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## Information outputs for children's social services

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## Performance Management

The findings suggests that 'high-tech' solutions, and an EIS that delivers high-level management information, are less important than an organisational culture that promotes analysis, learning and improvement. Information outputs are required at all levels, not just by senior managers. Staff should be involved in the supply and quality control of this information and its routine use in supervision, team meetings, service planning and performance management.

## Ongoing work

Work is continuing to produce a practical guide for local authorities, to map specific outputs to the ICS Process Flowcharts, and to codify outputs required to address some of the key issues that research has shown to have an impact on outcomes for children.

## Research Partner

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU), Institute of Education University of London

## Principal researchers

- Mike Gatehouse (CCFR)
- June Statham (TCRU)
- Harriet Ward (CCFR)

## Project length

Began December 2002, ongoing (April 2004).

## Funders

- The Department for Education & Skills (originally funded by the Department of Health)
- The Welsh Assembly Government

## Where to find more evidence

Gatehouse, M. and Ward, H. (2002) *Outputs from Information Systems for Children in Need*, CCFR: Loughborough

Gatehouse, M., Statham, J. and Ward, H. (2004) *Information Outputs for Children's Social Services*, CCFR: Loughborough, available for download at: [www.dfes.gov.uk/qualityprotects/pdfs/outputs.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/qualityprotects/pdfs/outputs.pdf)

Details and Working Papers on the ICS can be found at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/integratedchildrenssystem/>

The Core Information Requirements, Data and Process Models can be found at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/qualityprotects/info/coreinformationreq.shtml>

This CCFR Evidence paper forms part of the CCFR Outcomes for Vulnerable Children research programme

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### For further information about the CCFR please contact:

**i** Professor Harriet Ward  
Director  
**@** [H.Ward@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:H.Ward@lboro.ac.uk)

**i** Suzanne Dexter  
Administrator  
**@** [S.Dexter@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:S.Dexter@lboro.ac.uk)

**i** Centre for Child and Family Research  
Department of Social Sciences  
Loughborough University  
Leicestershire LE11 3TU UK

**☎** +44 (0)1509 228355

**📠** +44 (0)1509 223943

**W** [www.ccf.org.uk](http://www.ccf.org.uk)

# Information Outputs for Children's Social Services

## Report on research undertaken for the Department for Education and Skills and the Welsh Assembly Government

This study set out to develop a framework for describing outputs from the information systems used in children's social services. It suggests what information needs to be retrieved, and in what form, to enable local authorities to plan, operate and manage these services more effectively. This work complements the Data Model and Process Model published by the Department of Health's Core Information Requirements programme, and should assist local authorities with the implementation of the Integrated Children's System.

- Outputs are whatever is retrieved or extracted, in whatever form, from an information system. They include not only printed reports, but information viewed on the computer screen, alerts that may appear on screens, e-mail and other messages and notifications.
- Information systems in current use in children's social services are generally designed more for recording information than for retrieving and using it, especially in daily practice. This severely limits their usefulness and reduces the quality of the data they contain.
- In a 'virtuous' information system, operational and management information outputs can complement and reinforce one another, with those available to team managers being particularly important.
- Outputs that enable social workers and administrative staff to work more easily and effectively are the 'dividend' which reward them for the time and trouble required to record information and which motivate them to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data.
- Analysis of research evidence from childcare studies suggests that the 'critical outputs' for improving outcomes for children in need are in most cases the same ones that are required for effective day to day operation, administration and management at case, team and service level.
- The forms or 'exemplars' of the Integrated Children's System may be either inputs to or outputs from an electronic information system. Two potential ICS outputs are the Chronology and a 'rolling record' to relate assessed need, planned action, actual intervention and outcomes.
- A principle of 'subsidiarity' is suggested, whereby staff at all levels of children's services should be provided with output tools to enable them to analyse their own work intelligently, to make comparisons with others and to contribute aggregate data to service-wide performance evaluation.
- Required outputs, including, but not limited to printed reports, should be detailed in the specification of all new electronic information systems. The quality, range and flexibility of output provision should be a key criterion in assessing and commissioning such systems.
- The Outputs Framework proposed in this study classifies outputs by Use Level, Use Context, Type, Content and Dissemination.

**TCRU**  
THOMAS CORAM RESEARCH UNIT  
Institute of Education, University of London

## The problem

Evidence from inspection and research shows that staff in local authorities often lack the tools and skills to organise, analyse and interpret information. Even where these are present, the organisational culture that can promote and support research and analysis is often absent or eclipsed by financial pressures, staffing volatility and regulatory overload. Whilst the Integrated Children's System (ICS) will help to systematise the way in which information is recorded about individual children, local authorities also need to know how best to retrieve and use this information in order to conduct, monitor and improve their service to children and their families.

Information systems often act as little more than repositories: much data is entered into them but very little is taken out. Unless information is used and its potential value is adequately understood, there are few incentives to input data in the first place, ensure that it is complete and accurate and update it regularly. Poor quality data is the inevitable result. Even where provision for outputs is built into systems, such outputs (especially printed reports) are often not used, because there is no clear organisational context and culture to require and support such use.

In the design and commissioning of local authority electronic information systems, information retrieval and usage is often accorded a low priority with the result that the outputs which might enable staff and managers to deliver better services are not readily available. In many such systems, information can be extracted only by staff with specific IT skills, using special software. Such staff are often unable to respond to the needs of all who require information outputs, especially front-line practitioners and administrators.

## About the study

The researchers drew up an initial draft of the Outputs Conceptual Framework which was published for consultation by the Department of Health and discussed in detail at an exploratory workshop in May 2003. Fieldwork was then conducted in six local authorities, four in England and two in Wales. In each, discussions were held with the Assistant Director or a senior childcare manager, information or performance management

officers, team managers, practitioners and administrative staff (over 50 in total). The capabilities of the information systems in use were discussed, examples of outputs were collected and staff at each level asked to identify their output requirements. A report of the project was published on the DH (now DfES) website in March 2004.

## Obstacles to obtaining outputs

The fieldwork identified some of the obstacles to obtaining outputs, among them:

- Inadequate IT hardware, especially the lack of fast, reliable network connections, PCs and printers.
- Information systems which include little or no provision for outputs, obliging staff to use complex and cumbersome reporting software for which they often lack the skills and time.
- Electronic systems which are hobbled because only staff in particular buildings and locations can use them, while others rely on paper systems.
- Over-stretched IT staff whose priorities are dictated by the needs of senior managers rather than those of front-line staff.
- Screens and search facilities mainly designed for recording and data entry rather than information retrieval.
- 'Single viewpoint' systems which can only, for instance, view the data on children, and cannot supply 'cross views' on the various services (e.g. foster care or CAMHS) delivered to them.
- Poor handling of textual information, especially that contained in assessments, care plans, reviews and case notes.
- Inability to generate chronologies for court reports, case summaries, etc., despite the necessary data being present in the system.
- The lack of clear contexts and guidelines for the use of such outputs as are provided.

## The Outputs Framework

The proposed Outputs Framework classifies outputs by use, type, content and dissemination, as shown in the table below:

THE OUTPUTS FRAMEWORK		
Use	Level	Case, Team, Service, Department, etc.
	Context	Case Management, Review, Admin, Finance, Team Management, Supervision, Performance Review, Multi-Agency Work, Returns to Government, etc.
Type		Screen, Printed Report, Alert, Warning, Notification, Chronology, Task List, Diary, Web Page, Text-rich Document
Content	Record Type Universe	Case Details, Chronology, List, Aggregate Statistics, etc. Single Child, Selected Children, All Children, Cross views (Carers, Social Workers, Schools, CAMHS, etc.)
Dissemination	To whom? Where? How delivered	Screen, Intranet, e-mail, post, etc.

This Framework provides a simple classification scheme which can be used in a number of ways, for instance:

- To identify existing outputs, who receives them and how they are used.
- To enable individual staff and teams to draw up structured lists of the outputs they require.
- To facilitate the listing of outputs required when commissioning a new or upgraded information system.
- To map outputs to processes in process flow-charts and in the Process Model.
- To classify the outputs required to support key childcare objectives.

## Types of Output

Outputs are often thought of only as printed reports. Yet a good electronic information system (EIS) can and should diminish the amount of paper that needs to be printed out and make available, on screen, web-page or in e-mail messages, the much more specific information required both for daily work and for management and planning.

**Screen forms** are therefore as important for information retrieval as they are for recording and need to be linked to the means of searching, sorting and filtering the data.

**Printed reports**, where they are used, should be 'generic' and adaptable, capable of being sorted and filtered to list, summarise or aggregate data on groups of cases.

**Alerts and warnings** can inform staff of specific needs or risks to children —health, diet, communication, contact, etc.; or of actions or processes that need to be commenced or completed —assessments, reviews. Some of these can be posted to **diaries** or **task lists**.

**Notifications** send messages (e-mails, texts) to those 'outside the system' —schools, GPs, Youth Offending Teams and others.

All events recorded in the system should be able to be compiled into a **chronology**, useful for case summary and transfer, supervision, review and court processes.

Numerous paper forms can be '**populated**' with names, case numbers and other essential information stored electronically.

A competent EIS can also **export** to other systems data required for financial accounting, returns and information sharing with other agencies.

## The Integrated Children's System

The Integrated Children's System (ICS) incorporates the core social work processes of assessment, planning, intervention and review and is due to be implemented in all social services departments by the end of 2005.

ICS implementations will benefit greatly from considering from the outset the outputs that are required for practice, management and planning. For instance, implementing the ICS chronology as an EIS output should bring great benefits to practice.

The ICS is intended to be mainly computer-based. Its 'exemplars' will not necessarily exist as paper forms. The information they contain may be presented in the screen forms of the computer system and may be as useful for outputs (for viewing, using, sharing and analysing information) as for inputs (for recording it).

The core ICS processes depend upon a body of information concerning needs, planned interventions, services and outcomes, as indicated in the Planning and Review exemplars. This information should be made available by the EIS as a 'rolling record' to facilitate each successive stage in the process.

## Key questions from research

The research identified and mapped outputs (for all user levels, from practitioner to head of service) that would be required to address some key practice questions as identified in government objectives and recent research findings. The questions include:

- Are family support services meeting children's needs?
- Are procedures to protect children from harm working effectively?
- Are there sufficient staff with the necessary skills and resources to provide an effective service to children and families?
- Is adequate support available for disabled children?
- Is there a choice of appropriate placements when a child needs to be looked after?
- Are looked after children experiencing placements that improve their sense of stability and security?
- Is the education of looked after children being adequately addressed?
- Are young care leavers receiving adequate support as they make they move from care to independence?