

Information Sharing and Assessment- The Answer to Child Protection or the Source of more Questions?

HANNAH GOODMAN

Research Fellow, De Montfort University, United Kingdom

ROY BAILEY

Honorary Senior Research Fellow, De Montfort University, United Kingdom

BRIAN WILLIAMS

Professor in Community Justice and Victimology, De Montfort University, United Kingdom

Abstract

This article looks at the background to the creation of the Information Sharing and Assessment project. This includes issues such as the findings of reviews into previous child protection failures, the original aims of the project, and the proposed database of children. This article summarises the concerns of a number of academics and workers in the field, and goes on to discuss the drawbacks of this system. This includes concerns over civil liberties due to the nature of the information held and access to this. Findings from the evaluation of the Bridges project that was set up to implement the ISA system in Leicestershire and Rutland are presented which demonstrate how these concerns have had an effect in practice. The article concludes with a discussion about whether this system would solve the problems that it was designed to remedy.

Introduction

This article will look at the background to the creation of the Identification, Referral and Tracking (IRT) scheme, which is now called Information Sharing and Assessment (ISA), a database containing details of all children in England and Wales. It will look at what constitutes child abuse, reports that have been carried out previously into failures in child protection, the Children Act 2004 and the reasons why an ISA system has been proposed, including child protection. It will then go on to look at the system that will be created by this, including advantages and disadvantages, and civil liberties issues raised by a database potentially containing personal information on 11 million children. The Community and Criminal Justice Research Centre of De Montfort University was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the IRT/ISA trailblazer for the Leicestershire and Rutland area. Findings from this research are discussed alongside literature from other sources. The authors will demonstrate that the proposed ISA

system has some serious drawbacks and may not be the solution that is needed to help protect children from abuse.

Background

The topics of child abuse and child protection are still highly emotive, and were placed in the public eye again following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié, and the subsequent report and legislation. There has also been an increase in the awareness, resourcing and legislation in relation to child abuse as an issue in recent years. However these developments have not always been without their difficulties

Child Protection

The child protection register contains 'confidential details of children who are at continuing risk of physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect, and for whom there is a child protection plan' (NSPCC website). In 1999 there were 35,630 children on the register. In 2003 this had dropped to 26,600. Just over 10,000 children were registered because of neglect, over 4,000 were registered due to physical abuse, nearly 3,000 for sexual abuse and 5,000 for emotional abuse (NSPCC website). Fewer children are being placed on the child protection register and children are not remaining on the register for as long as in the past. Holland and Scourfield (2004) claim that this is due to improved accuracy of assessment, the carrying out of reviews, and the rules governing registration.

Rights

The New Labour government of the U.K. set out its plans in 1997 for improving the lives of children and has since introduced measures designed to eliminate child poverty; to improve standards in the Care system; to develop preventive programmes through Sure Start; and to provide support for young people through such innovations as Connexions. The Children Act 2004 is a further measure intended to improve the protection for and the care of children. Nonetheless, there are critics of the philosophy underpinning this legislation.

The aspects of children's rights which claimed the most attention of commentators on the Children Act and on its preceding consultation papers, *Every Child Matters* and *Next Steps*, are those relating quite directly to issues of participation and more obliquely to discrimination, labelling and stigma.

Templeton (2004) urged consistency of policy with that set out by the UN Convention 1989, arguing that otherwise difficulties can arise when Government policy itself becomes inconsistent, for example when the youth justice system, guided by different principles, develops in a direction contrary to that of other children's services. The consequences of this will be discussed later in this article in relation to the development of a system called RYOGENS that was created to monitor young people at risk of offending.

Legislation and background to the creation of ISA

The Children Act of 2004 imposes upon children's services authorities a duty to promote co-operation between the relevant agencies to safeguard the well-being of children. S.12 (1)(a) permits the Secretary of State to require that local authorities or other specialised bodies establish and maintain a database of information about children that is relevant to their welfare, or may 'himself establish and operate, or make arrangements for the operation and establishment of, one or more databases containing such information' [S.12 (1) (b)].

At S.12 (6) – (8) the Act includes provision for information sharing between agencies. It states that the Secretary of State can make provision to decide what 'information must or may be contained in any database' and 'permitting or requiring the disclosure of information for inclusion in any such database' [S.12 (6)].

The databases are intended to facilitate information sharing between professionals, but this may turn out to be more complex than originally envisaged, partly due to the somewhat ambiguous provisions in the Act itself, and partly to differences in agency cultures about the significance of and the disclosure of confidential information:

The Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*, sets out how the Government initially intended to tackle [this breakdown in communication] by sweeping away legal, technical, cultural and organisational barriers to information sharing to make it easier for practitioners to provide the right help at the right time before a child's situation reaches crisis point (Sure Start, 2004).

Information Sharing and Assessment

Ward (2004) wrote that the Government's planned database would have to include details of all children as it is not possible to know which children will need to access services. The database would include details such as name, date of birth, and GP. Those professionals who worked with a child, such as drugs, mental health or sexual health workers would then be able to log their concerns about a child on the database. What should be achieved by this is the mapping of what services and agencies children are accessing, and ensure that onward referrals are made where appropriate. Information sharing and communication between agencies should be made easier. The focus should be preventative (CYPU website). This would be useful because, as found by Ayre (2001), many changes to the child protection agenda have been made following high profile abuse cases and have tended to focus on looking for individuals who are to blame for mistakes, rather than looking to improve practices in the future.

The scope of ISA/ IRT will reflect the fact that:

The Cross Cutting Review of Children at Risk, the analysis of which has informed the work on LPS [local preventative strategy] and IRT, used a broad definition of 'risk' intended to reflect the fact that children and young people may move in and out of periods of risk during their childhood and adolescence. The LPS, and therefore IRT, should be concerned with promoting positive outcomes and preventing negative ones. Such negative outcomes might include educational failure; behavioural problems/ offending; ill health; victimisation/ abuse; and material poverty (CYPU website).

Agencies involved would include health, education, social care and organisations around youth justice.

ISA will also introduce a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) which will provide an 'initial assessment of children with additional needs, looking at the whole child, as a basis for sharing information across services' (DFES, 2005). This could also prove a useful tool in developing a shared language amongst professionals as the CAF would be used by many different agencies.

Young people's views of IRT

Researchers from the University of Durham investigated what young people thought about the IRT project as it was initially proposed. They found that young people were positive about IRT overall but did have concerns about consent and security issues. Young people also wanted to be involved in making decisions that concern them (Pain *et al.*, 2004).

The young people who took part in the research felt that it would save the young person having to recount their story to each new worker; however the flipside of this was that, based on this information, it could allow workers to pre-judge them. Young people also raised the issue that they wanted to know what information was being stored about them, and have a say over who had access to this. They also felt that it was important that IRT did not 'replace the human contact and professional awareness of the complexity of their problems' (*ibid*: 15).

Singleton (2004: 20) stated baldly that

Most important will be the ability to put the views and needs of children before organisational issues.... I fear that too much time, energy and resources will be spent on reorganisation, diverting attention from where Lord Laming [chair of the Victoria Climbié Enquiry] identified the greatest effort was needed: improving effectiveness at the front line.

Advantages of ISA

The ISA database will allow for professionals to log their concerns about a child. Ayre (2001) argues that there is widespread agreement amongst professionals on child protection issues and the ISA database could be a forum for these concerns to be shared between agencies. Ling and Luker (2000: 575) argue that although there might be 'vibes' about particular individuals that workers pick up, these will be based on professional knowledge. Truman (2004) argues that improvements in data collection and analysis will lead to more accurate statistics on the rates of child neglect that take place.

Early successes have included 'agreeing a clear vision for IRT with partner agencies, gaining the commitment of councillors, senior managers and practitioners' (Sure Start, 2004: 5). However, obstacles have also been identified including: '...the short-term funding that is making it difficult to recruit and plan long-term. The continuing ambiguity over legal aspects of information sharing has also held up progress in some trailblazers' (Sure Start, 2004: 5).

The creation of ISA may also serve to remind professionals of the importance of communication. Reder and Duncan (2003: 96) claim that 'interagency communication

would improve if *all* professionals concerned acquired a 'communication mindset' as part of their core skills'. Carvel (2004) writes that the project trailblazers are tackling the breakdown in communication between agencies through the use of shared language rather than jargon.

An advantage of the ISA project would be that it could help clarify which agencies are working with a particular family and how this is progressing. This would be important to prevent the creation of situations in which

past adverse experiences when in need of help (from parents or professionals) become repeated in current interactions with professionals. This may include repeatedly asking for professional input then failing to take it up, or 'shopping around' to a number of other agencies. For their part, the professionals remain unaware that others are involved with that person and so have no idea of any need to communicate with them' (Reder and Duncan, 2003: 93).

Drawbacks of ISA

The ISA project requires those who work with children and have concerns about the safety of children to log these on the database. Sometimes it will be the sum of these concerns by a number of people that will justify intervention with a child or family. However, Ling and Luker (2000: 572) found that nurses often 'reject the apparently prosaic and feminine qualities of intuition and subjectivity' because these are seen as 'inappropriate' in a professional setting. It is important that only objective information be shared between professionals, unless the status of concerns as conjecture is acknowledged. However, where professionals reject using their intuition, it is possible that they will miss subtle signs that children are being abused or neglected. Whilst these concerns may not themselves individually be enough evidence to act on, if they are not logged, a sum of concerns will not be generated.

Reder and Duncan (2003: 82) state that 'problems of communication seem to haunt professional practice. Since the 1970s, virtually all reviews of fatal child abuse cases in the United Kingdom report that there was evidence of communication failure between professionals'. This may include failing to get in contact or return messages to other professionals, difficulties with passing on information or failing to pass on the results of decisions to others. This could be due to mistrust or lack of mutual respect (Reder and Duncan, 2003) or because busy professionals failed to give tasks sufficient priority.

Other difficulties may involve issues such as '...territorialism and role identifications; status and power; competition for resources; professional and organizational priorities; stereotypes; value systems about child abuse and families; mutual unfulfilled expectations and disrespect for the other's expertise' (Reder and Duncan, 2003: 92).

Taylor (2004:18) commented on the complications which have arisen from a lack of detail about what is meant by 'information as to the existence of any cause for concern'. Hill *et al.* (op.cit. p.48) wondered 'how concerns are interpreted and applied by practitioners, especially staff from the different backgrounds and with differing levels of involvement with a young person'.

Ayre (2001) suggests that instead of developing a new system, the judgement of professionals is developed. Reder and Duncan support this, saying that 'previous enquiry reports have indicated the need for significant training, practice and resourcing

improvements which have never been adequately implemented and that the very same themes can be inferred from the Victoria Climbié Inquiry' (2004: 95). Hill (2003) discusses the fact that the database would not have saved the person whose death sparked the enquiry which led to its creation, Victoria Climbié. This is because it is not intended to contain information about children who are privately fostered or who have emigrated to this country.

Government plans to set up the ISA database may face additional serious problems. These may include issues of data protection, funding and data quality. A study carried out by Hammersmith and Fulham Council found that when a comparison was made of over fifty thousand records in its social services department with the local NHS database nearly half did not match. In a few cases, the records did not even agree whether the person was alive or not (Rogers, 2003). Liberty echoes this concern, stating that without appropriate back up, a system using multiple data bases with different levels of access may prove to be 'unworkable' (2004: 13).

Ward (2004) states that professionals with concerns over a child would be able to 'flag up' these issues online, but that in half of trailblazers, the pilot schemes that were set up to test methods for how ISA might best function, were not using this system due to concerns that a flag would be used instead of action being taken. In East Sussex, issues of lack of communication were tackled through the use of common language for professionals. This could be an area which would warrant further investigation. The flagging system is used as a back up, so that when five concerns have been raised, this triggers an automatic reminder that an overview of the child's situation is required (Carvel, 2004b).

Another factor that may limit the effectiveness of the system is over-cautious referrals. This may swamp the system with less serious cases and render it even less effective. Not the least of the difficulties facing the introduction of ISA is the availability of the requisite and necessary resources. As Roberts (op cit) pointed out, the success of ISA and flagging will depend on the extent to which the intervening agencies are able to fulfil the promise of their mandates. Hill *et al.* (op.cit.: 37) quoted Henri Giller:

The process is not only about getting everybody around the table to agree 'Yes these are our priority vulnerable kids; these are the ones to identify and we're going to identify them.' You've got the whole issue of 'can we deliver a service? Is the service effective? Is it sustaining?

They added questions of their own (p.50) concerning the outcomes for the 'flagged' young people: 'Were they referred to appropriate agencies? Was action taken with reference to the concerns noted and multi-agency working aided?' In their Oxfordshire study they also found that there seemed to be 'wide variations in the number of concerns noted for individual young people' and wondered how far this was justified by the evidence or was it 'sometimes a case of practitioners being 'trigger happy' when clicking on concerns'?

Cross (2004) warns that a number of databases are currently being developed and how these will fit together is unclear. These databases include RYOGENS which is being funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. A RYOGENS database would allow for the sharing of concerns about a young person by agencies including education, health, the police, the Probation Service, Social Services, Youth Offending Teams, anti-social behaviour teams, Connexions and community wardens. When a number of concerns have been raised about one child, an alert is made and the case is

reviewed (Hill *et al.*, 2004: 5). The RYOGENS website claims that this database could be used as a tool for the IRT pilots, and as a 'potential interim solution to some of the challenges' of IRT (2004). However, the creation of two systems such as IRT and RYOGENS does demonstrate a breakdown in communication between government departments. This is hardly reassuring when the stated aim of the project is to aid communication between professionals.

The RYOGENS development introduces a wholly different conception of the meanings to be ascribed to the notions of a 'vulnerable young person' or a 'young person at risk'. If the questions are asked 'Vulnerable to *what?*' or 'At what *kind* of risk?' the answers are likely to reveal very different sets of assumptions and policies in respect of child abuse or neglect on the one hand and anti-social behaviour or crime on the other. In a thinly veiled literary allusion to this dilemma, Seaford (2001: 464-5) envisaged that

the child moves through Whitehall growing and shrinking like Alice: in the Department of Health she is a small potential victim, at the Treasury and Department of Education a growing but silent unit of investment, but at the Home Office a huge and threatening job.

This may be something of a caricature but it does raise questions about the objectives and integrity of ISA and the respective levels of political investment by the different central governments departments involved.

The Government hopes that the development of the ISA system will 'help social services and police to identify and protect children who are at risk of abuse or neglect' (Winnett and Leppard, 2004). However, concerns arise when the boundaries concerning identifying children at risk of abuse or neglect, and those at risk of being drawn into the criminal justice system are blurred. This could be exacerbated by the use of a system such as RYOGENS, created to track those at risk of becoming criminals.

This sort of concern raises the question of potential stigma. Roberts (2004: 22) commented on the introduction by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in its indices of multiple deprivation of the concept of 'super output areas' which effectively identify some of the most deprived neighbourhoods across the country. She hoped that in future the graduates of Sure Start, extended schools and children's centres in such areas will break the mould. To do so, in her view, such schemes will need to be hugely expanded, and the government must seriously consider in future whether:

many of its positive policies, starved of funding, will be further undermined by an increasingly coercive attitude to families. Identification, Referral and Tracking . . . raises many concerns. Will it mean that whole neighbourhoods consist of "flagged" children, adding to the stigma of the estate on which they live? If basic provision - social services, counselling support, parent groups and child guidance continues to be understaffed and poorly funded, what good will flagging really do, apart from demonising a child at an even earlier age? . . . It would be a tragedy if Tony Blair's domestic legacy is gradually reduced to the image of the disciplinarian state taking an even thicker stick to families who won't "behave".

Civil liberties issues

The civil liberties group Liberty had serious concerns about the introduction of the database following the Children Act. They state that the case of Victoria Climbié demonstrated a

serious lack of understanding by the care professionals involved. No database can solve these problems. In fact, the creation of a database could be counterproductive, in becoming a panacea for all ills. Liberty fears that without relevant training of those involved in care services and without adequate resources to allow people to work effectively, the proposals ... will have little positive impact' (2004: 4).

Liberty (2004) goes on to discuss what will happen to data stored on the database once a child reaches the maximum age for the scheme as the data stored may be of a highly personal nature. The database could be seen as 'creating a national database through the back door'; a database created now containing information on all children in the UK, would include information on nearly half the population in twenty years time (Barry Hugill of Liberty, quoted by Winnett and Leppard, 2004). Hugill not only called for more detail on whether children would be able to see their file, but asked when the file would ultimately be destroyed (Ward: 2004).

There were a number of concerns over issues such as confidentiality and data protection within this scheme. The Act allows for much of this information to be shared, but leaves much to the discretion of the Secretary of State (Club UK, 2004). Storing data that is not necessary to the database could breach privacy rights.

There are also concerns about how this information might be used by organisations that have access to it.

Civil liberty and child protection organisations are worried. Liz Garrett, head of policy at children's charity Barnardo's, says: "If agencies making decisions about young people have access to information about their youth justice record, they may not be given a fair chance." (Hill, 2003).

People whose criminal record would not otherwise be disclosed could be labelled by being included on ISA or another similar database.

During the second reading of the Bill, Lord Northbourne (Salari, 2004) said it was unfair that parents would be denied access to the information in the database that professionals were party to. He added that it was dangerous to send a message to parents that the Government does not 'wholly trust' them. Down (2005) questions what right parents will have to alter information on the database that is incorrect.

Management and resources

From the perspective of the Association of Directors of Social Services, Thompson and Coughlan (2004: 37) remarked that:

Sensitivities about information sharing and its challenges remain at a premium. There is public and political perception that professionals use legislative barriers

as convenient cover for failing to communicate effectively with each other. That view has probably been reinforced by the Richard inquiry. It is clear from the wording of the Bill [now an Act] and some of the attached briefings that the government is encountering the same regulatory impediments which affect professionals' day-to-day practice.

Bailey and Williams (2002: 70-72) referred to previous studies of interagency work in the field of criminal justice which pointed to 'the likelihood that the bland term 'partnership' may conceal conflicts arising from power inequalities and other differences between the agencies concerned'.

Hudson (2004) warned that although few question the desirability of multi-agency arrangements, in themselves they are no guarantee of effective teamwork. In his view,

Several assumptions underpin the operational level proposals, and it is important to unpick them and consider the extent to which they can be taken as read. First, the extent to which there is clarity regarding the role and scope of each agency and profession. Second, the extent to which there is agreement about the nature of the tasks faced, and the most appropriate way of addressing them. And finally, the extent to which one profession or agency positively regards the contribution from another agency or profession.

IRT fieldwork

ISA was implemented in Leicestershire and Rutland by a newly established project, Bridges. The work of the Bridges team was split into three main tasks. These included the creation of the database containing information on all children, the development of a common assessment framework, and an online service directory.

Initially the research team had planned to carry out a range of interviews with front line staff who accessed the Bridges database, used the CAF or the online service directory. However, as Bridges is a trailblazer for what was initially known as the IRT project, and was recently re-named the ISA project, this was subject to change. The trailblazers were created to try out in practice different methods of carrying out the IRT/ISA aims, in order to identify what worked and so the Government's implementation guidance was being released throughout the period of time during which the evaluation was ongoing.

The guidance subsequently released by the Government on what information could be stored on the database was different from what the team had been led to believe would be needed, leading to delays in getting the database online. This echoes a finding about causes of delays to IRT trailblazers found by Sure Start back in 2004. This led to a change in the purposes of the research away from Bachman and Schutt's definition of evaluative research, which 'seeks to determine the effects of a social program (sic) or other type of intervention' (2001: 13). The research team was instead asked to contact members and ex-members of the ISA partnership board, rather than field staff, and concentrated on evaluating the reality of being a trailblazer for the ISA project with particular regard to senior managers' views of the impact it had had on their own services.

The aim of this was to identify what areas of the work carried out by the Bridges team had been useful, what had not been useful, and to identify difficulties that

arose where discrepancy between what was first floated as the suggestions of what would be required and what was then required by Government guidance occurred. The research team was provided with a list of twenty people who were or had been on the board which manages the project. This was used as the sampling frame for the evaluation. The research team attempted to contact all those on this which led to eleven interviews being carried out during the summer of 2005.

The majority of interviewees stated that one of the aims of ISA was to facilitate information sharing between agencies. Interviewees also believed that ISA was about identifying children and ensuring that they were referred to the correct services in order to access the support that they needed: 'Well, the benefits are clearly about proper information exchange and so the right people are aware of particular circumstances of individual families and children who are most vulnerable or at risk in some way.' This bears a strong resemblance to the stated aims of the ISA project, that ISA should be there to improve information sharing between professionals, and developing a common assessment of need. Perhaps not surprisingly, the staff interviewed were well informed about the purposes of the project.

Communication

One interviewee summed up the advantages that would be offered by this scheme by saying:

In the context of integrated children's services, which is the direction we're going in, multi-agency teams, either co-located or more disparately based, will have quicker access to information about particular families. So they should be better able to tailor their services more quickly to the needs of the family. I mean IT systems will never replace conversations, so professionals will always need to talk to each other, but they can provide significant blocks of foundation material about the family that can be really helpful for decisions to be made quickly.

I think the common language is about children in need or children who are vulnerable and what we mean by vulnerable and what we mean by children in need. . . . Children's needs change all the time. It is quite difficult to say this is a vulnerable child and this is a child in need; there's no kind of formula which works it out. So yes, it would be helpful to improve people's understanding - but it doesn't have to be related to a database.

One interviewee described the ISA project as "essential", as in the past agencies could not always identify whether they were in fact dealing with the same child, for example if the child used several surnames or if a name had been recorded differently by separate agencies.

Another advantage included being able to access data held by other agencies which had proved to be difficult in the past and required protocols and additional staff training. The information that agencies are accessing should then be consistent. Interviewees were also keen to reduce the duplication that currently takes place, as it was stated that in some cases up to twenty agencies might be in contact with a family, all of whom are asking for the same information.

The Work of the Bridges Team

Interviewees were on the whole very positive about the work that the Bridges team had carried out, and the benefits of some of the particular tasks required by ISA such as the Common Assessment Framework. They were more critical of the need for and implementation of the electronic database, and discussed how issues with these had delayed the piloting of the Bridges database.

Common Assessment Framework

A Common Assessment Framework (CAF) would involve a variety of agencies including Connexions, the Youth Offending Service (YOS) and social services departments. Agencies were keen to ensure that this complemented the work of their own agencies:

I think it's also helped within the YOS and the way we'd use Bridges is, in terms of presentation to management teams is to, I guess, review the purpose and function of our own assessment tool and where Bridges or CAF can give us some added value and looking at, seeking to avoid duplication where possible. So we've had quite a debate about that interface between our assessment tool and the common assessment framework.

A suggestion of how this might work included implementing the CAF, and then using this to highlight whether the agency would still need to carry out an assessment using its own original assessment tool.

Online Service Directory

The Bridges team has created its own website that contains the details of many services that are available to work with children and families. The feedback on this element of its work was very positive:

the website usage has gone up over the years and the last I heard it was having a significant number of hits by people looking through the needs identifier and the services. They're sort of one component of Bridges' armoury. So people get, I think the website, because the hits have been going up, is clearly something that people go back to and find useful. So yes, my impression is that it's useful...

However, this appeared to be a relatively straightforward element of the work of the Bridges team.

Database

This appeared to be one of the biggest elements of the work of the Bridges team, and by far the most contentious. During the course of the interviews, many participants raised

concerns about the database. Concerns were also voiced about the practicalities that had been faced by the Bridges team when trying to implement this. Practical issues that have affected the implementation have included data security issues, usefulness of the available data to staff, and ease of use of the database.

An interviewee discussed whether the database would save professionals work or would in fact increase their workload:

if frontline professionals have got to add data to two systems, then it adds to their workload.

Disadvantages mentioned by interviewees included that the information on a database would be open to interpretation; an interviewee said that it would be easy to offer too much information or not enough to make their meaning clear.

The issue remains about whether the ISA system could fulfil the aims that it was set up to meet:

Well I think it might be a good idea in some respects but I think that if the government thinks that it's going to protect children, they're wrong ... And what I know is that, you know, a database with all children's names on won't protect children, not least because it would be really difficult to have it accurate and because the numbers of children who are actually being deliberately harmed or neglected is really, really, really small. So it's a bit like a sledgehammer to crack a nut really...

It was clear from the interviews that participants did not feel that a database alone would offer children additional protection above that provided by the systems that are currently in place.

Being a Trailblazer

The government's idea for the trailblazers was that they should test the reality of creating an ISA system, and feed back on what might be best practice. Areas were left to develop a system that seemed to meet the needs of the implementation guidance that had been released at that time. However, in practice trailblazers found that what they had been led to believe would be included, and then what the guidance actually said, could be two different things:

I think one of the problems with all this is, and maybe partly because we've been a classified a trailblazer, is that the rules of the game are changing constantly. And the position we're now in... is not where we started however many months, 12 months or so ago. And we're having to adapt our objectives of the project all the time because the department, DFES and Department of Health, have changed their position constantly.

Agencies therefore had to decide which information they felt they could share. There were also security issues raised by the health services that led to them not wishing to put any data on the website for a time:

We've had, the major sort of flaw for us locally, has been the sort of failure for health to engage sufficiently well early enough, which led to six to nine months delay in access to their information. So that was, you know, how we could have got round that I'm not sure really because they were given the information over and over and over and over again and were saying, yes we're agreeing to this on one hand and then suddenly, secretly, decided to review their engagement. So they obviously got nervous and decided that they shall review their engagement.

However, these delays have 'ensured that what has happened is robust and fits within the legislative framework'. An interviewee mentioned a problem caused by these delays was that they had been trained on the new database, but had not then had another cause to use it. An interviewee also commented that because they had not had to access this again, it was easy over time to forget how to use it. Another interviewee mentioned that a difficulty caused by these delays was that people who had initially been excited by the ISA scheme had lost interest in it. These delays have also led to problems in agreeing how actions should be progressed. This has led to delays to the planned piloting of ISA.

Working with the Bridges Team

Overall, interviewees were positive about their experiences of working with the Bridges team. They felt that there was a good flow of information between the team and themselves. One interviewee commented of the project that 'It's absolutely impressive, very, very clearly focused, well managed'. Interviewees also reported that:

Bridges has had a pivotal role in the development of information sharing and thinking across agencies, across the whole of the county. So in that sense, they've shared a lot of information and triggered a lot of thought about information sharing, both principles here and principles in practice.

However, there were wider concerns about the civil liberties implications of a database covering every child in the country, and several respondents reflected upon how they felt about their own children being 'tracked' in this way: a 'major ethical challenge' which has been implemented with little public discussion, despite the likelihood of concerns on the part of parents of the children involved, if not from the wider public:

on the face of it, anybody's child could be flagged as a child with a problem without, and some authorities have done this without consent already, some of the other trailblazers have gone into flagging without consent. And so you get the possibility that anybody's child could be unfairly flagged as having a particular problem and never knowing and just suddenly receive services or, you know, potentially quite draconian services like youth justice or police knocking on the door or something because somebody's put a flag up.

Data sharing between agencies is essential where there is more than one agency involved, but that doesn't mean I believe it should be necessarily a completely open book. One of the principles of the Data Protection Act is proportionality - you share the information which is relevant to colleagues. I'm sure that in the past insufficient information may have been shared because there was

insufficient understanding of other people's roles and the information needs related to those roles. I think as multi-agency working develops, people get a better understanding of what their colleagues' roles are.

The Future of the Bridges Project

The research team discovered only late in the day (during the data collection phase) that it was likely that a national database would be required, rather than a series of local ones. This clearly affects decisions about the future of the Bridges Project, and the management group will be concerned about the relative importance of its other work as well as the extent to which a co-ordinating body is required to manage the database.

The aims of ISA commanded wide support among those interviewed for this research; its implementation in Leicestershire and Rutland has succeeded, at least to some extent, in improving communication and information sharing. However, the implementation of the database has met with numerous difficulties. The work of the Bridges team has been useful to many of those interviewed but there is widespread scepticism about whether it continues to be needed, not least because of the significant cost of a pilot that has been unable to meet all its original aims.

Wider concerns are also likely to affect the decision about the future of the project: whilst an effective ISA system may help co-ordinate work by agencies, the research literature and the field research for this study identify serious civil liberties issues which have yet to be addressed sufficiently. Given that nationally, the number of children likely to be placed on a fully operational ISA system would be approximately eleven million, there are practical as well as political and ideological issues involved.

Conclusion

It is clear from a number of respondents' comments that the wider work of Bridges has improved communications between the relevant agencies in Leicestershire and Rutland. Different professionals are also, it seems, becoming more aware of each other's jargon, and learning to distinguish between hunches and hard evidence about risk to children, while not discounting the former.

Much of the literature reviewed expressed concerns about the civil liberties implications of a shared database on every child in the country, and the agency representatives interviewed for the research expressed surprise that more public and media concern has not been generated by the trailblazers. However, this project has been piloted at a time when there are other major civil liberties issues being discussed in the media (the 'war on terror', identity cards and so on) and it may be that there is room for only a small number of such issues in the spotlight at any one time. In particular, concerns expressed by others who have written about the idea of a national database are echoed by respondents to the field research, especially in relation to the lack of clarity about what happens to data years after they are collected, and when outdated information will be amended or removed from the database.

It is clear from the literature that there is widespread concern about what a number of authors see as a lack of 'joined-up government' in relation to databases in particular, with different government departments sponsoring a range of experiments, and this is echoed in respondents' concerns about confusion caused by a plethora of central government initiatives, and the waste of public funds which this may involve.

In conclusion, it would seem that whilst an effective ISA system may help co-ordinate work by agencies, there are serious civil liberties issues such as access to personal data and the removal of information stored on the database that are yet to be addressed sufficiently. This is particularly important as the number of children who were thought to be at risk and so were placed on the child protection register in 2003 was 26,600, however the number of children likely to be placed on a fully operational ISA system would be approximately eleven million. The database would therefore seem to be more than simply a safety net for identifying vulnerable children and the 'swamping' issue would appear to be a real concern: how can agencies pay attention to eleven million records?

It is also interesting to note the point made by Hill (2003), that the ISA system would not have saved Victoria Climbié, whose tragic death again sparked the child protection debate, as children who are immigrants would not appear on the database. On a more practical level, the separate introduction of the ISA and RYOGENS databases demonstrates the lack of joined-up thinking and action by a Government which is in turn trying to introduce joined-up working by agencies, at a potentially huge cost to the tax payers. Ten and a half million pounds has been spent on the trailblazers so far (Down, 2005). This is contrary to the point that the biggest issue in cases where children had died whilst agencies were aware of them, was the break down of communication between the professionals involved. What was missing was professionally integrated action. Without tackling this, the introduction of a potentially flawed information system may not be enough to prevent the next tragedy.

References

- Ayre, P. (2001) 'Child Protection and the Media: Lessons from the Last Three Decades', *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, pp. 887- 901.
- Bachmann, R. and Schutt, R.K (2001) *The Practice of Research in Criminology and Criminal Justice* California: Pine Forge Press.
- Bailey, R. and Williams, B. (2002) *Inter-agency Partnerships in Youth Justice – Implementing the Crime & Disorder Act 1998*, University of Sheffield Social Service Monographs-research in practice.
- Carvel, J. (2004a) 'All eyes on the child'
<http://societyguardian.co.uk/children/story/0,,1219380,00.html>
- Carvel, J (2004b) 'Society: Calculating risk: some schools, medical staff and police are already pooling information about local children. But can protection be offered to the vulnerable without infringing civil liberties', *The Guardian*, 28/4/04, p. 10.
- Children Bill - an overview (2003) *childRIGHT 202 December 2003*.
- Club UK Online 'The Children's Bill 2004'
<http://www.clubukonline.co.uk/legal-update/legaldetail.asp?offset=20&id=283>
(accessed 1/12/04).
- Cross, M. 'All Systems Go for Child Protection'
<http://societyguardian.co.uk/e-public/story/0,,1309355,00.html>
- Children and Young People's Unit website www.cypu.gov.uk (no longer accessible online).
- DFES (2005) 'Fact Sheet: Information Sharing'

- http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/05BA857391D0882FCD4DA7CAF06E6A01.doc (accessed 8/9/05).
- Down, G L (2005) 'Nanny State Too Far?' *The Times Online*
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-61-1755588,00.html> (accessed 8/9/05).
- Explanatory Notes to Children Act 2004
http://www.hmso.gov.uk/cgi-bin/htm_hl.pl?DB=hmsonew&STEMMER=en&WORDS=victoria+climbi+&COLOUR=Red&STYLE=s&URL=http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/en2004/2004en31.htm (accessed 1/12/04).
- Hill, N. (2003) 'Civil Liberty: Under Surveillance'
http://www.ypnmagazine.com/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=full_news&ID=2606 (accessed 1/12/04).
- Hill, R. Jones, S. Roberts, C. and Baker, K. (2004) *An evaluation of the early application and piloting of RYOGENS*, University of Oxford.
- Holland, S. and Scourfield, J. (2004) 'Liberty and Respect in Child Protection', *British Journal of Social Work*, 34, pp. 21- 36.
- Hudson, B. (2004) 'Willing. . . But Able?', *Community Care*, 17-23 June, 2004.
- Liberty (2004) The Children Bill: Liberty briefing for the second reading in the House Of Commons
<http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/resources/policy-papers/2004/children-bill-2nd-commons.pdf> (accessed 25/11/04).
- Ling, M.S and Luker, K.A (2000) 'Protecting children: intuition and awareness in the work of health visitors' *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 32, 3, pp. 572- 579.
- NSPCC website (undated) 'Summary of child protection register statistics'
www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/Statistics?CPR.asp (accessed 13/1/05).
- Pain, R, Uprichard, E and Warren, J (2004) *Lifemapping: trajectories of exclusion and young people's views on Identification, Referral and Tracking (IRT)*, The University of Durham.
- Reder, P and Duncan, S. (2003) 'Understanding Communication in Child Protection Networks', *Child Abuse Review*, 12, pp. 82- 100.
- Roberts, Y (2004) 'A coercive attitude towards families may undermine schemes to give children a better start', *Community Care*, 13-19 May, 2004.
- Rogers, J (2003) 'Government plans to set up national child database must overcome serious problems'
<http://www.computerweekly.com/articles/article.asp?liArticleID=126324&liArticleTypeID=20&liCategoryID=2&liChannelID=28&liFlavourID=1&sSearch=&nPage=1#> (accessed 24/11/04).
- Ryogens (2004) 'FAQ's' <http://www.ryogens.org.uk/faqs/faqs.html#fullIRT> (accessed 1/12/04).
- Salari, N (2004) 'Child Protection - Tracking plans risk putting parents off seeking support', *Community Care*, 15-21 April 2004.
- Seaford, H (2001) 'Children and Childhood: Perceptions and Realities', *The Political Quarterly*, 72, 4, pp. 454- 465.
- Singleton, R. (2004) 'Front Line Sags in Backroom Battles', *Community Care*, 3-9 June 2004.
- Sure Start Newsletter June/ July 2004.
www.daycaretrust.org.uk/mod/fileman/files/New_Partners_issue_33_v3.pdf (accessed 25/11/04).
- Templeton, J (2004) 'Why Every Child's Rights Matter', *childRIGHT* 207, June 2004.

- Thompson, P. and Coughlan, J. (2004) 'Next Steps to a Better Outcome', *Community Care*, 29 April - 3 May, 2004.
- Truman, P (2004) 'Problems in identifying cases of child neglect', *Nursing Standard*, 18, 29, pp. 33- 38.
- Ward, L (2004) 'Flags on concern' on child database', *The Guardian*, 28/10/04, p. 7.
- Winnett, R and Leppard, D (2004) 'All children to go on 'big brother' computer', *Sunday Times*, 25/7/04, p. 1.