

## **Guest Editorial**

Welcome to the Winter 2008 edition of *Research, Policy and Planning*, providing an Anglo-Welsh theme to research into the effectiveness of services for vulnerable children and their families. The four articles and the short report have opened my eyes to the treasure trove of knowledge, ideas and opportunities for improvement which robust research provides us. I am also struck by how child centred research can cross the boundary between child and adult services and, in an environment of increasing divergence between the policy agendas in England and Wales, a timely reminder that research also crosses this boundary and we can continue to learn from each other's experiences.

Working with people during traumatic periods in their lives and enabling them to find resolution is fundamental to social work. Emily Warren and colleagues explore a pilot programme for family dispute resolution. The four areas addressed make this important reading for all professionals because we recognise how difficult it can be to engage with people when automatic trust is not present and how positive the outcomes are when it works. We also know how, as professionals, we make assumptions and forget how often these prove to be flawed but can have serious consequences. The inherent tensions involved in trying to achieve a balance between enablement and enforcement is another day to day challenge with possibly the most challenging aspect of the role actually getting the views of the child, or indeed those of any vulnerable person, when others deny access.

Darrell Fox follows with an article concerning Family Group Conferencing with particular reference to restorative justice. Family Group Conferencing has many of the challenges explored in the previous article with the tension between enablement and enforcement being more evident. Today we are expected, quite rightly, to deliver our practice and interventions in ways that have been tested and are supported by evidence. Within social work this has proved difficult to achieve and Fox argues that research will not provide all the answers to practice questions and that we need to develop an approach which is evidence informed and knowledge based. This is not an insignificant challenge in its own right and, as Fox concludes, we in public services must continue working in the absence of good quality empirical research but at the same time continue to learn from practice and experience.

Clive Downs builds upon the theme that it is our responsibility to base policy on the evidence of effectiveness of the services we provide by exploring the world of data analysis. His article on the educational attainment of children in care re-introduced me to event history analysis and reminded me of the power of statistical tools in enabling customer-focused planning and service delivery. It re-enforces the need for, and the power of, robust knowledge in order to inform both policy and practice. Clive challenges us to learn from the approaches and tools used by others and to discard our comfort blanket that it is simply too difficult to achieve this in social care because of the complexity of the world in which we believe we operate.

In her exploration of the nature and availability of child level data on children in need for use by practitioners and managers, Samantha McDermid contributes to the current debate the role and impact of recording data on the time available to practitioners to work directly with children and their families. As a Director, I found it very helpful to be reminded that data collection is about guiding key social care processes and not about keeping practitioners from service users. However, in order to achieve this, social workers must be enabled to make the link between the data they are recording to their own practice and service provision. Furthermore, her message that the most effective data gathering is found where both

practitioners and managers develop a learning culture, in which the ability and willingness to use data to inform practice and planning are encouraged, is one that we need to take on board by accepting that it is our responsibility to ensure that our organisational cultures support colleagues in achieving this.

In her short report, Jane Held provides a position statement on the progress to date on the “Narrowing the Gap” project concerning the life chances of vulnerable children and their peers, together with details of the next steps for the project to June 2009. Jane provides the reader with a fitting climax to this edition as making a significant difference to the outcomes for vulnerable and excluded children has been a theme throughout all the articles and helps us all keep the faith with *Every Child Matters* in England and *Rights to Action* in Wales.

Finally, this edition contains reviews on six books. Having read through all the articles I am particularly interested in exploring further the role of research in ‘Using Evidence: How Research can Inform Public Services’.

*Research Policy and Planning*, the Journal of the Social Services Research Group, provides a truly valuable resource thanks to the subscriptions to the journal by a mainly local authority membership together with the articles and reports contributed by their staff, service users and academic researchers. I hope that you enjoy this issue and that you, like me, are signed up to *Research Policy and Planning*, the Journal that speaks for and about social care and social work.

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