embedded effectively in children's social care? What are the key conditions required to enable this?
4. How can children's social care teams be supported to learn from each other?

This report provides an overview of our key findings, insights, and learning for the sector. Drawing on data from our interviews, peer network and co-analysis workshops, the report is split into two parts. First, we set out current practices for tracking outcomes, the factors shaping their use and effective approaches to using data to track outcomes across children's social care. Next, we examine the broader barriers and enablers to effective data use in tracking and measuring outcomes. We conclude with headline conclusions, best practice and learnings, which are grounded in our understanding of the current approaches to tracking outcomes and our assessment of the key enablers for effective outcome tracking.

¹ The independent review of children's social care, MacAlister (2022); Children's Social Care National Framework: a government response to the consultation on principles for practice, expected outcomes and indicators, Department for Education (2023).

² A detailed methodology is included in the appendix.

Outcomes tracking in children's social care

- The outcomes recorded in children's social care can be split into two broad categories: performance or intermediate measures, and outcomes for children and families.
- When asked to describe the outcomes they tracked or recorded in their work, interviewees primarily referred to performance related outcomes, rather than specific outcomes for children and families.
- The types of outcomes recorded vary depending on the level of intervention in a child and family's life, with different balances between performance and direct outcome measures.
- National reporting obligations and local priorities represent key systemic drivers shaping the types of outcomes that are recorded and prioritised within children's services.

A core aim of this research project was to understand how local authorities track and measure outcomes for children and families and the role of data in supporting their approaches. In this section, we first examine the outcomes that local authorities involved in our research track and measure, and the factors which drive the recording of these outcomes, before exploring some of the effective mechanisms for using data to track outcomes for children and families.

Common approaches in tracking outcomes

Across the local authorities involved in our research, there were several parallels in the types of outcomes tracked and measured for children and families. First, the outcomes tracked can be split into two broad categories: performance-related outcomes which record a child and family's engagement with a service, and outcomes for children and families, such as meeting health and development milestones. When asked to identify the outcomes that they tracked and recorded, **interviewees frequently highlighted performance measures rather than specific outcomes for children and families**. This may be linked to the prominence of national statutory reporting obligations in shaping the outcomes that local authorities track and measure across their services, which we explore in more detail below.

The types of outcomes recorded, and information or data used to evidence them, also reflected the level and stage of intervention in a child's life. For child protection cases, for example, intermediate outcomes or performance measures were more frequently identified, such as timeliness of initial meetings, length of child protection plan, and re-referral rates.³ This may be a consequence of the focus on case closure as an indication of a good outcome

³ La Valle et al. (2019) provide a helpful distinction between two types of outcome in their development of a proposed outcomes framework for children's social care: user outcomes, outcomes achieved for children and families, and intermediate outcomes, the factors or conditions that need to be in place to achieve outcomes for children and families, e.g. appropriately assessing needs and providing the right levels of support.

for children and families on child protection plans; if a case is closed, this could indicate that areas of concern relating to the safety of a child have been addressed.

In the case of children in care, outcomes recorded combined both performance measures with the specific outcomes for children and families. Performance measures, for example, included the number of placements, while outcomes for children in care focus on health, social-emotional development, and educational attainment. We have summarised these outcomes in Figure 1 below.

	Children at risk of harm	Children in care / Looked after children	Children leaving care
Performance or intermediate measures	<p>Timeliness of initial child protection meetings.</p> <p>No. of children reporting to front door of service, no. of re-referrals.</p> <p>Ratio of contacts to referrals.</p>	<p>Appropriateness of foster placement.</p> <p>No. of social workers a child has been seen by.</p> <p>Length of care and number of placements (stability).</p>	
Outcomes for children and families	<p>Child protection cases closed*.</p>	<p>Outcomes and indicators shaped by local priorities, but fall into broad categories:</p> <p>Health of child (regular health and dental checks, up-to-date immunisations)*.</p> <p>Meeting socio-emotional development milestones.</p> <p>Education – attendance, mainstream vs alternative provision, attainment, rates of exclusion*.</p>	<p>*Children and young people entering education, training, or employment.</p> <p>Good educational attainment and type of employment.</p> <p>Children and young people able to access stable accommodation.</p>

Figure 1. Outcomes by forms of intervention

*In our research, interviewees identified these measures as examples of outcomes recorded in their services. However, they can also be considered process-level measures, as they are drawn on data used to measure service performance at a national level.

Across the different types of intervention, questions of proportionality were also identified as a central focus, especially by interviewees in more senior roles. Interviewees reported that combining both performance data (around the timeliness and number of engagements with families, for example) with the outcome of an intervention enabled services to reflect on the balance between the level of intervention into a family's life and the needs of the child.

National policy and local priorities: factors influencing outcomes tracked

The types of outcomes tracked and measured for children and families are driven by systemic factors influencing children's social care at national and local levels.

At a national level, children's social care services' statutory reporting obligations represent a key driver for the outcomes data that are recorded for children and families. Many interviewees highlighted the SSDA903 return and Children in Need census when asked to indicate the types of outcomes they recorded in their service.⁴ These reporting requirements shape, in turn, the types of data collected – emphasising cohort level quantitative measures of service performance.

Despite their prominence, interviewees noted that these outcomes do not reflect the complexity and realities of social worker's interactions with children and families, and the progress they are able to achieve. This issue is explored in more detail in the barriers section below.

Local factors also play an important role in shaping the types of outcomes prioritised and indicators used to evidence them. Historic or entrenched issues affecting children and families can impact the outcome areas which children's social care services focus on. In one local authority, for example, levels of educational attainment have been a longstanding issue. This has led to an increased focus on several educational factors, such as attendance and attainment, within children's social care.

Elsewhere, in another local authority, health outcomes were a significant focus for children in care, with up-to-date immunisations identified as a key priority for the service. These local factors not only affect the types of outcomes recorded, but the data and practices used to record them. For the local authority where educational attainment has been identified as a focus area, this has been enabled by greater connections with local education teams and the shared use of a multi-agency data hub, pulling together data on a child from multiple services.

⁴ The SSDA903 return is the Department for Education's national data return for children looked after, which local authorities are responsible for completing annually. The data collected through the SSDA903 return covers both children looked after and care leavers. For children in care, the data collected covers placement, legal status, and adoption from care, while data gathered on care leavers captures education, employment, and training status alongside current accommodation.

The Children in Need census captures child-level information on all children who have been referred to children's services in a year, including demographic characteristics and information on type, number and outcome of any assessments or referrals.

The conditions for effective data use in outcomes tracking

- Our research highlighted several key barriers and enablers for the effective use of data in tracking outcomes in children's social care.
- Capturing the complexity and nuance of social work in outcomes tracked, and the amount of data collected by local authority services, represent key barriers to using data to support outcomes tracking.
- In contrast, multi-agency connections, the establishment of structures and processes for interpreting and discussing data, and contextualised approaches to engaging with data represent key enabling factors.

Through our research with local authorities across England, we explored some of the key conditions which shape how data can be used to track outcomes for families. We found that capturing the complexity and nuance of social work, along with the vast amounts of data being collected, represented key barriers to tracking outcomes in children's social care. These barriers are explored in the first part of this section. Building on this, we then outline the enabling factors we observed across local authorities that can support the effective use of data to support outcomes tracking.

Barriers affecting data use in tracking outcomes:

1. Capturing the complexity of social work practice in outcomes tracked

As outlined above, interviewees commonly identified performance measures when asked about the types of outcomes tracked in their service, such as re-referral rates or timeliness of visits. While these outcomes were a prominent focus in our discussions, several interviewees challenged their value in reflecting the context of a social worker's engagement with children and families and progress achieved.

"I think what historically has been valued the most in social care is process data, rather than outcome data, when ...what's really important is the outcome... If you demand that a social worker does an assessment within 45 days, but actually, it's a really, really complex family that's going to take longer than 45 days, that's a good thing, isn't it?"

Senior Service Manager

This issue emerged particularly in discussion with social workers involved in our research. For several interviewees working directly with children and families, the outcomes recorded in their service were disconnected from or not reflective of their work. Outcomes associated

with statutory reporting returns, for example, were highlighted for not providing space to capture meaningful changes or points of progress in a family's engagement with a service.

“You can work really well with a parent who then actually kind of changes their mind and perspective on working with professionals, ... build a really good relationship, that can be a really good turning point for that parent. But that doesn't record anywhere that's counted or measurable in terms of the data that we have to produce for the Department for Education.”
Senior Social Worker

Reflecting on this issue, some social workers questioned whether performance measures were privileged because of the ease of collecting data to report against them, in comparison to some of the less tangible impacts of a social worker's support.

“The data that's easier to measure, sometimes [it] feels [like] that's valued more.”
Social Worker

These feelings of disconnection from and dissatisfaction with performance-related measures led some social workers to indicate that they viewed these measures, and the data used to record them, as the focus of more senior members of their team.

2. Navigating the large volume of information and data collected

Across our interviewees, there was a shared recognition that local children's services collect and generate large amounts of data and information about children and families. These data range from the qualitative notes recorded during individuals' visits through to broader service level performance metrics.

Managing the large amounts of information and data generated by children's social work was identified as a challenge for both individual social workers – in determining what information to record – and services as a whole. For services as a whole, the introduction of data management systems such as Liquid Logic and Mosaic was felt to have further exacerbated this issue.

“But in children's social care, because we've got Liquid Logic, we can create so much data, it's just too much for people to go through.”
Senior Service Lead

As data management systems become more comprehensive, services can collect and connect more sources of information on the support they provide for children and families. However, some interviewees and peer network attendees cautioned that this ease of collecting data could lead to authorities gathering information without a clear strategy for how it is going to be used. This could contribute to further uncertainty in services and teams around why information is being collected and stored. Taking this further, there is a potential risk this could make tracking outcomes for children and families more difficult – as children's services have to disentangle and process more data and information.

Enablers for effective use of data in outcomes tracking

1. Multi-agency connections and partnership working to build a more rounded picture of a child's life

Across the local authorities involved in our research, forging connections with other agencies was a key enabling factor for using data effectively to track outcomes for children and families.

In some of the local authorities involved in our research, close connections have been formed between children's services and other agencies, such as education teams, to support efforts to tackle key local issues. This has involved local authorities establishing systems and processes which enable the sharing of data between different agencies that support or interact with children and families. Connections with education teams, for example, have enabled the sharing of data relating to educational attainment, attendance, and risk of exclusion.

“Every month, we share with our social workers, and senior leaders as well, a real clear breakdown of how our children are doing in school, and who are those children who we should be most concerned around. And again, that's built on data that is reinforced by conversation.”

Senior Service Lead

This approach to multi-agency data use and sharing requires the support of data management systems that enable social workers and performance staff to access data from different agencies in a streamlined way. In one local authority, the use of a dedicated data management system has enabled greater use of data from across services, by providing a single view of a child based on multiple sources of data.

“The piece of innovation work here in [LA] that we've been working on is the [Management System]. So, what that does for us is it layers information, and it pulls child level information in and gives a far more enhanced picture of a child. We are layering in health information... the more we can pull in, the better that picture looks and starts to inform service development, starts to help us to ask questions and work together across the partnership to respond.”

Senior Service Manager

This has enabled service staff to build a more rounded picture of the lives of the children they support, drawing on wider data to enable the more effective tracking of outcomes achieved through support from a social worker. Access to this data is also supported by engagements between social work staff and education coordinators, who hold relationships with local school leads. These coordinators provide further contextual information to aid with understanding the information shared on this data management system.

2. Creating structures to review outcomes and coordinate support

While having access to data from other agencies is an important tool for informing the tracking and measurement of outcomes, using this data effectively requires the creation of dedicated structures and processes to review, respond and coordinate support.

Several local authorities involved in our research have introduced dedicated decision-making structures to review outcomes and performance and coordinate support. These structures play an important role in bringing together managers and service leaders to engage with data collected at regular intervals. In some cases, this involves bringing together representatives of different teams and agencies to reflect on data for individual children, drawn from different agencies. For example, in one local authority, service leads and managers are brought together through a dedicated Performance Overview Board to review outcomes for children in care.

We have [...] whole day sessions looking at outcomes for those children [in care]. We developed a tracker that pulled in initial data. It would tell us their education, attendance... it would RAG that piece, it would tell us how many placement moves they'd had. We would ask different people in the system to put a RAG on where they felt that child was at. We would then have a conversation about every child."

Senior Service Lead

This approach was identified by interviewees from within service as being effective in drawing together previously separate conversations about data gathered by the service into a single, joined up conversation to coordinate activity and reflect on the outcomes being achieved for individual children. In this instance, drawing on data from other agencies helped to enrich conversations and provide a more detailed picture of children's needs and the support required.

In other local authorities, structures have been created which bring together data and reflections from children's social workers, other agencies, and children and families themselves to reflect on the outcomes achieved.

"And so when a family have done something where it's they've really achieved success [...] we would invite that family to a panel where some really kind of curious questions about what was it that you did, what the worker enabled within your system to get things going, because we want to learn more about this. Something's gone well, we want to know what's gone well, and really deep diving into that."

Practice Lead

As well as drawing on the experiences of families, this panel also gathers insights from other services that have supported the family, to understand and triangulate the impact achieved. Involving families and other agencies in this process enables this service to develop a full understanding of what outcomes have been achieved and the role of social workers in achieving them. Further, the feedback captured from families also informs wider learning within a service, by informing overall practice with children and families.

3. Commitment to contextualised approaches which draw together data and experience to track, measure and review outcomes

Uniting some of the processes and structures that local authorities have introduced to use data to track and measure outcomes for children and families, including those discussed above, is a commitment to contextualisation through conversations and discussion. While interviewees highlighted the importance of establishing these structures, the way in which data was approached – both in these structures and across services more generally – was felt to foster effective use of data. In both the structures discussed above, engaging with data and experiences in conversation was identified as being important for developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of children and families, and how outcomes have been achieved.

“But actually, it's that softer conversation underneath that [analysis of data], because we can think we're doing a great job, but actually, are we making the difference we want to?”

Senior Service Lead

At a broader level, interviewees pointed to the importance of embedding a curious and contextualised approach to interpreting data across a service. This was felt to involve both creating space to interrogate the information collected – exploring questions of how and why outcomes are achieved – and recognising that performance measures alone cannot provide a full picture of outcomes achieved for children and families. Establishing effective approaches to using data to track outcomes therefore connects to the broader culture surrounding data collection, interpretation and use within services – it is not just the structures themselves that are valuable, but the ways in which discussions are framed and data considered.

Conclusions, best practice and learnings

Our research has identified several key barriers and enablers for the effective use of data in supporting children's services to track outcomes for children and families. Building on these reflections, we provide a series of conclusions and suggestions for best practice and wider learning below. When doing so, we also consider the connections between our research and the development of the National Outcomes Framework for children's social care.

Connecting outcomes tracking and social work practice

- Our interviews highlighted feelings of disconnection among social workers from the outcomes reported and data prioritised within their services and their everyday practice. To address this issue, local authorities could consider how feedback loops can be created within services to ensure that social workers understand how the information and data they collect is used in broader outcomes tracking processes internally. This could help to foster further buy-in for and understanding of services' approaches to tracking outcomes and create opportunities for sharing best practice – by celebrating where good outcomes have been achieved.
- At a more structural level, there are broader implications for the outcomes prioritised and incorporated into the National Outcomes Framework for Children's Social Care. The prominence of performance or process-related measures suggests that more could be done to identify a shared set of outcome measures for children and families (e.g. safety, health) across the country.

The role of data and collaboration in outcomes tracking

- Contemporary data management systems have made it easier for services to collect, store and display more data relating to the children and families they support. Our research has highlighted the importance of clear strategies for the collection and use of data within services for creating more purposeful ways of collecting useful data – and ensuring this is proportionate for children and families.
- Cross-agency collaboration and information sharing can also enable children's services to build a more detailed understanding of the outcomes achieved for children and families. For local authorities looking to build these multi-agency connections further, mobilising around specific local issues and areas of concern appear to be effective ways of connecting services working with children and families.
- At the same time, our research highlighted the importance of dedicated structures and discussions for making sense of the data used to track outcomes for children and families. This highlights the importance of creating spaces which enable service staff (including from multiple agencies) to come together to explore the implications and contextual background behind outcomes data collected.

- Building on this, the National Outcomes Framework provides an opportunity to further enable and support the sharing of data and partnership working between agencies supporting children and families.
- More broadly, our research points to the need for adopting contextualised approaches to using data to track outcomes at a service level, which incorporate both service level measures and the experiences and expertise of social workers. This could help to create more balanced approaches to understanding engagement with and outcomes achieved for children and families.

Bibliography

Children's Social Care National Framework: a government response to the consultation on principles for practice, expected outcomes and indicators, Department for Education (2023). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1185764/Children_s_social_care_national_framework_and_dashboard_consultation_response.pdf

How do we know if children's social care services make a difference? Development of an outcomes framework. Summary report. I. La Valle, Di Hart, L. Holmes with V. S. Pinto (Nuffield, 2019). <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CSCS-Outcomes-Framework-Summary.pdf>

The independent review of children's social care, MacAlister (2022). <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122449/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

Appendix - Our approach

Recruiting a diverse sample of local authorities represented a key priority for this research project, to develop a comprehensive picture of local authority practices around the country. When identifying local authorities to approach for interview, we attempted to account for a range of local authority characteristics, including location, type of authority, Ofsted rating, and population demographics.

We began by developing a sample of twelve local authorities, with the aim of interviewing **15 staff across five local authorities**. When reaching out to local authorities, we contacted senior staff, such as Director for Children's Services and Principal Social Workers, to secure buy-in and support recruitment within their teams. Where no follow-up contact was made, we replaced local authorities with others that shared similar characteristics or preserved overall sample diversity. We completed four sampling rounds, approaching **senior staff in 37 local authorities**, and **successfully recruited 17 interviewees from seven local authorities**.

Local authority	Location	Urban / Rural	Authority type	Ofsted rating	Population size (approx.)
LA1	South	Urban	Unitary	Requires Improvement	245,000
LA2	North-east	Rural	Unitary	Outstanding	620,000
LA3	South	Urban	Unitary	Good	207,000
LA4	North-west	Urban	Borough	Good	550,000
LA5	South-east	Rural	County	Outstanding	1,850,000
LA6	Greater London	Urban	Borough	Good	317,000
LA7	Greater London	Urban	Borough	Requires Improvement	275,000

Interviews and analysis

We conducted interviews remotely and transcribed them using Otter.ai software. Interviews were then analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach. This involved first creating a high-level coding framework of several key codes related to our four research questions to provide an overall structure to our coding process. We then coded inductively, developing codes and themes from our interview data. Approaching our analysis in this way enabled us to develop an overall framework that was both structured and based on the reflections shared by interviewees rather than themes identified prior to coding.

Limitations

Recruiting interviewees proved to be a key challenge for this project. We found it difficult to recruit frontline social workers successfully, even in local authorities where we secured the

engagement and support of more senior staff. This limited engagement may be linked to the pressures faced by social workers working directly with children and families, which may have made them less likely to engage, alongside a desire among senior staff to protect the time of more junior colleagues. As a result of this limited engagement of social workers working directly with children and families, staff in more senior and performance-related positions are overrepresented in our sample.

The number of interviewees recruited from each authority also varied. In two local authorities, for example, we were able to recruit four interviewees each, while in two others only one member of staff was successfully recruited. This has made it difficult to draw out broader trends in those local authorities where engagement was lower. Our research therefore draws more heavily from local authorities where we were able to interview two or more staff members.

Frontline is a social work charity working to ensure that all children in England have a safe and stable home, and that their life chances are not limited by their social or family circumstance.

We create social change for these children and their families by developing excellent social work practice, leadership and innovation through our programmes, and by building a movement of leaders in social work and broader society as part of our Fellowship.

Find out more at <https://thefrontline.org.uk/>

E: evaluation@thefrontline.org.uk

Frontline, Coram Campus, 41 Brunswick Square, London, WC1N 1AZ

Renaisi strengthens communities across the UK by challenging the root causes of economic and social exclusion.

Renaisi's excellent team, 25-years' experience, and unique cross-sector model drives real social change, step-by-step, in partnership and with those at the heart of the issue playing a central role. As leaders in place-based change and experts in using learning to understand the intersecting and complex nature of social challenges, we have the potential and the responsibility to drive change in society.

Find out more at <https://renaisi.com/>

T: +44 (0) 20 7033 2600

E: info@renaisi.com

Unit 1.2, 244-254 Cambridge Heath Rd, London E2 9DA