Title: Case recording in child protection: An exploration of the evidence base and good practice.

Abstract: There is a statutory duty for all practitioners to record information in child protection work in England (HM Government, 2023). Case recording is a daily task for practitioners, yet an under researched area of practice. This continuing professional development (CPD) paper will consider the context in which case recording takes place, and highlight messages from child protection reviews and inquiries, before exploring learning from contemporary research. The complexities of case recording will be considered, and how practitioners can reflect upon and improve their daily case recording skills. Practitioners are encouraged to keep the child's views and experiences central and consider the long-term impact of case recording on adults who have experienced abuse and neglect in childhood.

Key words: case recording, recordkeeping, child protection, safeguarding, care experience, child looked after, abuse and neglect.

Key practitioner messages:

- Case recording is a complex and nuanced task, often missing the multiple perspectives inherent in a child's narrative.
- The views, experiences and identity of individual children and young people can be lost in case recording, especially for very young children, older children and those in sibling groups.
- Case recording has a support function for care experienced adults to understand their childhood histories, aiding recovery from abuse and neglect.

Introduction:

Case recording is an under-researched area of practice, yet an activity which takes place on a daily basis for practitioners working in child protection. Serious Case reviews (SCRs) and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) have highlighted over many years that missed opportunities to record and share information in a timely way has had serious consequences for the safety and welfare of children and young people (Sidebotham et al, 2016; Dickens et al, 2022). This continuing professional development (CPD) paper will provide reflection on the complexities of case recording for all practitioners working in child protection, especially social workers. It will consider how practitioners can improve their daily case recording skills, to keep the child's voice central. Although the research explored here is largely based on the social work profession, there are useful learning points for all practitioners who case record in child protection work.

Context setting:

Case recording is a term often used interchangeably with 'recordkeeping' or 'social work writing'. 'Case recording' will be used here to include the running record of information and action, summaries, assessments, reviews and plans held within a child's social work case file (Jones, 2016), and any case recording completed by partner agencies working in child protection. Case recording can be electronic, or paper based, and sometimes a hybrid of two. It can go beyond written notes to also

include photographs, drawings, diagrams, worksheets, audio or film (Muirhead, 2019).

There is a clear expectation in the statutory guidance in England for all practitioners working with children and families to record actions, recommendations, decisions and outcomes for children and young people (HM Government, 2023). Case recording is a crucial activity for all practitioners, and they are guided to gather, record and systematically check information, discussing with children and families as required (HM Government, 2023). Research suggests administrative tasks, including case recording, range from approximately a quarter to 60-80% of a social worker's time (Holmes and McDermid, 2013; BASW, 2020). Research studies are not easily comparable (Holmes and McDermid, 2013), but practitioners often underestimate how much time they spend on such tasks (Lillis et al, 2020). Arguably, case recording moves practitioners, especially social workers, away from direct work with children and families (Ferguson, 2017), and is often viewed as a time-consuming task, hindered by complex processes and systems (Muirhead, 2019). Practitioners can 'overlook the significance, value and complexity of case recording, and treat it merely as an administrative task' (Muirhead, 2019, pg. 11). In the independent review of England's child protection services, Munro (2011) stated that case recording is essential and 'its centrality in the protection of children cannot be over-estimated' (p. 111). The recent 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care' in England (MacAlister, 2022), 11 years later, emphasises that action is still required to improve case management systems and reduce repetitive administrative tasks to allow more time to be spent with families, echoing this longstanding challenge (White et al, 2010).

Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs), formerly Serious Case Reviews (SCRs), are conducted when children are fatally or severely harmed, and abuse or neglect has occurred or is suspected (HM Government, 2023). Although such reviews represent a small number of children and young people, and only occur where there has been a negative outcome, there are important lessons to be learned. Instances of poor case recording has been a continuous feature of SCRs, CSPRs, and national inquiries in the UK over many years (Laming; 2003; Locke, 2010; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022a; Dickens et al, 2022). Concerns have also been identified internationally, in countries such as Australia, where reviews and inquiries, together with research, has emphasised the 'deficiencies of recordkeeping' in child protection systems (Purtwell and Hawkes, 2023). Criticisms include inaccurate, minimal or missing information impacting interprofessional working and information sharing. Missed opportunities to record, understand the significance of information, and share this in a timely way 'can have severe consequences for children' (HM Government, 2023, pg. 18).

Language is crucial. Poor use of language can 'dilute' the child's experiences impacting on effective safeguarding: 'vague, stock phrases and jargon can minimise or obscure the reality of a child's life' (Brandon et al, 2020, p. 20). Euphemistic or misleading language was a theme identified by SCIE and NSPCC in their 'Learning into Practice' project analysing 38 serious case reviews (SCIE, 2016). There were instances where language did not capture the lived reality of the child. For example,

the word ‘grubby’ was used to describe a home smeared in dog faeces and a young person, was described by her mother as having ’15-20 sexual partners’, which was recorded by the practitioner (SCIE, 2016), rather than ‘sexually exploited by 15-20 people.’ This lack of accuracy, challenge and analysis can seriously minimise the risks to the child or young person. Practitioners may use such language for fear of damaging relationships with families; to sanitise uncomfortable situations for themselves; or use words and phrases they perceive to be ‘professional’, which however, add very little meaning (SCIE, 2016).

Listening to and hearing the voice of the child and taking their views into account is embedded in England within the Children Acts 1989 and 2004, and the associated statutory guidance (HM Government, 2023). Yet the child’s voice is not always evident in case recording. Practitioners do not always obtain and record a full understanding of the child’s lived experiences (Radford, 2010; Bernard and Harris, 2016; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022b). Reviews also consistently highlight a lack of professional curiosity about the ‘cultural and ethnic context’ for the child (Bernard and Harris, 2019, pg. 259).

In the longer term, case recording is essential in supporting adults who have experienced abuse and neglect as children. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) emphasised that access to records has a ‘clear support function’ (Jay et al, 2022, pg. 262). Victims and survivors consider their recovery dependent on a comprehensive understanding of their history and case records play a district role: ‘Records about someone’s life are key to them understanding life narrative, creating integrity of experience, building self-esteem and can also have the power to create new meanings for life events’ (Who Cares? Scotland, 2019, pg 3).

A recent Australian study by Hawkes et al (2024) identify the impacts of poor case recording for children in a child protection context include ‘hindering access to preventative, appropriate or culturally supportive services; preventing early responses to child abuse and neglect; contributing to and resulting in fatal or serious outcomes for children; and having implications for lifelong access to records’ (pg. 4). Case recording is therefore an important, contemporary and complex area of practice.

Brief Summary of evidence base:

There is a body of existing research which helps us understand the current evidence base, and 3 useful research studies will be explored. Firstly, Lillis et al’s (2017) 3-year study in the UK in relation to social work writing, conducted practitioner interviews in five local authorities. 71 social workers were interviewed. This was alongside 10 weeks of researcher observations, and analysis of 481 days of social work activity logs and 4608 texts. Although not exclusively within children’s social work services, as this research also included adult social work and mental health social work too, the data did identify a number of paradoxes within social work writing or case recording as a whole. Social workers engaged in a variety of written tasks on a daily basis, yet were ‘urged not to make writing the centre of their practice’; social workers considered writing an important aspect of their work, but expressed frustration at the time this takes; and the complexity of writing is ‘highly

visible' to social workers and researchers, but remains 'largely invisible in policies underpinning social work provision and professional registration' (Lillis et al, 2017, p. 46-47).

In relation to the child's voice, Ogle et al (2022) analysed 114 case records relating to 28 children and young people between the ages of 2.5 years and 16 years subject to a child protection plans, in the North of England. Methodologically, they used critical social work theory and critical discourse analysis, and four dominant 'actors' were identified. Children under the age of 5 years were the most likely not to have their wishes and feelings sought and recorded, justified on the grounds of young age (the too-young child). There were few direct references to the child's perceptions of their circumstances, especially over the age of 13 years wherfe there were concerns regarding child sexual exploitation (the at-risk child). The identity was lost for a number of children, where they were not mentioned by name, were collectively mentioned as part of a sibling group, or the recording for the child was left blank (the ignored child). Finally, the author of the case record, usually the social worker, was also present due to the language they chose to use (the author of the case record) (Ogle et al, 2022, p. 280-282). Although this study was within one locality in England, findings support the 'dominant discourse of the unseen or unheard child' (Ogle et al, 2022, p. 280), which is evident in the wider literature (Ferguson, 2017).

For care experienced people, the case record may be the only written information they can access which explains important life events and professional decision-making. What practitioners write today may have a profound impact many years into the future (Shepherd et al, 2020). Case records are critical, both in relation to safeguarding children in care and throughout their lives (Hoyle et al, 2019). One useful example is the *MIRRA* (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) project, which conducted interviews and focus groups with more than 80 care leavers, social work practitioners and information professionals in England, bringing together different communities of expertise (Shepherd et al, 2020). They found case files 'fail to account for the multiple viewpoints inherent in a child's narrative, only capturing organisational, subjective, biased or prejudicial perspectives' (Shepherd et al, 2020, p. 311). Care-experienced people accessed records in the hope of making sense of their lives but were 'shocked by how divergent the "paper self" was from their own sense of self' (Hoyle et al, 2020, p. 942). Wider research on access to records in countries such as Australia and Canada show these concerns are global, with the voice, experiences and feelings of the child rarely present (Shepherd et al, 2020). A literature review conducted by Coram Voice with the University of Bristol (2015) highlighted care experienced young people are often frustrated that there are gaps in information, emphasising regret at 'how little personal information was stored such as photos and family mementos' over time (Coram Voice, 2015: 15). This issue was also highlighted in the MIRRA project.

As we can see, there are multiple purposes and functions of case recording and competing demands in child protection. Case recording is a practitioner tool for case analysis; the basis of information sharing in interprofessional working; necessary for organisational and external audit; and ultimately for the child or young person,

including their right to access records potentially many years into the future (O'Keefe and Maclean, 2023). This inevitably causes tensions and dilemmas for practitioners.

Summary of key learning points for practice

The research base emphasises the complexities and challenges of case recording in a changing social landscape, with a need for policies to reflect this. Time for busy practitioners is of course a barrier, and there is no easy remedy to this. However, case recording is 'not only a tool to *record* practice, but also a tool *for* practice' (Rai and Lillis, 2021: 104). Lord Laming, in his inquiry of the death of Victoria Climbie (2003), shared this view: 'The case file is the single most important tool available to social workers and their managers when making decisions as to how best to safeguard the welfare of children under their care' (pg. 6). Case recording encourages and supports reflection, analysis and decision making (O'Keefe and Maclean, 2023).

Practitioners must ensure each child they are working with, particularly within sibling groups, has their individual views and experiences recorded, paying attention to their cultural needs. This is especially important for young children under 5 years, and older children over 13 years (Ogle et al, 2022). Multiple perspectives are also important. Different players, including the child, young person, their family members and practitioners, will have individual perspectives, and it is important to include this diversity. A professional opinion is valuable, but practitioners should make their views explicit and not the whole narrative, to reduce bias, prejudice and balance power. Although outside of the scope of this paper, it is important to highlight that relationship building, participation and involvement of children and young people in decision-making is crucial in child protection (Diaz, 2020). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) sets out the right for children and young people to express their views and for these views to be taken seriously, and partnership with families underpins the Children Act 1989. Practitioners have a duty to ensure these views are recorded thoroughly and accurately to inform decisions which affect the child's life. Children and young people may also wish to co-produce case recording, such as assessments, reports and plans. Practitioners could consider more creative methods, such as pictures, photographs, visual/audio recordings, as well as the traditional written word (O'Keefe and Maclean, 2023).

The language chosen is central to the task: 'Words are powerful. Chosen well, words can empower and encourage. However, chosen carelessly, they can create stigma, barriers to understanding, or even cause offence' (O'Keefe and Maclean, 2023, page. 41). Those who access their files, sometimes decades later, may rely on information to understand key events in their lives and help them recover from traumatic childhood experiences. Case recording needs to be accurate, accessible, strengths based and kind. Care experienced people value records which include personal mementos and photographs, encouraging practitioners to be creative and thoughtful, working alongside the child or young person.

Test your knowledge

Part 1:

Q1: What percentage of a social worker's time is spent on administrative tasks, including case recording? How does this impact on practice?

Q2: What do Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs), formally Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) tell us about case recording?

Q3: Which recent national inquiry states access to records has a 'clear support function' for adults who have experienced abuse as children?

Q4: What do Hawkes et al (2024) share are some of the impacts of poor case recording for children in a child protection context?

Part 2: This is an extract from a child protection report presented to an initial child protection case conference:

The three girls are very close and look out for one another. Due to the level of neglect within the family home, Somaya (9 years) appears to care for her younger sisters by helping them get dressed for nursery and school and will make simple meals. Mum is very depressed. She has stopped taking prescribed medication and refuses to see her mental health practitioner or family doctor. Mum has detached herself emotionally from the girls and does not show any love or affection, except sometimes to the youngest. Mum is struggling to do any household tasks. The home is becoming more and more cluttered and unhygienic. The children do not have any relatives in the area. Dad continues to work long hours and does not see the concerns of professionals. He does get the children to and from school, as he works as a self-employed taxi driver. Dad can be angry with professionals and says he wants the family to be 'left alone'. I worry about him being angry with the girls. Somaya is very mature for her age and this may be due to her cultural heritage. Somaya wants to be a nurse when she grows up.

- How might you improve the extract of this report based on your learning?
- What changes would you make to the language used?
- How might you feel reading this extract as Somaya or the two younger children accessing their case records as adults?

Reflection

As we can see, case recording is not a straightforward or simple task. There are layers of intricacy and nuance. Practitioners working in child protection need to consider the purpose and impact of what they record, both now and in the long term. As a final reflection, consider your learning overall, and look back at examples of your own case recording to critically reflect on how you could improve this. How will you share your learning and reflections with colleagues in your field?

Selected references and links to other resources

The following sources are useful to learn more in this area of practice:

Hoyle, V., Shepherd, E,. Lomas, E. and Flynn, A. (2020). Recordkeeping and the life-long memory and identity needs of care experienced children and young people. *Child and Family Social Work,* 25 (4), pp. 935-945.

Lillis, Theresa., Leedham, Maria and Twiner, Alison (2020). Time, the Written Record, and Professional Practice: The Case of Contemporary Social Work. *Written Communication*, 37(4) pp. 431–486

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Shepherd, E., Hoyle, V., Lomas, E. Flynn, A. and Sexton, A. *(2020).* Towards a human-centred participatory approach to child social care recordkeeping. *Archival Science,* 20, pp. 307–325.

The project 'Writing for Social Work (WiSP)' has a number of relevant publications and resources and can be accessed at: https://www.writinginsocialwork.com/

Footnote (notes on the 'test your knowledge')

Part 1

A1: This can be difficult to quantify, but some research suggests that up to 60-80% of a social worker's time can be spent on administrative tasks, including case recording, and this is often under-estimated by practitioners. The administrative part of the role impacts on the direct work with children, young people and their families.

A2: Poor case recording has been a continuous feature of Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) and Serious Case Reviews (SCRs). Inaccurate, minimal and missing information impacts on effective information sharing and interprofessional working. Language can be recorded inaccurately, be misleading or euphemistic, minimising the risks to the child. This ultimately can have severe consequences for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

A3: The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) led by Professor Jay (2022).

A4: Hawkes et al (2024) share impacts of poor case recording as including:

- Hindering access to preventative, appropriate or culturally supportive services;
- Preventing early responses to child abuse and neglect;
- Contributing to and resulting in fatal or serious outcomes for children,
- Having implications for lifelong access to records

Part 2: *The extract from the child protection report is only brief, but there are clear improvements which can be made. The case recording does not differentiate between the two younger children, who will have their own individual experiences, wishes and feelings. They are referred to collectively as the 'younger sisters'. Words such as 'cluttered' and 'unhygienic' are euphemistic and meaningless, very much open to interpretation, which potentially minimise the risks to the children. This may be deemed judgmental by the family. Consider your specific observations when writing about home conditions and ensure they accurately describe the risks. There is some reference to the family's culture, but their background and identity is not clear to the reader, and there are assumptions made about Somaya's maturity possibly being due to her cultural heritage. Parents' and younger siblings' names are not used making the record feel impersonal. The phrasing of the extract does not explicitly highlight the family strengths or help the reader understand the pressures on the family. There are professional observations and opinions included in the extract, about the father's anger and mother's depression, and the potential impact on the children. However, the children's voices and the parents' views of these professional concerns are not present. As we have learned multiple perspectives are crucial. It is unclear who Somaya has shared her views with and when, in the final sentence.*

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