

policy briefing

part of the **Living
Assessments**
project

Changing Narratives

Parents' experiences with
the social care system and
aspirations for change

by Lucy Evans

Purpose

This briefing presents a thematic analysis of seventeen online discussion sessions held with the Experts by Experience (EbyE) parents group as part of the Living Assessments project, summarising their insights. The experiences shared at the sessions included several recurring themes of discussion and aspirations for change. This document draws on these discussions to provide a comprehensive overview of these, along with concrete policy recommendations.

Living Assessments

Living Assessments is a five-year Wellcome Trust funded research project based jointly at the University of Kent, the University of Cambridge, and the National Children's Bureau (NCB), in conjunction with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). The project explores the experiences and impact of health and social care assessments on children and families.

Central to the Living Assessments programme is the inclusion of lived experience. NCB recruited three EbyE groups – comprising disabled children and adolescents, young care leavers, and parents of those who have undergone assessments – to ensure that those directly impacted by policies have a meaningful platform to share their stories. The project has worked to ensure the experiences of those affected are heard at the highest levels in government and to enable evidence-based changes to improve the lives of children and families involved in assessments. These children, young people, and parents have bravely shared their personal stories to help push for necessary change. Throughout the project, they have got involved in the research, advising decision-makers, and reviewing existing findings.



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Recurring themes

Five recurring themes emerged throughout our discussions with the EbyE parents group. While some of these themes reflected topics introduced into the discussion by researchers and NCB staff, others emerged through the parents' own experiences. All the themes described recurred in varying degrees across the course of the project, and they provide important insights for researchers, practitioners and policy makers to reflect on.

Relationship between parents and social workers

Over the years, parents regularly discussed their relationships with social workers. It is important to note that alongside the points raised below, parents also shared the positive experiences they had, including times in which they felt particularly supported by social workers.

Parents identified various barriers to developing constructive relationships with social workers. Discussions primarily focused on what parents described as a

power imbalance between themselves and social workers that sometimes left them feeling unable to affect outcomes for their own children and family. Parents reiterated that steps must be taken to shift this dynamic as the relationship with a social worker underpins a family's entire experience of the support they receive.

Parents noted that social workers should be acting as a buffer in the system and working to protect children and families. Yet it was often felt that they seemed to approach families with preconceived notions, instead of engaging in objective fact finding. Parents described sometimes feeling as if they were being viewed through a lens of suspicion rather than compassion, with one parent sharing that 'the worst thing I ever did was ask for help.'

Parents described a culture in which professionals seemed to treat them as if they were not doing what they should to support their own children, with categories such as a 'Child in

Need' resulting in further stigma. It was described how social care involvement could make you feel alone and exhausted, with parents unconvinced that social workers were always willing or able to understand these experiences.

Parents referred to the 'lanyard privileges' of social workers, and the ways in which parents could become 'easy targets' because they exist outside the professional network. Rather than focusing on building relationships with families and gathering their input, parents described how some social workers could appear duty bound to follow up referrals and to involve other professionals.

Ultimately, the social worker's professional opinion is the key evidence considered by a panel making life-changing decisions about families. Yet, some parents described feeling reluctant to challenge the decisions and actions of services, as they feared receiving further blame, or having their children taken off them. They expressed the difficulty of feeling afraid to disagree with a

professional who is meant to support and care for you.

Home

The home, both as a physical space and as a concept, was frequently touched upon throughout our sessions with parents. Overall, parents did agree that a home visit was a useful way for a social worker to get an idea of a family's living situation. However, the parents felt that having social care involvement in the home could alter its usual meaning of comfort and safety and transform it into a vulnerable space of public scrutiny, without any resulting support.

Parents spoke of how having social workers in the home could leave lasting effects of stress and fear for them and their children. One parent described how emotions were always high after social worker visits, with their children often in tears, and how they could be left with feelings of failure and self-loathing. Another told us how when social services were in their home, 'it felt like we were being violated' as they were told their home was not

good enough.

The home is potentially a space through which social services can quickly attribute parental blame and therefore could be seen as a 'tick box' method of judging how well a family is or is not coping. Some parents expressed their distress at social workers going through their bedrooms and agreed that this invasive practice should be stopped unless there is a significant safeguarding concern.

Involvement with social services can mean your home is held to a much higher standard than it would be for families who do not have this involvement. Again, parents spoke of how it appeared as though some professionals could have a preconceived judgement before entering a home. They felt the outcome of a home visit could therefore be dependent on the pre-existing ideas and intentions of the social worker and felt that if that if they wanted to find something negative, then they would. Parents shared that they felt social workers may be entering family homes with a 'deficit

model' approach and potentially seeking out issues to confirm existing preconceptions.

Social workers entering the home can also create what some parents may feel is 'no-win' situation. If their housekeeping is immaculate, for example, then they may be assumed to not need help. If the house is in a terrible state, on the other hand, parents may be viewed as incompetent and could be put under further scrutiny. Parents are therefore made to walk a tightrope and strike the difficult balance between proving competence but still feeling able to ask for the necessary support.

Systemic barriers and gaps in support

Parents told us there are currently huge gaps in support, with many children and families simply not accessing the services they are entitled to. Some specific gaps parents identified included delayed assessments, support declining as children get older and social care being too reliant on schools to provide support.

We were often told that ear-

ly help was not always as described. Many of the parents we spoke to felt that they didn't get the necessary support when they first needed it and now required more significant help. There was agreement in the group that early help should be individualised and timely and it shouldn't just be for younger children – appropriate support was needed for older children and teenagers too.

They felt that funding gaps had created a situation in which assessments could sometimes be done in a way that denied children and families access to the services they were entitled to. It was said that in these cases, the system was stacked against families if assessments were done in a way that avoided identifying and responding to an unmet need.

Often, too much responsibility is left to parents to fight for and co-ordinate support. There is a huge reliance on community and a family's own network to solve problems and support one another, with parents echoing each other's belief that the best source of information was always

other parents. The system can create a situation for families in which the provision of support is not necessarily based upon who needs it the most but rather on who can advocate for their child's needs best. It is therefore those who feel confident chasing and challenging services who may then get the better outcomes.

One of the parents' sessions was centred around a survey of interviews with parents of disabled children undertaken by the Postgraduate Medical Institution at The University of Exeter in 1978. Reflecting on its questions and answers, it was generally felt that this historic document revealed the decline in access to care and support that had occurred in the parents' lifetime. For example, parents said it would be very unlikely today to have one professional who knew your child well. This amplified the concerns raised earlier around parents' relationships with social workers, as current gaps in support mean that families are rarely matched with one consistent professional. Parents are therefore having to

'start all over again' and repeatedly try to form positive, trusting relationships with social workers who can feel like strangers.

Mental health

Parents explained that there was insufficient recognition of the connection between social service involvement and poor mental health, emphasising that engagement with services could potentially lead to trauma and mental health difficulties for both children and families.

The mental health of parents is so often neglected due to the needs of their child, with one parent describing how anxiety and depression was 'just a normal part of being a parent of a disabled child.' Yet, it was flagged that the social care system may create more distress for caregivers than the actual care for the child. Some parents described a constant battle to access the most basic support, having to re-tell the same stories on multiple occasions and wait for promised phone calls that never came. The mental health of siblings in the home is similarly overlooked. This

is particularly concerning for families in which the behaviour of a disabled child can impact their sibling's wellbeing and safety.

One parent spoke of how their whole family were left traumatised by social services, describing how desperately their daughter had wanted to hide when she saw their family support worker in the local shop. There are no services in place to support families or address any potential emotional damage experienced as they have moved through the social care system.

When parents ask for support, they are often asked about their mental health. As with home visits, this can appear almost as a trick question. Again, if a parent was to demonstrate perfect mental health, the standard of support could be lowered, yet if they appeared to be in very poor mental health, they could be at risk of having their children taken away.

Intersection of inequality

Parents spoke of how factors such as socio-economic status and gender can intersect to

worsen experiences of the social care system. They felt that the notion of 'good parenting' was largely determined by the beliefs and experiences of typically middle-class social workers. They described how the middle classes have raised the bar of 'good parenting' to include things like clubs, music lessons, and additional tutoring. Yet, these expectations were not realistic or achievable for families on lower incomes, and it would be unfair to hold them to the same standard.

Some parents described feeling that social workers may look down upon families living in poverty and could conflate this with neglect. On the other hand, parents expressed how if you were an educated and articulate individual, social workers might feel more able to relate to you and would possibly be more willing to support you.

Families felt they often had the wider context to their home situation overlooked by professionals. One parent shared their personal experience of not having

the means to build an appropriate wet room in the house, and so their child was getting bruised when taken in and out of the bath. This was then immediately perceived as neglect and abuse, and it took this parent three years and many proceedings to fight this assumption and get an appropriate wet room installed in their home.

Parents similarly highlighted the sexism that may infiltrate social work practice and places higher expectations on mothers, all whilst making them the focus of parental blame when issues arose. For example, one parent spoke of how a member of staff from the social care team suggested they gave up their career to care for their child and to complete all the housework, whilst appeal panel failed to ask why their husband was consistently absent.

Recommendations

Drawing on key insights from our discussions with parents, the NCB makes the following recommendations to government:

- **Make partnership with parent's default practice:** The Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 guidance states that all practitioners should work in partnership with parents and carers as far as possible, but this is not happening in practice. Driving forward the children's social care reforms, the Government should implement Family Group Decision Making to ensure that local authorities embed joint decision-making in all assessments and care planning. This will help equalise the power imbalance between practitioners and families, help build trust, and empower parents to challenge decisions and feel confident being advocates for the young people they know well. Systematically including parent/carer voices in case discussions and decision panels can allow social workers to develop more appropriate and effective methods of support. This can also reduce the risk of instances of parental blame in which those who are seeking help may be viewed as the problem.
- **Design support around each family and their individual needs:** By working with families and intentionally asking questions as about what the family thinks they need, social workers and other professionals can act as partners in families' lives. This would also be an effective way to ensure support is not simply given to those who are most able to advocate for themselves.
- **Guarantee early and continuous support for children of all ages:** The Department for Education should establish statutory minimum standards for timely and continuous support. This would help ensure families are not left waiting for information or assessments and continue to have support as their children grow older. The Government should further ensure that wherever possible, each

family can develop a relationship with a single and consistent social work professional. Many families 'fall through the gaps' of support, with long waits for assessments, help withdrawn as children grew older, and inconsistent provision across services, which prevents professionals from getting to know a family well. If a professional does have to move on, then a thorough handover must be completed, to avoid families having to re-share their experiences.

- **Fund a compassionate, skilled and trauma-informed social care workforce:** The Government should make trauma-informed, anti-poverty, anti-racist, gender and disability awareness training accessible for all social workers and encourage uptake at any stage of their career. When disadvantage is interpreted as neglect, families face further judgement, stigma or punishment when seeking help, partly due to gaps in training and limited resource. This would help social workers to be better equipped to understand

families' realities, prevent re-traumatisation, and provide support that addresses poverty and disability rather than mislabelling them as neglect. These changes should be accompanied by the provision of a range of appropriate mental health and wellbeing support for families involved with children's social care.

- **Ensure independent mediation between families and professionals:** The Government should ensure access to mediation to help avoid the escalation of disputes between families and professionals, particularly in decision-making processes. Parents described feeling powerless in these contexts, sharing how they can face institutional defensiveness, and can lack clear routes to resolve conflicts fairly. Independent mediation would help build families' confidence, trust, and create a fairer, less adversarial system where possible disputes can be resolved more constructively.