

Children's Services: What is happening to SSRG members?

This article will explore the impact of changes in children's services to SSRG members resulting from the implementation of the Children Act 2004, and will consider what SSRG has to do to help influence those changes.

Many of our SSRG members are located in local authority social services departments involved in analysing and presenting information about planning, commissioning and evaluation of children's services. The impact of the Children Act 2004 is having a profound effect on those members day to day working lives.

Generally, the children's services parts of the old social services departments are amalgamating with old education departments to form new organisations. These organisations are acquiring various titles to describe their roles and functions. They all have a new Director of Children's Services, many of whom have been recruited from the old local education authorities.

A number of SSRG members working in research, planning and evaluation sections are being assimilated into these new organisations, and in some cases will be managed by people with education backgrounds, and are faced with the cultural challenges of accommodating other traditions and values while

maintaining the best of a social care perspective on the needs of children and young people. Partnership working can be both trying and time consuming.

New alliances are having to be formed and new ways of surviving are having to be found, because working with new colleagues from other professional backgrounds isn't always easy. They bring their own histories and views, and in many cases social services staff are feeling junior partners in what appears to be a dominant educational environment.



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Added to that, we are being asked to find new solutions to long standing problems. We are now being asked to

be more "outcome focused", to produce new performance management frameworks, more outcome focused performance indicators, more refined commissioning arrangements and new planning processes to help provide better services. New processes and systems, including CAF and ISA, are being introduced that will redefine the shape of management information systems now and in the future.

Some of us may find we have an unknowing or worse, unsympathetic manager, gaps may be forming, where retired or redundant ex colleagues used to provide sound advice, and therefore we are entering a "brave new world" where supportive reference points have all but disappeared. And worst of all, the new manager may not even be prepared to renew the SSRG subscription because they cannot see the relevance of this august body in helping deliver the change agenda.

For SSRG the challenges run in parallel to these experiences. Putting to one side the need to reflect on our name, we need to form

Children's Services: What is happening to SSRG members? cont.

new alliances with education research network organisations. There are a lot of them around with a longstanding research pedigree.

There is BERA, the British Education Research Association, a national education academic network (the website address is www.bera.ac.uk). In February a number of us are attending an event in Birmingham run by the local authority group of BERA to explore common research interests.

Another organisation of 60 years standing is NFER, the National Foundation for Education Research, see www.nfer.ac.uk, telephone 01753 574123. They have offices, staff and a comprehensive research programme, and they house EMIE, Education Management Information Exchange, founded in 1981 and providing helpful information about the education world. Another education research organisation we have recently discovered is the LEA Research Group who organise events for education planners.

As well as forming alliances with education research networks, SSRG also needs to cultivate more contacts with colleagues in DfES

where there are a number of initiatives concerned with research, evaluation and performance management.

In addition, our long standing alliance with ADSS is having to be re-positioned with the emerging Confed, which is becoming the rallying point for Directors and senior managers for children's services. See www.confed.org.uk tel 0161 275 8810. A number of us are attending their national annual conference on 27th January, and the new President will be sharing a platform with the new ADSS President at our annual workshop in Oxford in March this year.

We need to do more in SSRG. A group of Executive Members are spending time trying to chart the new world of children's services. We are committed to operate on three fronts over the coming months. Those are:

- Building new alliances with the organisation mentioned above to make sure the social care research voice is heard and represented in children's services.
- Advising SSRG members of developments and changes in the children's services research world, and drawing on some of

our allies such as NCB and Research into Practice to help keep an eye on the changes.

- Working with our members to make sure our publications and events are relevant to your day to day concerns and preoccupations.

We need to use our SSRG network to share people's experiences of these changes and find ways of making sure solutions are found, and shared, to address the challenges for children's services planning, research, evaluation and performance management.

One suggestion is that a group of us gather at the next Annual Workshop in Oxford to discuss what we can do collectively. In the meantime please contact me on davidallan@warwickshire.gov.uk to tell me what you think.

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