

# **SEEN, HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD: UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN'S INFORMATION SYSTEMS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES**

Early Lessons for Government from  
the Children's Information Project

**JUNE 2025**



# Contents

<b>1. Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. About the Children’s Information Project.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. A Common Framework for Effective Information Use – Key Design Features.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Implications for Current Central Government Initiatives .....</b>	<b>9</b>
4.1. School Readiness Indicator .....	9
4.2. Single Unique Identifier .....	12
4.3. Children’s Social Care Data Dashboard.....	15
4.4. National Enablers Common to All Three Initiatives.....	18
<b>5. Next Steps for the Children’s Information Project.....</b>	<b>19</b>

## Funding Acknowledgement



*The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.*

*Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org*

*LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation*

*Website: nuffieldfoundation.org*

# 1. Executive Summary

## **The Children's Information Project**

The Children's Information Project is a five-year strategic initiative funded by the Nuffield Foundation to understand and test how local authorities use information about children and their families to improve lives. Our focus on ethical and effective information use sheds light on how government approaches to data and information enable, shape and influence the ability of local services to meet national goals.

The project team comprises researchers from the Universities of Oxford and Sussex, the London School of Economics, and Research in Practice, and four local authority sites: Hampshire, North Yorkshire, Oldham, and Rochdale. We recognise the commitments of the new Government to national missions supported by strong measurement. We recognise the ambition to use AI to address national challenges. This project is finding out how the Government might, or might not, do this in ways that create real and lasting benefits in people's lives and which strengthen democracy by improving the responsiveness of institutions to local views.

The project aims to test the effectiveness and implementation of ethical approaches to children's information use. Our starting hypothesis is that by ensuring that the ethical principles of Respect, Connect, Care and Protect consistently underpin the policies, processes and practices of information use, we will also achieve more effective information use, leading to better outcomes. This includes ensuring proportionality in the uses of personal data. Specific challenges arise where there are different interpretations of the balance between uses of data for public good or improved safeguarding in individual cases on the one hand – especially where these arise from linkage – with concerns about data privacy on the other. The challenges are exacerbated when this balance is not informed by the views of data subjects.

More background on the Children's Information Project can be found in the following link: [Children's Information Project: The story – Nuffield Foundation](#)

## **Relevance to government initiatives**

Our learning from working alongside the four local authority sites in improving the use of children's information has led to a general framework for assessing the

quality of information use in terms of the degree to which it is both ethical and effective. This includes better use of existing information and ways of improving the relevance, meaningfulness and accuracy of information; especially important if we are to harness the potential of AI to achieve benefits for society.

We have applied this framework to three children's information use initiatives by the Government – the school readiness milestone, single unique identifier and children's social care dashboard – and have drawn out from our learning a number of ways in which their effectiveness might be compromised or improved, which we summarise in this report.

In each of these areas, there are opportunities for Government to enact policy on children's information use in ways that improve local understanding and the effectiveness of local services leading to genuine improvements in people's lives and experiences. We think our framework and the analysis from it suggest important steps in implementation that will be essential to realising the potential benefits.

### **The national school readiness indicator**

First, the proportion of children in reception year achieving the Good Level of Development is proposed as the measure of success for a national milestone to give children the best start in life. This has the potential to lead to genuine improvements in children's cognitive, social and emotional development, with long term benefits for all. However, in creating a national target from the Good Level of Development, the Government influences how children's development is measured, understood and responded to throughout the system, from local authorities to families, pre-schools, schools and health services. Our evidence suggests that if the ways in which this influence plays out are not considered, then the target will be at best irrelevant to achieving opportunity for all. At worst, it could undermine existing practice – for example if there are perverse incentives to focus on small groups of children near the margin rather than ensure progress for all, including those who start furthest behind.

### **Single unique identifier**

Second, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes a proposal for the introduction of a consistent identifier that agencies working with children must include in information processed about a child. This can improve agencies' ability to share accurate information for the purposes of making effective safeguarding

decisions and to facilitate data linkage across datasets for policy analysis and research purposes. However, the introduction of a unique identifier also raises important questions of democratic accountability, participation and trust in government and public agencies. Our findings show that children, their families and carers don't fully understand how their information is currently used. Once children's information is linked, the stakes are potentially higher and it will be essential to design safe and transparent processes for how data subjects can access, check and challenge conclusions drawn from linked data. Clarification is needed on whether care leavers who are in the process of transition to adult services should be included in the scheme, so they also benefit from enhanced safeguarding.

### **Children's Social Care Dashboard**

Third, the Children's Social Care Data Dashboard offers the promise of an improved performance and accountability system that enables the Government and local authorities to monitor and understand their progress towards national outcomes in a consistent way, and to take appropriate action where performance falls short. Local agencies already make use of the Children's Social Care Dashboard to assess their position in comparison with the national position and their nearest statistical neighbours. But its value is heavily constrained by the inadequacy of current national data about underlying need and children's experiences of services. This limits its usefulness to explain differences in local performance, or for local services to assess what action is needed to improve progress towards desired outcomes.

### **Opportunities for government to draw on our early learning**

We have created several opportunities for government officials to learn with us between now and the conclusion of the project in September 2026. These include bespoke briefings on the application of the draft Framework for Effective Information Use to each government initiative, engagement with the Learning Network programme, and invitations to private workshops on emerging learning. We will hold launch events to share findings from our Interim Report in October 2025 and our Final Report and accompanying Framework for Effective Information Use in 2026.

## 2. About the Children's Information Project

The Children's Information Project is a five-year strategic initiative (2021-2026), funded by the Nuffield Foundation to understand and test how local authorities use information about children and their families to improve lives. The project team comprises researchers from the Universities of Oxford and Sussex, the London School of Economics and Research in Practice, and four local authority sites: Hampshire, North Yorkshire, Oldham, and Rochdale.

At each site, the project team is exploring how mixed methods of children's information collection, incorporating qualitative and quantitative information, can support each other to build a better understanding of children's lives, as the basis for an improved service offer. Core to the approach is a desire to ensure that diverse voices – including those of children, young people, families and practitioners – are heard more clearly within children's information, and that these voices influence how the information is gathered, shared, processed and used.

In Hampshire, the team is assessing how improved children's information use can enable children and families to receive support as early as possible when difficulties first emerge. In North Yorkshire, the focus is on testing how using good quality information can better reflect and improve the experiences and outcomes of young people leaving care. In Oldham and Rochdale, together with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the team is looking at how information can be well used to help younger children be better prepared to start school.

The project is examining whether and how information improvements can inform the design and delivery of local authority children's services, leading to greater equity, stronger democratic engagement and accountability, improved cost effectiveness and better outcomes for the children, young people and families that they serve.

---

***"Information use shapes thinking. If we want to think better and have better policy and practice, it needs to be based on an understanding of the diversity and the reality of the range of different experiences."***

**Professor Leon Feinstein**

---



### 3. A common framework for effective information use – key design features

Working with the four local authority sites, the project is developing a common 'framework for effective information use' that incorporates key design features and practices which have been identified in the relevant literature and through intensive fieldwork as essential dimensions of effective information use. Some of the most important features include:

- ✓ **Integrating voice:** capturing the multiple voices of children, young people, carers and practitioners in children's information systems in ways that are valid, meaningful and can be analysed and used. In addition, knowing and honouring the views, wishes and feelings of data subjects (children and families) and practitioners about what information should be included, and about how their information is gathered, processed, shared and used.
- ✓ **Understanding needs:** reviewing existing Children's Needs and Outcomes Frameworks and data sources to assess their strengths and limitations for providing authentic and meaningful understanding of needs to enable effective local action.
- ✓ **Best use of available information:** enabling those responsible for local service delivery to understand and map information flows and make more efficient and cost-effective use of a range of information sources, including national data and local information, including case files. The potential benefits are to provide a more holistic and voice-centred understanding of experiences, needs and issues to inform national policy, provide meaningful accountability and improve local authority service delivery.
- ✓ **Appropriate action and learning:** applying the discipline of a 'theory of change' to the design of children's information systems so that there is a transparent, meaningful and proportionate link between the capture and use of information, and the outcomes a service or system is seeking to achieve. This approach also helps those responsible for children's information systems to ensure information use informs appropriate action.
- ✓ **Infrastructure and governance:** ensuring that robust, inclusive mechanisms are in place to enable trustworthy and accountable uses of children's information; consistencies between agencies in definitions, quality and accuracy of data; clear proportionate and relevant data-sharing arrangements; and sufficient investment in technical and analytical capability.

In the coming year we will use this framework as the common basis for evaluating the local authority sites' continued progress and develop it into a practical tool for use by those developing new children's information use projects or adapting existing systems.

The project deliberately spans different approaches to using children's information, at different levels of development. This enables us to test the barriers and enablers of information use and how to share learning from innovation. Our work to date has relevance to the work of other local services seeking to improve their use of children's information. A Learning Network has been created with a wider set of 20 local authorities and other local agencies, which are at different stages of work to improve their information use. This forum is facilitated by Research in Practice and meets regularly to share, stress-test and document learning beyond the four local authority test sites. Government officials have joined on occasion.

Through this work the project is learning about how much, or rather how little, information that is collected is analysed and used locally to understand and strengthen practice with children or enhance local services. It is already clear that the focus of data development and analytic capacity in local agencies is geared towards national accountability. This places an expensive burden on local authorities and represents a great waste of opportunity. This project is designed to help government analyse how its uses of children's information shape and constrain local use and to develop more optimal solutions.

While we don't claim to have all the answers, our findings so far suggest there would be value in government officials adopting and contributing to the emerging framework for effective information use as they develop their initiatives. We will summarise and further explain our framework and its application in October 2025 in a Baseline Review and expect the framework will change and flex as we review findings from the first three years, and as it is tried and tested by the 4 local authority sites. Specifically, we hope central government will come on the learning journey with us, both to improve its own use of children's information and to become more of an enabler to practice in the way it oversees the treatment of information in local authorities and in the way it treats and handles children's information nationally.



## 4. Implications for current central government initiatives

The new Government has made it clear that measurement through data will play an essential role in its proposals for national renewal, including those relating to improved outcomes for children. This section summarises initial feedback from the project team and local authority sites based on our initial analysis – using the ‘framework for ethical effective information use’ – of the issues and challenges the Government is likely to face as it develops and implements three important initiatives designed to improve children’s outcomes: the national indicator for school readiness, the Single Unique Identifier and further development of the Children’s Social Care Dashboard.

### 4.1. School readiness indicator

The recent publication of *“Plan for Change: Milestones for a mission-led government”* sets out the importance of having clear, measurable milestones that will hold services to account for demonstrable progress. A **school readiness indicator** is proposed as part of this package, to measure progress towards giving children the best start in life.

To make this tangible, and to assess progress towards its long-term mission of breaking the link between a child’s background and their future success, the Government proposes the first milestone will be to increase the proportion of 5-year-olds reaching a ‘good’ level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessment, from 67% currently to 75% by 2028. The EYFS assessment considers children’s development across a range of areas including language; personal, social and emotional development; and maths and literacy.

The local authority sites in Rochdale and Oldham, supported by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, have been testing how they can better use information about speech and language development, to improve early years outcomes overall. Given the highly heterogeneous populations served, the goal is to achieve outcomes in a way that also narrows the attainment gap. Our local authority sites demonstrate a strong commitment to the aspiration embodied by this milestone but together we have identified below some important gaps where our project may be able to assist.

### **INTEGRATING VOICE:**

- To date, while there are mentions of the importance of including the voice of children and families, there are no clear proposals yet for how this might be done either at practitioner level or within the proposed data.
- Some research already exists on **family/carers views about school readiness, which could usefully be incorporated into the design and interpretation of the national measure**, and which offers an additional perspective on priority needs to be addressed. The [Kindred Squared School Readiness Survey - February 2024](#) showed parents and carers typically hadn't heard of the idea of school readiness until just before their child started school. They were unaware of expectations on them for preparing their child and were more likely to assess their child as ready than were their teachers. It is currently unclear which service for children and families, if any, has responsibility for engaging parents/carers in preparing their child for school to address this gap.

### **UNDERSTANDING NEEDS**

- **More granular assessment of need** is also helping the Rochdale team identify where it needs to work in partnership with other services working with the same children and what additional information would help them assess progress. For example, availability of speech and language therapists, as measured by waiting times to start therapy, is one potentially useful additional measure to monitor in local and national performance systems.

### **BEST USE OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION**

- Our analysis and feedback from local authority sites highlights the need to better explain and evidence the link between the proposal for a narrow focus on early educational attainment (as suggested by the selection of the proposed 'school readiness indicator') with wider development outcomes and the broader context for each child, including their home learning environment. **Additional supporting measures, some of which are already included in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile**, are likely to be needed to capture that broader context and **to assess children's progress** and not just level of attainment.
- One challenge in understanding progress is that there is a continuity gap in pre-school measurement. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire tools typically used at age 2 – 2 ½ years are not fully aligned to or linked with the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile undertaken a year into a child starting reception year.

- **An ethical approach to children's information use would consider and value what progress is being made for different sub-groups of disadvantaged children by each local authority**, taking account of the child's context. For example: those in receipt of free school meals; those with SEND, and those with experience of the children's social care system. Without this, there is a risk that some areas will achieve the milestone at the expense of a widening attainment gap, or without an understanding of the underlying needs of, and progress made by, different groups of children.
- Similarly, it is important to consider contextual information relating to the local delivery system (in addition to the child's context). Local factors might include the capacity and quality of the Early Years and health and social care workforce, the availability and expected role of Family Hubs alongside early provision, timeliness of SEND assessments, and availability of speech and language therapists, as mediators of school readiness.

#### **APPROPRIATE ACTION AND LEARNING**

- The local authority sites are alert to the **risks of perverse incentives** if the performance and accountability approach associated with this measure is not well designed, with the contribution of different parts of the local and national systems properly mapped and aligned. They feel action is needed to counteract the incentive for schools to assess children's baseline readiness as low (to make it easier to demonstrate subsequent progress).
- Similarly, **an effective accountability system should avoid punishing local authorities working with more challenged and highly mobile populations**. For example, Oldham and Rochdale perform below the national average on the proposed measure, but this is largely an artefact of the levels of deprivation or high mobility in the area. This does not help the service manager to understand what they need to do to improve the school readiness of this group, or where they need to influence the contribution of other services.

#### **GOVERNANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

- Local authorities involved in the project suggested that additional measures may be needed to ensure consistency between practitioners, schools and local authorities in defining school readiness and communicating this more clearly with parents. One possible mechanism may be through the Ofsted inspection framework for early years.

## 4.2. Single Unique Identifier

Part 1, Children's Social Care, clause 16LB, of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill gives the Secretary of State powers to specify a consistent identifier – such as NHS number – that designated persons must include in information processed about a child. The inclusion by all agencies working with children of the same consistent identifier in their case management systems is intended to improve their ability to accurately share information for the purposes of making effective safeguarding decisions. It may also facilitate data linkage across datasets for policy development and research purposes.

**Our work with four local authority sites suggests that the introduction of a single unique identifier would have great potential at local level.** These local authority sites already link data across their own systems using a combination of name, gender and date of birth to match individuals; a single identifier will make this both easier and more precise. The proposal will also help accurately identify individuals who move across local authority boundaries, as many of the most vulnerable children may do. **However, our analysis of the proposals against the framework has identified issues for further attention both during the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and subsequently through the proposed testing in local areas which will inform secondary legislation.**

### **INTEGRATING VOICE**

- **There is little evidence to date suggesting that children and families have been consulted about the introduction of the single unique identifier and its implications for how and where their information is shared.** This compromises not only their democratic rights to have a say in systems and practices that affect their lives and privacy but also affects their trust in the agencies seeking to support them, and thus the effectiveness of that support.
- Children, young people and adult carers are often poorly informed about what information about them is recorded, shared and used, and for what purposes. **It is essential to understand what concerns (whether real or imagined) they may have so these can be addressed.**
- Most of the focus has been on informed consent and the content of privacy notices to support this. But there has been less attention on **whether and how data subjects – in this case children and their families/carers – can access, check and challenge conclusions drawn from linked data** about their needs and level of risk. This is particularly important where powers to link data do not rely on consent, as is likely to be the case where linkage supports safeguarding decisions.

- Leadership of this initiative at national, as well as local level will need to ensure **effective consultation with children, young people and their families in ways that allow for their multiple voices and concerns to be recognised and heard.** As part of this process, it will be necessary to ensure sufficient steps are taken to inform and consult minority groups who may be more identifiable and have greater concerns about use of linked data.

### **UNDERSTANDING NEEDS**

- There is likely to be more support for linkage where it is possible to demonstrate an improved understanding of place-level needs that leads to amendments to service provision. However, **most local authorities do not have the technical capability and resources** to define and assess this, and questions have been raised about whether the wording in part 8 of the Bill that suggests linkage should *directly* support safeguarding (rather than by means of a trial, study, audit or any other direct means) may prohibit this.
- Our local authority and learning network sites have questions about who is in scope for the Single Unique Identifier. They wanted **clarification on the applicability to care leavers who are no longer children** and are in the process of transition to adult services but may be better safeguarded through inclusion in the scheme. In addition, they note **that adopted children are given a new NHS number limiting linkage with earlier records;** and that **some communities – such as asylum-seeking children and young people from the Roma, Gypsy and Traveler communities – may be under-represented in linked data.** This under-representation may stem from lower engagement with health and education services, the lack of recognition of Roma and Gypsy Traveler ethnic identities in NHS Data Dictionaries, and the lower matching success rates for these groups when health and education data are linked.

### **BEST USE OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION**

- **The validity of much of the data within datasets is questionable:** it often relies on proxy indicators and binary data items, and is not informed by the voices of children, young people and carers about what is important. **It is essential that the Government puts significant effort into improving the underlying data quality and developing the technical infrastructure** alongside the implementation of a single unique identifier beyond the areas that the government is working with as pilot test sites.

## **APPROPRIATE ACTION AND LEARNING**

- **The biggest barrier to linkage is not the lack of a unique identifier, but a lack of confidence about what can be safely shared where safeguarding concerns may override the need for consent.** The challenges arising from variable understanding about sharing children's information within local authorities are compounded when there is a need to share across partner agencies. The latter includes how and when combined information should be used to make referrals to services, and will likely require additional training and understanding around consent.
- Doubts were also raised about whether – even with a consistent identifier – it would be possible to link information in the timeframes required for urgent safeguarding decisions to be made.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE**

- **Significant leadership at national level will therefore be needed to explain, consult and co-develop the proposal in ways that are supported by children, young people and their families/carers.** This will be an essential complement to locally led engagement on specific implementation.
- Local authorities anticipate an increase in data access requests as a result of the introduction of a Single Unique Identifier which could have implications for already stretched services. These would potentially be more complex to respond to where data are linked.
- Members of the Learning Network report that they have each been involved in numerous examples of **local data sharing agreements to clarify what can be safely shared** but producing them is a time-consuming and frustrating process which **would benefit from a nationally mandated template, guidelines and support.**
- Local authorities will individually need to work with multiple suppliers on different systems, each with different lead-in times and charging mechanisms, to make changes to accommodate an identifier within their systems. **They will need support and resources from central government to ensure necessary changes are prioritised and funded.**



### 4.3. Children's Social Care Data Dashboard

The Children's Social Care Data Dashboard presents national data against four outcomes for children and families set out in the National Framework for Children's Social Care, and, where available, will also seek to track 'enablers' such as workforce capacity, spend and quality of leadership as assessed by Ofsted. Outcome 4 is that children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. The selected measure for care-leavers is the % of care leavers in accommodation considered 'suitable', with separate measures for 17-18- and 19-21-year-olds.

The Children's Information Project has early learning relevant to improving data for care leavers as the local authority site in North Yorkshire has been focusing on this dimension. North Yorkshire is developing its own dashboard to understand the needs and outcomes of care leavers. This aggregates and integrates existing 'voice' information and better reflects the outcomes that are most important for care leavers and the practitioners that work with them, especially as they relate to the suitability of accommodation. Given the learning resulting from the work in North Yorkshire, we focus on care leavers in the analysis presented below. However, many of the underlying issues and solutions apply across the overall dashboard.

At present, the Dashboard draws almost exclusively on published statutory data returns made by local authorities, so is constrained in its focus on a narrow set of bilateral accountability measures between the Department for Education and local authorities and does not take account of the contribution of other agencies (for example health and criminal justice services).

The local authority sites involved in the Children's Information Project do already make use of the Children's Social Care Dashboard, alongside the Local Authority Interactive Tool, as a valuable tool for comparison with the national position and their nearest statistical neighbours. However, the use of each is limited by the lack of information about underlying need and young people's experiences. These gaps – alongside those relating to the lack of information about the contribution of other services – limit local authorities' ability to identify appropriate action and explain differences in performance. For example, suitability (and availability) of accommodation is likely to be impacted by the overall housing situation in an area, which is not included in the data set.

#### **INTEGRATING VOICE**

- The framing of the outcome measures for care leavers in the Children's Social Care Dashboard is nationally mandated, and at present based predominantly on what is currently measured (for example through the SSDA 903 returns). Our work with care leavers and practitioners in North Yorkshire highlights the

**absence of inclusive engagement with them at national level to identify how well – or how poorly – these measures capture their experiences and how they might be improved.**

- There is a potential for information in Pathway Plans, which are completed by Personal Advisers working with young people in the process of leaving care, to better capture young people's voices and for more consistent aggregate information to be collated within and across local authorities.
- As information about care leavers is collated and presented in the Children's Social Care dashboard at national level, significant granularity is lost and the limited local information about children's experiences is stripped out. While some loss of detail is inevitable, our work in North Yorkshire is finding ways to integrate and retain some meaning at local level. This could potentially be scaled up, should the Department for Education be open to this, through a combination of additional support for other local authorities to adopt the learning, or through co-designed amendments and enhancements to the requirements in national returns.

#### **UNDERSTANDING NEEDS**

- **A serious gap has been identified between, on the one hand, the proposed national measure of 'suitability of accommodation', which is based on the local authority personal advisor's assessment and, on the other, the views of the care leaver about whether they feel safe or stable in their home.** At the extreme, a personal adviser may judge accommodation such as custody as 'suitable' on the basis that it is necessary for the young person's current circumstances, rather than supportive of their progress to grown-up life and independence. This context is missing in the interpretation of national data, which may therefore present an overly optimistic assessment of accommodation suitability. **More granular information about the type of accommodation is already included in the returns to DfE and could support a less simplistic binary assessment of suitability,** ahead of any work to add in care leavers' experiences.
- Our local authority partners highlighted the importance of understanding the interaction between care leavers' life-skills – for example their ability to understand utility bills – and the suitability of their accommodation.

## **BEST USE OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION**

- In **North Yorkshire, Pathway Plan data additionally include information on the progress of individual children, which could usefully be integrated into future iterations of the Dashboard.** However, Pathway Planning and the associated data capture is done differently in different local authorities – often because of differential involvement in innovation projects and programmes, which have not subsequently been scaled up or rolled out nationally. While a degree of local flexibility and tailoring is an essential design feature in any national measurement system, there is a need for greater national consistency in the core approach.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE**

- The information that is included in the SSDA 903 return by all local authorities is amalgamated and published on an interactive platform, the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT), which forms the basis of the Children's Social Care Dashboard. **There is an urgent need to develop the LAIT to improve its usability by local authorities as an analytic tool.** This would preserve some of the detail in the underlying data – for example, the coding as to *where* the young person is living that is included in existing accommodation data. The local authority sites say they would prefer the LAIT to include sub-local authority level identifiers that would enable them to undertake more *within* local authority comparisons, alongside *between* local authority comparisons.

#### 4.4. National enablers common to all three initiatives

We have based our work on improving information use in children's social care and Early Years services, education and childcare. These are areas of policy and practice in which local authorities are the main agency for the interaction between practitioners and children, their families/carers. Local authorities provide a huge amount of information to each government department from whom they receive funding or to whom they have statutory responsibilities. They also collect and store considerable 'case-level' information about children and families and the services and support they receive.

There is currently no agency or mechanism for central government to ensure effectiveness in how to do this. In our work to date we have identified the following common enablers, which require stronger mechanisms to address nationally:

1. When central government introduces new (or significantly amended) children's information systems, it would be helpful to invest more up-front effort in working with all partners in the delivery system – specifically including the voices of practitioners who work directly with children and families – establishing a 'theory of change' or similar approach to set out more clearly the contribution of different parts of the local and national systems to meeting the nationally determined goal. This would better ensure that practice in different agencies is understood and aligned, ensure that cultural as well as technical factors are considered, minimise the potential for perverse or competing incentives, and identify the potential for additional contextual information that will assist government, local authorities and the public to interpret performance data appropriately.
2. There are a number of responsibilities that should ideally sit at national level, but which to date have been left to local discretion. This can be inefficient and can lead to lack of consistency. For example, multiple local authorities are wasting resource reinventing the wheel – as is the case with local data sharing agreements – when national government could mandate template local data sharing agreements. Clearer national steers on the most commonly experienced trade-offs between sharing for public good and protecting privacy would help improve consistency.
3. There is a need for central government to find models for further supporting and investing in local analytical capacity and data quality/standards, to value the integration of experiential information, and to support inclusive, democratic processes for determining principles and practices of information use. These are significantly underpowered, which is a blocker to the development of more effective local performance and accountability systems.

## 5. Next steps for the Children's Information Project

Building on the work in the four local authority sites to date, and with input from the Learning Network of 20 further local authorities, the next steps for the research team are as follows:

1. Refine the **prototype of the Framework for Effective Information Use** as a practical tool that will serve to clarify the key practices needed to support well-functioning children's information systems. This will help those responsible for such systems to understand the barriers and enablers to be addressed when improving the design of new or adapted information systems. In turn, this will ensure there is a transparent, ethical, proportionate and voice-informed link between the capture and use of data, and the outcomes a service or system is seeking to achieve.
2. The prototype tool will incorporate **a set of framing questions and criteria** for local authorities to assess how well developed their information system is for each practice dimension. It will be launched with the sector at a **Nuffield Foundation event in October 2025**.
3. The prototype tool will be used to **evaluate the further progress each of the four local authority sites** makes over the next year: in maturing their information system against the criteria; and in demonstrating how their redesigned information system impacts on improved decisions, services for children, and on children's outcomes.
4. The **Final Report of this work will be available in Summer 2026**. It will be accompanied by an updated version of the Framework and associated practical resources to help local leaders apply the learning and approaches to improve their own information systems.
5. The practical resources developed over the next year will be shared and stress-tested through **the Learning Network**, facilitated by Research in Practice, to help extend the reach beyond the local authority sites.
6. The project team will in parallel offer **bespoke opportunities for working with the Department of Education** on ways of applying the learning identified in this report to its children's information initiatives.

# Children's Information

Improving lives through better  
listening and better data



research  
in practice

US  
UNIVERSITY  
OF SUSSEX



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Children's Information Project  
Rees Centre  
Department of Education  
University of Oxford  
15 Norham Gardens  
Oxford  
OX2 6PY

The Children's Information Project team comprises researchers from the Universities of Oxford and Sussex, the London School of Economics, and Research in Practice, and four local authority sites: Hampshire, North Yorkshire, Oldham, and Rochdale. The researchers and local authorities work closely together, enabling collaboration and co-production between children, young people, parents and carers, practitioners, managers, data analysts, service leaders and policymakers to understand and shape how information can be used ethically and effectively.

[www.childrensinformationproject.org.uk](http://www.childrensinformationproject.org.uk)

