1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

As a result of high profile inquiries into non-accidental child deaths, most recently the case of Baby P., children’s social care services in the UK have been widely blamed for deficiencies in their policies, procedures and practices (e.g. Laming, 2003). As a result, children’s services departments have been subject to a range of measures designed to manage risks and reduce costs, including systems of regulation, proceduralization and metrics. These developments share obvious features with the broad swathe of reforms in public services making up New Labour’s modernization agenda. The re-configuration of professional work into formalized “business processes” and a talismanic faith in the power of information and communication technology (ICT) to enable radical organisational change are mutually reinforcing themes of the modernisation agenda. Such translation of professional practice into a range of standardised procedures, protocols, templates and timescales, aims both to produce an audit trail against which key performance targets may be measured, and to reduce variability and hence ‘error’ in human performance. This study, conducted in 5 local authorities in England and Wales, has sought to examine the impact of performance management on front line social work practice. The findings seriously challenge the notion that standardisation is the key to quality in the domain of child welfare. They show that the imposition of standard processes produces a range of unintended malign consequences, increasing the likelihood of error.

The study found that social workers at the front-door (in ‘referral and assessment teams’) faced particularly acute challenges arising out of the competing imperatives to safeguard children whilst at the same time minimizing the possibilities of error and blame for failing to meet performance targets. Managing and responding to some 300 referrals that on average face initial assessment teams every month is a complex activity that is not well understood, and has therefore been a priority for critical interrogation in our research. We found that the increasing regulation of timescales, format and processes for initial assessment created the ‘latent’ conditions for error, given that practitioners were required to exercise a range of not always constructive short-cuts to meet performance demands. In longer-term work, we found more space for ‘artful workarounds’ but practice – the scope for making intelligent, contingent and carefully thought out assessments was also constrained due to an often unforgiving performance management regime.

The work of supporting families and safeguarding children is inherently complex and context-dependent, and, as our empirical insights illustrate, practitioners’ situated work of managing risk comprises contingent acts of judgement, discretion and care, which cannot be reduced to standard formulas and algorithms. Whilst such technological paraphernalia may help legitimise an external image of social work as rational and
efficient, as we ideally expect of our public institutions, their potential for producing defensive practice, perverse incentives and stifling of 'outside the box' thinking cannot be underestimated.

The study has drawn attention to the artful work of practitioners to moderate or manipulate the regulatory systems in order, paradoxically, to offer a less risky service. However, professional discretion is under threat, given the e-configuration of procedure and protocol which render far more visible ‘non-compliant’ activity. Whilst the project set out to examine error, we found that error per se was little discussed by social workers or managers; however, risk, blame and the possibility of organizational sanctions were routinely invoked, with these anxieties exerting a pervasively negative impact on decision-making.

Based on the findings from the ethnography, a micro-world simulation has been developed, through which we have been able to study the contents of social workers’ and managers’ reasoning. The Microworld (known as Brigit – a loose acronym of the project title) guides subjects through a series of consecutive phases in relation to a specific child welfare or child protection case. Participants have access to a full portfolio of documentation relating to the case. Once the participants have made sense of the documentation in each phase of the simulation, they are set a problem to solve, typically involving a decision about what to do with a case involving a degree of conflict between child welfare and the use of resources. They are asked to record their appraisal and the reasoning underlying this decision. Some of these scenarios embody errors in the sense of developments that were not accurately appraised or reported by other professionals at the end of the foregoing phase. By asking users to comment on these errors, why they were made, how they arose and so on, it is possible to gauge characteristic patterns of moral reasoning and accounting, particularly attributions of blame and exoneration, including the impact of externalities such as performance targets and scarce resources. The experiment has provided a proof-of-concept for the microworld approach. It is noteworthy that Brigit is superior in certain respects to the systems currently deployed in many organisations. We attribute this to the fact that it has been designed with the end user in mind and has been subject to significant refinement through piloting work.

Our work shows that there are certainly more effective ways of effecting public sector reform than the top-down model of command and control that currently exerts such a significant impact on practice. The project has had significant influence in the aftermath of the death of Baby P. in November 2008 and subsequent media coverage of non-accidental child deaths and failures in the child protection system. These have brought the research to attention of politicians, policy-makers and the mass media. In addition, Sue White has been appointed to the Social Work Task Force, charged with addressing the whole range of issues relating to the future of social work in England. She continues directly to influence the policy agenda through this role and she is part of the Integrated Children’s System (ICS) subgroup of the task force charged with addressing the systemic problems created by its current design. Government has announced that there is to be a review of the ways in which systems of performance management and the practice model embedded in the ICS are affecting practice. The project has also enabled stronger relationships to be built between the participating agencies and the academic sites, and a range of dissemination activities have had a significant impact on practice development.