Children's Information

Improving lives through better listening and better data

Summary Report

What Is Ethical and Effective Use of Children's Information in Local Authorities, and How Can It Be Improved?

January 2026

Contents

Funder statement

Nuffield Foundation

Terminology

In this report, the terms **Framework**, **Approaches**, **Practices**, and **Enablers** denote specific, named constructs developed as part of the Children's Information Project. Accordingly, they are treated as proper nouns and capitalised throughout to differentiate them from their general meanings.

Summary

This report is the first iteration of a new Framework for defining, understanding and delivering ethical and effective information use in children's local authority services.

Ethical and effective use of children's information is central to national and local government's ability to understand and address children's needs. Yet at present we cannot target children's needs effectively enough because we have inadequate information on what these needs are.

Information use rests on core principles and Approaches, and involves defined Practices that extend beyond collation and analysis of data. Yet these are little understood. This leads to wasteful spending and missed opportunities.

In the Children's Information Project five universities have worked in depth with the local authorities in North Yorkshire, Hampshire, Oldham and Rochdale, supported by a Learning Network of 20 other authorities, to test and develop ways of achieving more ethical and effective information use.

In these publications we share the learning to date:

· **Summary.** We give a brief overview and summarise eight Practices that are essential to the delivery of ethical and effective information use. For each we give a definition and an example from one of our practice sites.

· **Infographics.** We have produced a series of graphics illustrating key learning from the work in the four local authorities. These will form part of the basis for the development of learning materials to be published in the autumn of 2026.

· **Main report.** In our write up of the work to date, we provide further detail on the project, the work in the sites, how we came to our definition of ethical and effective practice, and of our experience and learning about the eight Practices.

In the final year of the project, we will:

· Map examples of ethical and effective use across England and consider how different local authorities and other agencies have engaged in different ways with the eight Practices and what this has achieved.

· Consult with children and families and a wider range of practitioners, and local and national users of these Practices and the Framework.

· Draw on the full report and other work to produce learning materials for local authorities on how to achieve ethical and effective information use.

· Submit further academic papers for peer review and learn from feedback by our academic and practice advisers.

This will lead to a revised Framework, materials to support implementation and richer consideration of what central government can do to enable more ethical and effective information use.

A New Framework for Ethical and Effective Information Use

The core features of the Framework are described in detail in the main report. In this summary we focus on the eight information use Practices that describe the detailed, technical activities that are part of the delivery of ethical and effective information use.

Figure 1: A Framework for the implementation of ethical and effective information use
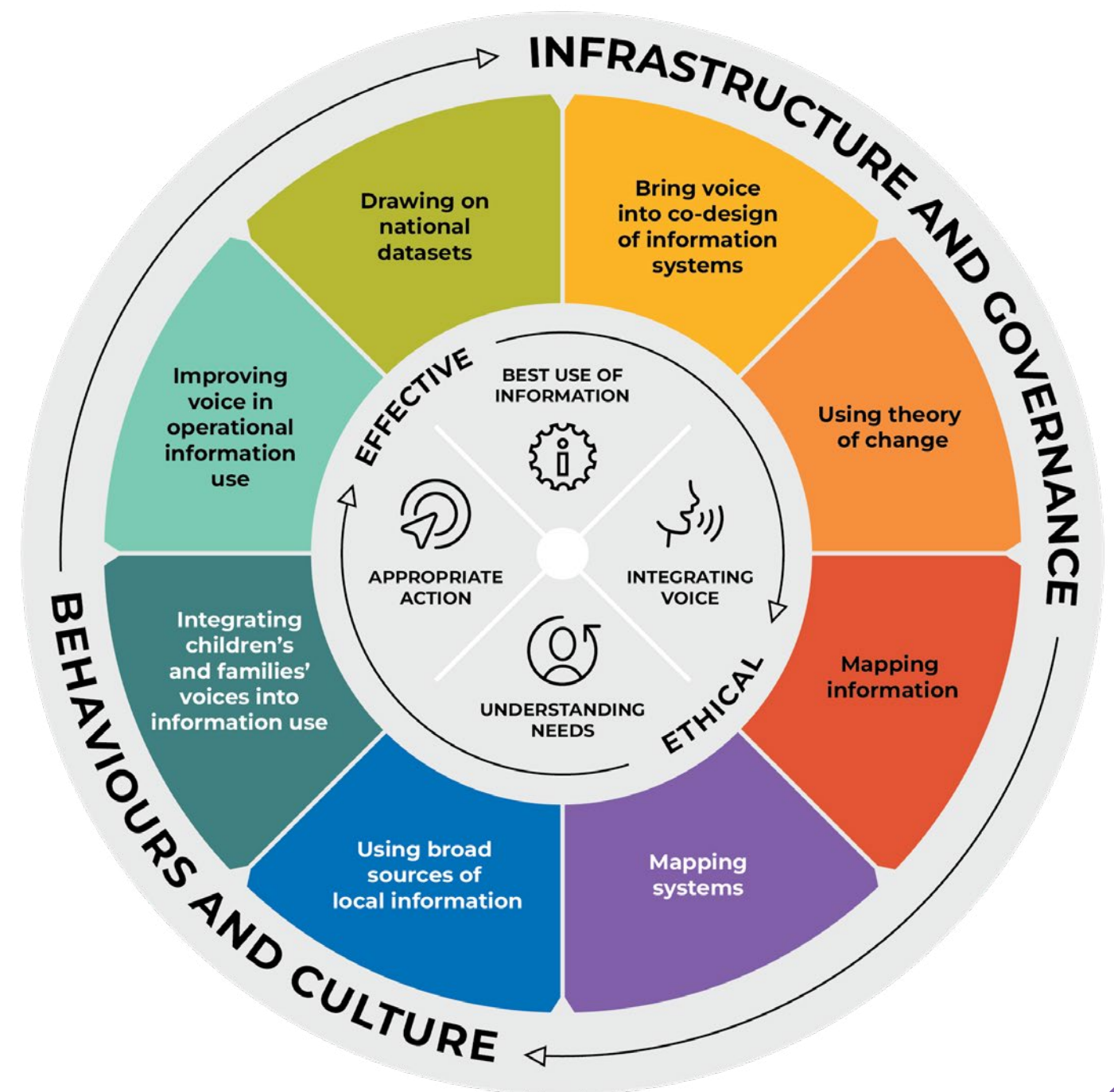
Eight Practices for Ethical and Effective Information Use

Different information projects in local authorities might involve different combinations of these eight Practices; not all are always required. However, together these eight reflect the core technical challenges of using information ethically and effectively.

We summarise these here with a brief definition and example of the Practices. We don't suggest that these reflect perfect examples, or that we have achieved success in all of our activities. Rather, the examples are provided to clarify what the Practices are such that those working in this field can begin to recognise, formalise, learn about and teach it.

The main body of the report provides more detail on the Practices, showing the important relations between the Practices, and some of the methods for achieving them.

Bringing voice into co-design of information use

Taking into account the views, wishes, feelings and lived experiences of individuals and groups in how their information is used.

Example: Co-designing better use of information on children's speech, language and communication needs in Oldham
The Oldham project offers an illustration of how voice can be embedded within the co-design of information use practices through iterative cycles of consultation, dialogue and critical reflection. At the onset of the project, researchers and local authority leaders interrogated early years and school-readiness information. This process led to the identification of a strategic and operational need to enhance the collection and use of more holistic data on children's speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs). Engagement was subsequently broadened to include service leads and practitioners working

directly with children and families, enabling a more comprehensive examination of existing practices and potential mechanisms for change. Insights generated were repeatedly fed back to stakeholder groups, creating a phased, reflective and collaborative process that fostered a shared understanding of current limitations and future possibilities.

A notable limitation of the initial project phases was the lack of involvement of parents, whose perspectives are crucial given that early indicators of SLCNs are identified by parents and practitioners working in partnership. Subsequent phases therefore placed a strong emphasis on parental participation. Parents and practitioners took part in focus groups and consultations, raising important questions about the types of SLCN information that should be captured and the conditions

necessary for meaningful parental engagement. These insights informed the development of a draft, voice-informed toolkit designed to support more holistic and consistent documentation of SLCN information at the operational level. The toolkit is currently undergoing further co-design and review through practitioner and parent workshops. It will be tested in routine developmental screening appointments by practitioners and parents, after which its usefulness, acceptability and potential to strengthen parental engagement and strategic decision-making will be evaluated.
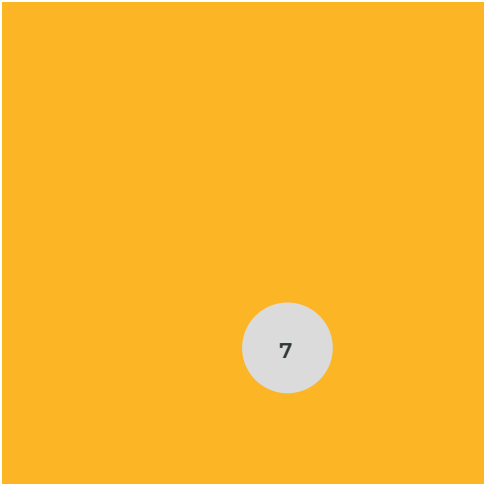
Using theory of change

Working with a theory of change approach to get agreement from all project partners in the local authority on:

- the information use challenge they want to address

- the outcomes they hope to achieve through better information use

- the steps and causal pathways that should connect actions to impact

- what needs to be monitored and measured along the way

Example: Theory of change to improve Early Years voice-led information from seldom heard families in Rochdale
The problem identified by the Early Years team in Rochdale was that standard Early Years data – in particular the current 'Good Level of Development' measure collected and used locally and for statutory returns – do not incorporate the views and needs of seldom heard families when measuring children's developmental progress at age 5. In line with the wider ambition of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Rochdale would ultimately wish to see more holistic, meaningful and contextualised measurement.

Rochdale was inclusive in engaging a wide range of colleagues across the Early Years service in an initial, in person workshop. Given the differing needs and priorities of the various representatives and sub-teams, it became clear that there were multiple priorities that could not all

be addressed within a single project. A follow-up workshop with a smaller group of core Early Years team members focused on how to reach the voices of seldom heard parents. The outcome is a project that includes:

- proactive and sustainable work to engage with seldom heard families of children in their early years

- a set of items (currently missing from school readiness assessments) that capture key information reflecting these families' voices

- a measurement framework to encapsulate this information, enabling better understanding of what is important to these parents, but missing from existing data and its use

Mapping information

Undertaking systematic research to assess what information is available on a particular topic, and how it might be brought into use.

**Example: Mapping Oldham's Early Years information**
In Oldham we set out to see the information landscape clearly: which sources exist across Early Years services, how information moves between services, and where information is used for day-to-day work with families and/or for aggregated strategic reporting. This work was designed to create a common, readable picture that the local team can use to reflect on their information environment.

We combined document analysis with network analysis to build a collection of linked maps. We aimed to gather together all documents that inform the local system supporting children in their early years, spanning the early learning, healthcare and wellbeing, and safeguarding sectors. To this end, we

assembled a corpus of 25 national, regional and local resources that specify what information is gathered and why.

The mapping shows a clear split between operational information (rich with parents' and carers' concerns, practitioner observations and children's experiences) and aggregate information (used strategically and dominated by nationally specified indicators). Across the local Early Years system, 41 types of information are collected, yet only 28 are used to judge progress against strategic priorities; 13 other measures (including observation notes, records in children's files, staff audit tools and other records of children's voice) do not routinely reach the level of strategic reporting. The over-representation of national nodes in the network files confirms the dominance of government voice in local uses of data and explains why locally valuable qualitative sources often disappear as information is aggregated.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the local Early Years information system is highly structured by national frameworks and disproportionately dependent on a small set of actors to carry information across organisational boundaries.
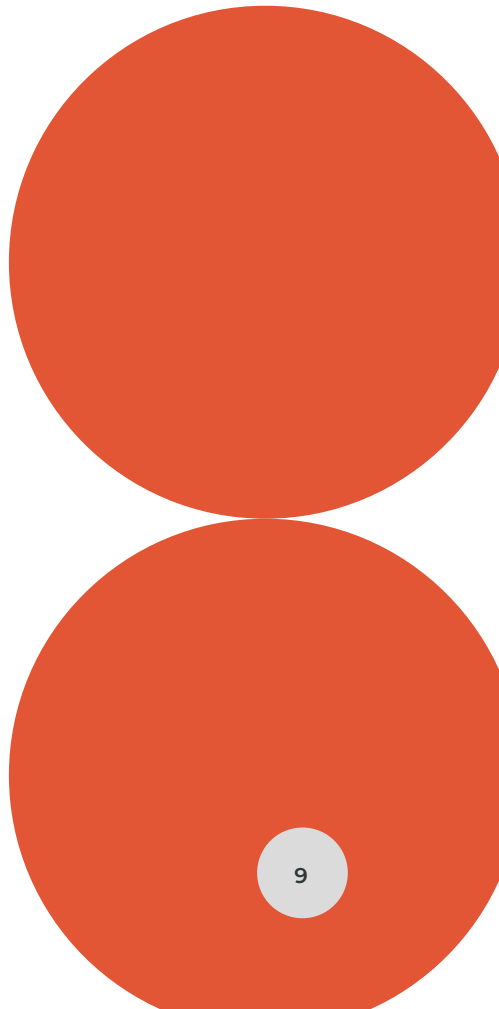
PRACTICE 4

Mapping systems

Undertaking systematic research to understand and model the relationships between key agencies, workforces, and children and families.

Example: Learning from Oldham system mapping
In Oldham, we mapped all the information about Early Years development that is recorded, measured or reported, and that flows within and between local agencies. The findings powerfully expose that:

- these metrics often do not align well with local strategic priorities
- locally generated insights are frequently hidden or excluded

The mapping also demonstrates the value of network analysis in turning a long list of services into a helpful relational picture. People can use this picture to understand the context in which they are operating and to support discussion of how information might be used ethically and effectively to improve supports and services.

PRACTICE 5

Using broad sources of local information

Seeking learning and insight from all possible sources of information.

Example: Using multiple information sources to examine care leavers' data journey in North Yorkshire
Our project in North Yorkshire Council focuses on care leavers and has sought to understand how Children's Social Care and its partner agencies can most effectively and efficiently meet the needs of care leavers. We aim to understand what support mechanisms are needed to improve the outcomes and life chances of care leavers.

Seeking an holistic picture of needs and outcomes for North Yorkshire's care-leaving cohort, our starting point was an exploration of the care leaver outcomes that are routinely recorded and used by the local authority. We then considered how these relate to the outcomes identified as important by care leavers, and those working in the care-leaving service. We consulted with care leaver apprentices, senior leaders and representatives from the care-leaving service in North Yorkshire. An integral part of the fieldwork was shadowing a 'day in the life' of personal advisors. Our fieldwork also included a series of focus groups with care leavers, personal advisors, and those working in data analysis and performance management roles.

Our enquiries brought to light the very broad range of information and the richness of voice, particularly young people's voices, within the management information system and individual case records. For example, information from a visit with a young person is recorded by the personal advisor as a case note in the local authority records. This might be a write-up of an oral conversation, but it may also be an upload of a WhatsApp conversation, a set of photos or a recently completed Pathway Plan. Case notes record what young people say and do and are written with the young person in mind. In North Yorkshire (and similarly Hampshire), voice is often documented in a style of 'writing to' the young person, as the prospective reader of their own case record, and practitioners ensure that the perspectives of the young person are documented in the case notes about each point of contact.

Information about care leavers that is used by central government constitutes a small proportion of the broad information that is recorded locally. Some of this broader information could be better used to understand the experiences and outcomes of care leavers, in a way that is more meaningful to care-experienced young people and those working with them.

PRACTICE 6

Integrating children's and families' voices into aggregate and strategic information use

Bringing the views, wishes, feelings and lived experiences of individuals and groups into information used for area level decision making.

Example: Integrating voice into aggregate & strategic reporting of care leaver's information in North Yorkshire
We identified that some information was being captured on case records but not being included on care leaver data dashboards. This information was being systematically recorded both quantitatively and qualitatively as part of the care leavers' Pathway Plan, and was being updated on a six-monthly basis. This exploration led to the development of a new version of the care leaver data dashboard that now includes scores (on a scale of 0 to 10) across domains identified by care leavers and those working with them as important. Separate scores are recorded from the perspective of the care leaver, and their personal advisor as part of reviews of their Pathway Plans. There are also qualitative statements comprising the voice of care leavers that become visible when the dashboard viewer hovers the cursor over a score.

PRACTICE 7

Improving voice in operational information use

Bringing more of the views, wishes, feelings and lived experiences of individuals and groups into individual level recording and decision making.

Example: Developing a parent/carer Voice Note to inform early help in Hampshire
The Hampshire project aims to reduce the rates of re-referrals of families to Early Help and escalations to Children's Social Care. Through successive iterations, this has led to a focus on families' voices in Early Help referral processes and to reflections on how improving opportunities for families' voices to be heard and recorded might contribute to better understanding of their needs and views earlier in the referral process and more appropriate, timely response to their needs.

Specifically, Hampshire's IUP involves developing a parent/carer Voice Note, to be recorded soon after referral. Until now, parents' and carers' voices have rarely been sought, recorded or heard prior to the Early Help Hub meeting where their child's case is discussed. That meeting is attended by a variety of services (e.g. housing and the child's school) but not by the parents or carers. Consequently, their voices are often absent until after the meeting has taken place.

The intention is that the conversation, and the resulting Voice Note, will elicit and then quote or paraphrase the parent or carer's view of their child and family's situation and their needs at this early stage in the referral process. The note will be stored as an accessible record in the Early Help service's information system and may then be returned to during future points of contact with the parents and carers.

The next steps in Hampshire will involve implementing the Voice Note across several teams within the district and monitoring its impact on operational decision-making and practice over an initial six-month period. We have co-developed training resources for the teams involved, and a short survey to capture practitioners' views of the efficacy of the voice note over time. Its impact will also be tracked through the outcomes for families following their engagement with Early Help during the trial period.

PRACTICE 8

Drawing on national datasets

Using data from national administrative datasets or their local equivalents to inform local level decision-making.

Example: Using national datasets to understand children's needs and service interactions in local areas
A new generation of national administrative datasets linking information from multiple children's (and families') services is becoming available. We have been exploring how new national administrative datasets might be further developed and how they can be used by local authorities to improve understanding of children's needs, life paths and service interactions in local areas.

To test methods and potential in this field, we are currently undertaking a research exercise using the Growing Up in England (GUiE) dataset (ADR UK, 2025d). GUiE is an experimental linkage of population census and longitudinal administrative data from the education

and Children's Social Care systems. The exercise harnesses several unique features of GUiE including: England-wide population coverage; the availability of large analysis samples for sub-group analysis; and the new opportunity to bring together rich information on household multidimensional disadvantage from the population census and longitudinal administrative data from the education and social care systems.

As part of the research exercise, we are currently developing, testing and trialling a new England-wide index for identifying children living in multidimensionally disadvantaged households (Child-MDH). Child-MDH will make an important break-through by bringing together and aggregating population-census derived information on household disadvantage covering four domains (household level employment, housing, education and health/ disability deprivation - Wave

1 GUiE) and information on Free School Meals (FSM) from administrative education data (Wave 2 GUiE).

We will use the index and linked longitudinal administrative data to build up new evidence on the relationship between multidimensional household disadvantage and children's contacts with the children's social care system.

We are also exploring how information from the ECHILD database can be used by Oldham and Rochdale Councils to improve understanding of needs in the early years.

Children's Information
Improving lives through better listening and better data

Childrens Information Project
www.childrensinformationproject.org.uk

Rees Centre, Department of Education
University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens
Oxford OX2 6PY

Acknowledgement

This 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.