The Turn Towards Privatisation of Services for Looked After Children: Findings from the National Evaluation of Social Work Practices

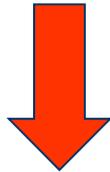## Nicky Stanley, and Jill Manthorpe

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SOCIAL
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UNIT

Genesis of Social Work Practices

Reaction against bureaucracy
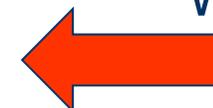and prescription
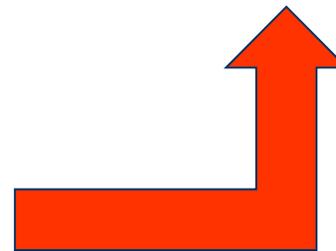
Promotion of
social enterprises

Concern about

lack of continuity

for LAC

SWPs

Workforce

retention

Coalition commitment
to reduce public sector

Privatisation of children's social services in England and Wales

- Outsourcing limited to specific services – residential care, fostering agencies
- NSPCC - Authorised Persons Status, now out of use
- CYPA 2008 – permitted LAs to transfer responsibilities for LAC to independent social work led organisations, 5 year period for piloting and evaluation
- 2013 – DfE consultation on changes to delegation and inspection of services to LAC

US Picture

- 1997: Kansas & Florida privatise all foster care

- 2000 – over 50% states had a privatisation initiative underway, usually contracting with not-for-profit organisations

- Remains a mixed economy – 2006 – majority of states retain case management of child welfare services in the public sector

- Steen and Smith (2012) US review:

'*successful agencies exist in both public and private sectors …success is not inherently connected to any organizational type*' (p. 857).

5 SWP pilots established 2009-10

- 2 managed by voluntary organisations:

- one, new staff recruited to SWP

- other, voluntary org already providing care leavers service in LA

- 2 professional partnerships

- one private business, new staff recruited

- other, social enterprise, staff and children moved out of LA together

- 1 remained within the local authority –

in-house model

December 2012

- Two SWPs did not have contract renewed – children returned to LA care
- Care leavers service continues to be managed by NGO but not as SWP
- In-house model continues as a distinct and separate service within the LA but no longer as SWP
- Social enterprise SWP continuing
- Two new SWPs for children have started up – Bristol and Norfolk
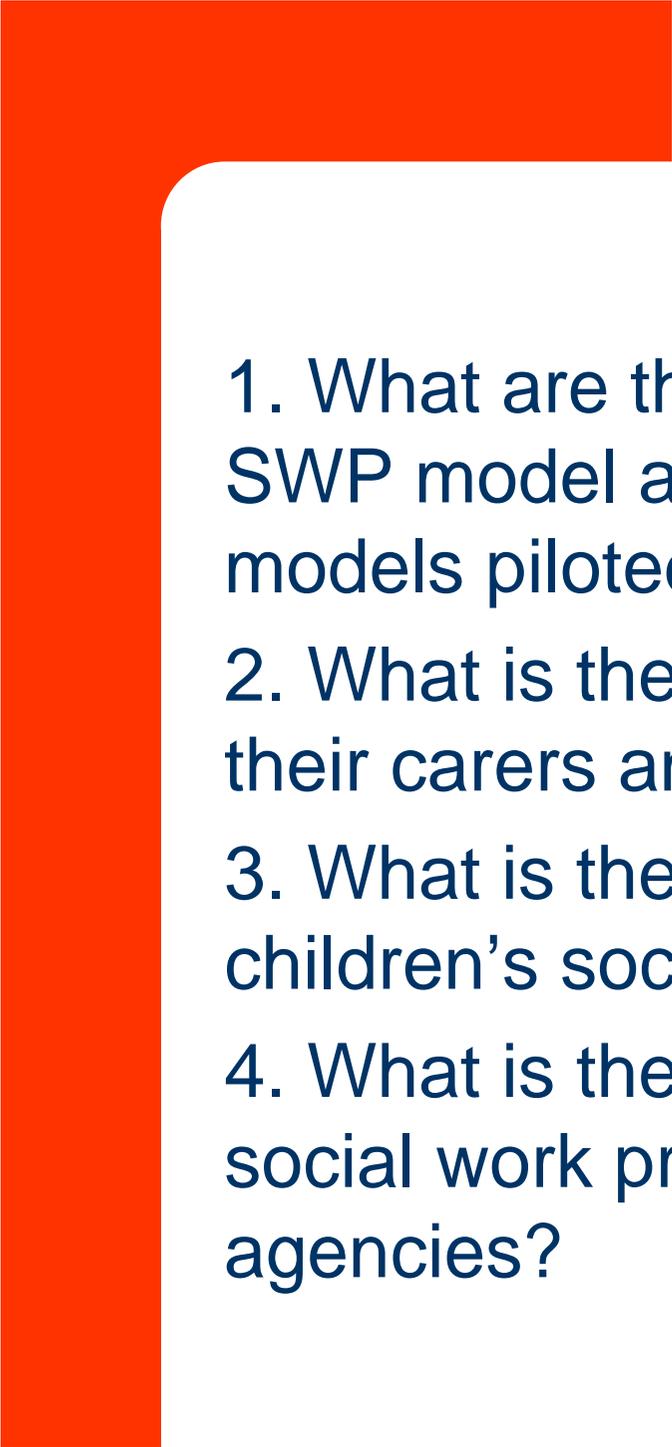
Key Evaluation Questions

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the SWP model and the benefits of the different models piloted?

2. What is the impact of SWP pilots on children, their carers and their families?

3. What is the impact of the SWP pilots on the children's social care workforce?

4. What is the impact of the pilots on child care social work practice in the authorities and on other agencies?

Evaluation Design and Data

- Matched control study - 5 pilot sites & 6 matched comparison sites

- 225 interviews with LAC in SWPs and comparison sites (56 interviewed twice in SWPs); 19 SWP parents interviewed

- Interviews with SWP staff, LA commissioners; IROs; other professionals; EAG members; children involved in governance

- 40 care plans analysed

- Secondary data on SWP and comparison children (903 data) and SWP workforce

- On-line baseline survey at 2 timepoints of over 1000 staff – SWPs, host & comparison sites.

- Carers' postal baseline survey at 2 timepoints - 1500 respondents in pilot & comparison sites

Relationship with Local Authority

- Close relationship with LA essential for start-up and survival of SWPs

- SWPs reliant on LAs for supervision, training, legal services, IT, out-of-hours services; premises & equipment; advice on complex cases

- Start-up, eg transfer of files, facilitated by previous close relationship

- Building trust takes time:

"Our managers have worked very hard to establish credibility with the local authority over the years..." (SWP staff)

Some Relationships Stronger than Others!

- Where SWP had previous established relationship with LA, pilot more likely to continue:

"If you were to analyse all the SWPs that are working very well it's because they have a good relationship with the local authority." (SWP Staff Member)

- In-house model never severed its ties with LA

- Prof partnership SWPs – most and least successful, distinguishing factor – quality of relationship with LA

- Doubtful whether SWPs would be viable in absence of LA support

SWP Finances

- Only one SWP controlled placement budget – risks involved

- Only 2 SWPs adopted payment by results – used in relation to savings on placements not outcomes for children

- LA commissioners did not consider that SWPs reduced costs:

"*we could have done it cheaper ourselves unfortunately*" (LA Commissioner)

Accessible Services

Round-the-Clock Accessibility

- Concept of 24/7 service proved a barrier to commissioning and staff recruitment

- By 2012, only two SWPs providing own out-of-hours service

- Children and young people reported making little use of out-of-hours services

- In both SWPs and comparison sites, children had informal contact with key staff by mobile out-of-hours

Small Is Beautiful?

- Children and parents valued being 'known' to staff
- Practitioners able to share information on cases so that families were familiar to them
- Other professionals found it easier to make relationships with a small team
- Small size made for heavy reliance on some key people and problems if they were not available
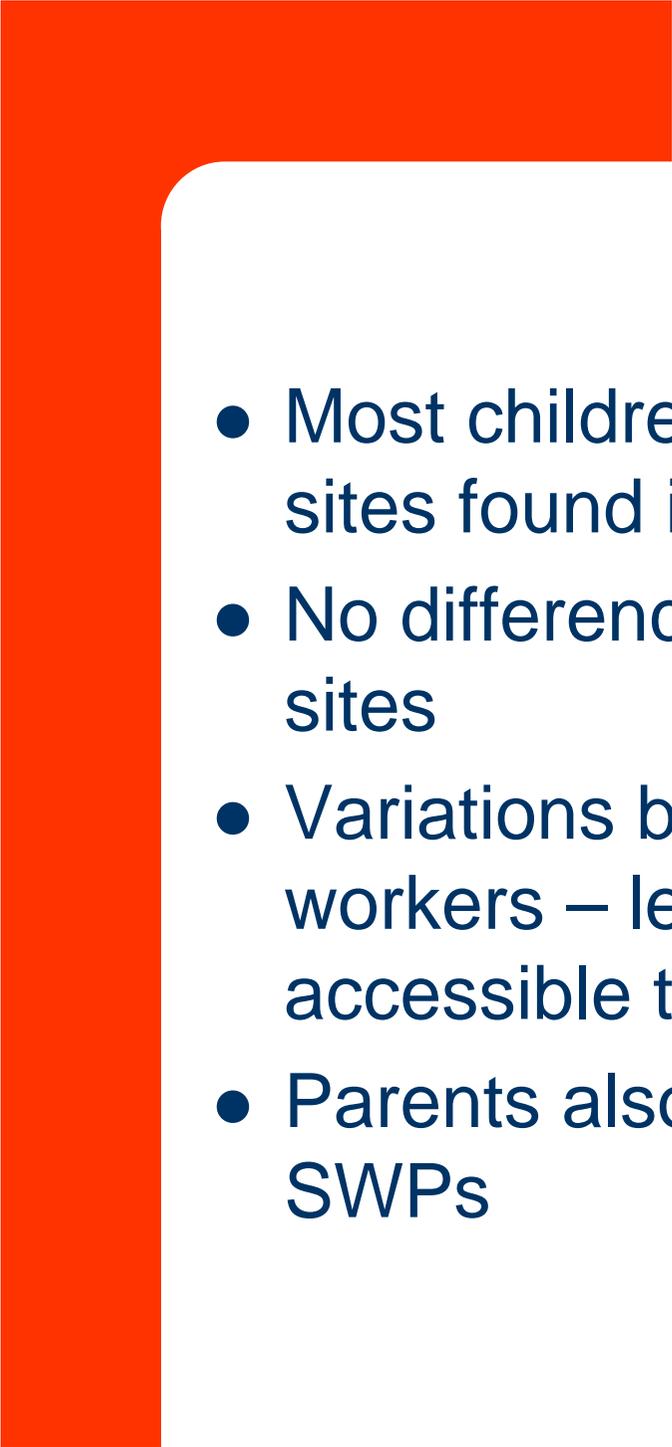- Small size made SWPs reliant on single contract with LA

Being known to staff

"So, they're all, they're all nice there, unlike [Social Services]. Like with [SWP] they're like 'Hiya [My Name], you alright?'. Do you know like right cheery and nice?"

(18 year old, female care leaver)

"…even the receptionist lady, I can phone her up and she knows who I am, I can speak to her about anything."

(SWP Parent)

Experiences of Worker Accessibility

- Most children in both SWP and comparison sites found it easy to contact their worker

- No differences between SWPs and comparison sites

- Variations between SWPs and between workers – leaving care workers more accessible than SWs - in this respect

- Parents also reported variations between SWPs

User Friendly Offices

User Friendly Offices

"*It's a friendly place, it's nice, really is, like they've got pool tables and sofas and kitchens and things like that there, so it's nice and friendly.*" **(15 year old, looked after girl, SWP)**

'It's less clinical…It's more of a homely place, you know, like the contact rooms are more, you know, which I think is good for the kids as well…it's not just white paint and cream paint… it's a lot better than any Social Services building I've ever been in'
(SWP Parent)

'…opening the building on a Saturday…this kind of creativity is really great…You couldn't open up a huge local authority on a Saturday morning.'
(SWP staff)

Relationships with workers

'I don't [know how to describe it, we're not mates, I know we're not mates because she's got to be professional. But, but at the same time like, I know I can talk to her about anything… she's always willing to listen, and at the same time she gets in touch with me, like, do you know what I mean? Like, with other Social Workers like, I've waited like different, like six months, seven months before.'

(16 year old, male care leaver, SWP)

- Vast majority said allocated workers **listened to them, cared about them and did their best** – no real difference between SWPs and comparison sites
- Examples in SWPs and comparison sites of workers who 'went the extra mile'.

Contact with Birth Families

- Overall more than two-thirds of children and young people described right amount of contact

- Dissatisfaction more evident among LAC than care leavers

- Slightly more children in comparison sites felt dissatisfied with arrangements for contact than in SWPs

- Variation between individual workers within an SWP

Carers' Perspectives

- Satisfaction with support received over contact particularly high among carers in those SWPs that prioritised work on contact.

- Carers looking after SWP children and young people significantly more likely to feel supported overall
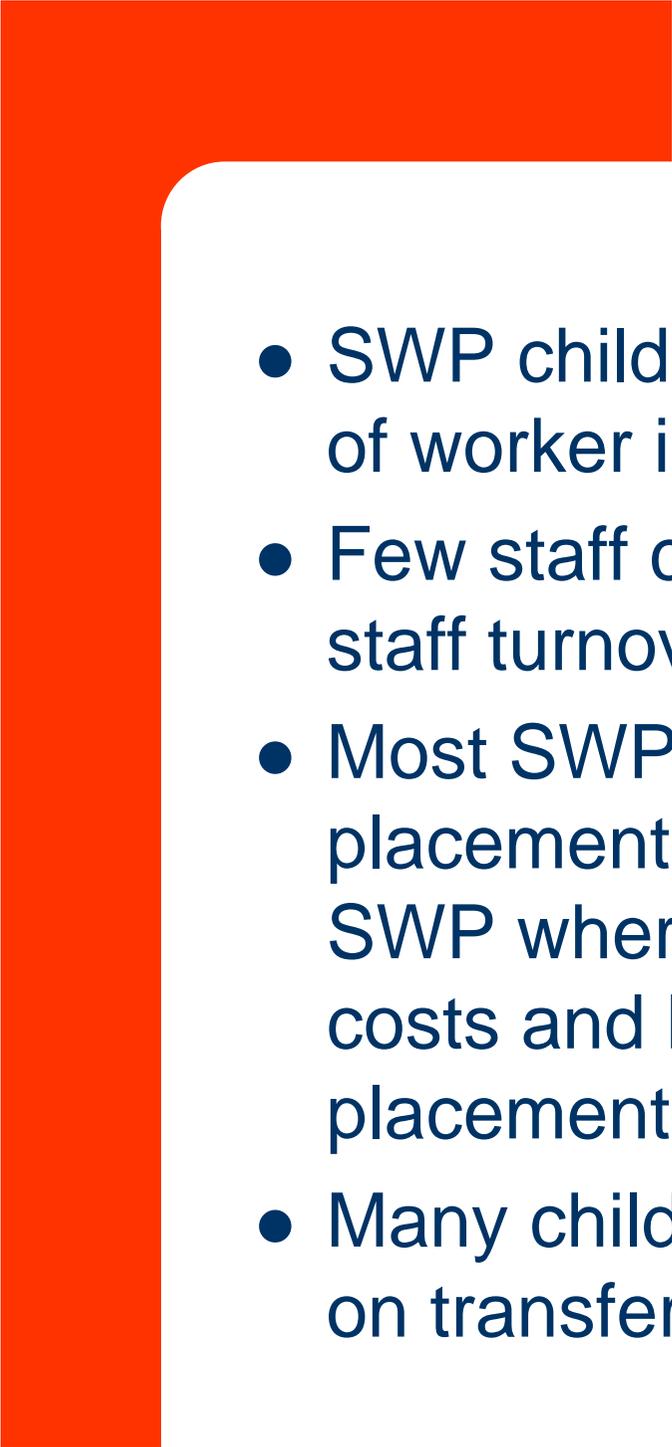
Continuity for Children and Young People

- SWP children more likely to report continuity of worker in the last year

- Few staff changes in 3 SWPs, but higher staff turnover in other two

- Most SWPs successful in reducing placement changes in first year but not in SWP where incentives to cut placement costs and high use of private sector placements

- Many children had changes of key worker on transfer in and out of SWPs

Choice re Move to SWP

- Mixture of those children who had some choice re move and those who had none

- Choice often uninformed/constrained:

"I would lose my Social Worker when I'm eighteen anyway I chose to keep like my PA because ...I'd known her" **(17 year old, looked after girl)**

- No choice:

"I think the Social Services doesn't really think about the kids, I think they just think about themselves because think about it, I knew X nearly all my life yeah, and then they just go and change it, they didn't think about the kids when they changed it, they just changed it"

(14 yr old, looked after boy)

Decision-Making

- SWP staff - reported shared responsibility for decision making made for speedier decisions

- Carers looking after SWP children more likely to say frontline staff able to take key decisions

- SWP children and young people more likely to describe quicker decision making but also more likely to describe delays

Staff Satisfaction

- SWP staff more likely to:
  - report sufficient time for direct work
  - agree with positive statements about workplace culture
  - feel that they were encouraged to undertake innovative practice & that mistakes were viewed as learning opportunities.
  - Score low on depersonalisation
- No differences found on decision latitude or on amount of time spent on administrative tasks
- SWP staff slightly more likely to report job insecurity

Factors underpinning staff satisfaction in SWPs

- Staff valued increased autonomy and flatter management structure (tho some variations and challenges)

- Increased opportunities for supervision and workplace support

- Smaller caseloads and restricted remit considered to increase opportunities for direct work

Building Blocks of a Successful SWP

Established relationship of trust with Local Authority

Spending enough time in direct work

Continuity of quality relationship

Focus on birth parents & contact

Accessible and welcoming building

Known to Team

Accessible staff

Conclusions

- Strength of partnership with LA key to SWP success- interdependency of public & private sectors
- Value of small, personalised and accessible service and user-friendly premises
- Mixed findings on SWP decision-making
- Management of contact – practice can be developed through agency commitment
- Mixed SWP achievements on continuity for LAC
- No differences between SWPs and controls in quality of relationships with children
- Smaller case loads and specialist function led to increased time for direct work with children and families.

Further Reading

Full report:

Stanley, N. et al (2012) **Social Work Practices: Report of the National Evaluation**
https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR233

Stanley, N. et al (2013) Turning away from the Public Sector in Children's Out- of-Home Care: an English Experiment. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 35, 33-39 http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.10.010

Stanley, N. et al (2012) Establishing Social Work Practices in England: The Early Evidence. *British Journal of Social Work*, doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcs101