Enhancing Voice About the Use of Children's Administrative Information

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The Project

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Aims:
- to improve the way that information about and from children, young people and families is used in local and national government in England
- to develop ethical, voice-respecting, publicly accountable uses of children's information
- in order to shape and support services that respond to their needs to improve their lives

Collaboration between:
- 4 Local Authority Sites - responsible for delivering public services in Hampshire, North Yorkshire, Oldham Rochdale
- 5 Universities: University of Oxford, University of Sussex & London School of Economics; with University College London and Manchester Metropolitan University advising
- Research in Practice – facilitates research/practice exchange through wider Learning Network (20 local authorities)

To:
- co-produce and evaluate an ethical, voice-informed 'information use project' in each local authority
- share with wider Learning Network, test, develop and learn
- inform local and national government policy

An inclusive approach to children's information and its use

Information: Umbrella term to mean everything that may be important to know and consider about children, young people and their families (individually or group-wise) to improve their lives

- includes information formally gathered and reported as 'data' in local and national administrative datasets
- also includes information (e.g. in case records) not necessarily codified as 'data' or collated within administrative datasets

Use: Collection, recording, collation, reporting, analysis & interpretation, decisions, actions and review
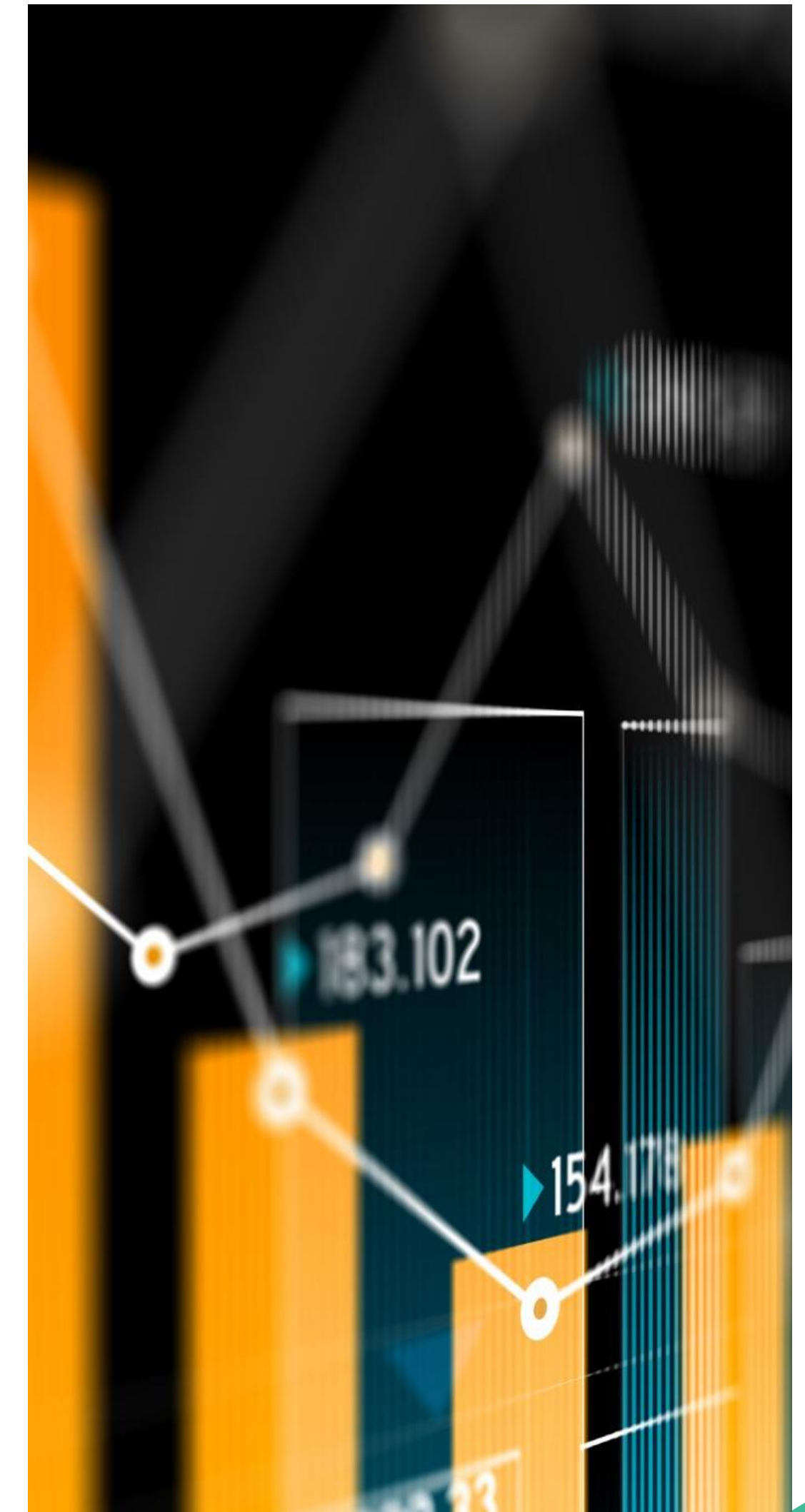
Voice(s) about children's information

Views, wishes and feeling about how children's information is gathered processed, shared and used

Multiple voices - of children, young people, parents, carers, practitioners, managers, policy makers, wider community

Voice about information: key concerns

1. Rapid 'datafication' of children's lives (Lupton and Williamson, 2017)

2. Growth of new information and data practices (especially digital) in local authority children's services - creates new means of monitoring and predicting risks and needs, and planning services, locally and nationally

3. Raises questions about:

   - How these information and data practices are experienced by children, families and practitioners?

   - How meaningful is the information or data used about children and families?

   - Whose voices are heard about how children's information is used and for what purposes?

4. New studies and initiatives exploring meaningful and ethical consultation and integration of voice into information systems and practices (Leslie et al., 2020; MacKay & Shirazi, 2022; Thomson & Berriman 2022)

Voice(s) about children's information: Hotspots

- Democracy, equality and justice

- Trustworthiness, transparency & accountability (governance)

- Professional skills, virtues and culture

Democracy, equality and justice

Central government and inspectorate voices dominate what information is reported in national statutory data returns

- restricts range of what is known and of voices expressed
- more systems-centred than child-centred?

Casts doubt on meanings attributed

- Care leaver: *'But they're like "Oh you're fine. You're on universal credit." I'm like "But I'm not fine. I want a job. I want to be doing something". I think a lot of it's just like process that they have to do. Like a lot of time they'll say "Right, we need to fill out this form". It's just like a box ticking exercise'.*

Much more info (and voice) is recorded in case management systems, but lost from datafication and reporting

- Practitioner: *'I think from our monthly reporting for leaving care… it's all data, there's no voice at all. It's pretty much saying "You're hitting accommodation, you're hitting education, you're hitting 'in touch' percentages, et cetera"…. But there's nothing about the actual, the voice of the young people in there. And that's what we need to pull through definitely'.*

Democracy, equality and justice

Feedback on services is often piecemeal, unclear where it goes or whether heard

- Practitioner: *'Great feedback from the family…..But that's that, on the office wall. Great for a kind of good feeling. But… what would happen if that had some really rich feedback in it or something that we should be considering? How does it feed into individual case audits?'*

Opportunities and challenges of consultation with children and families about experience of services

- Manager: *'I think from the voice point of view, there's the Care Champions… It's ad hoc, some young people get involved, but proportionately it's minimal. The actual formal voice work is really, really small…… We've got the voice of young people all over the notes. It's all in the pathway plan. They're saying they like this, they don't like that, but we don't capture that information and then feed it up to impact on policy'.*

And limited evidence of consultation about information use….
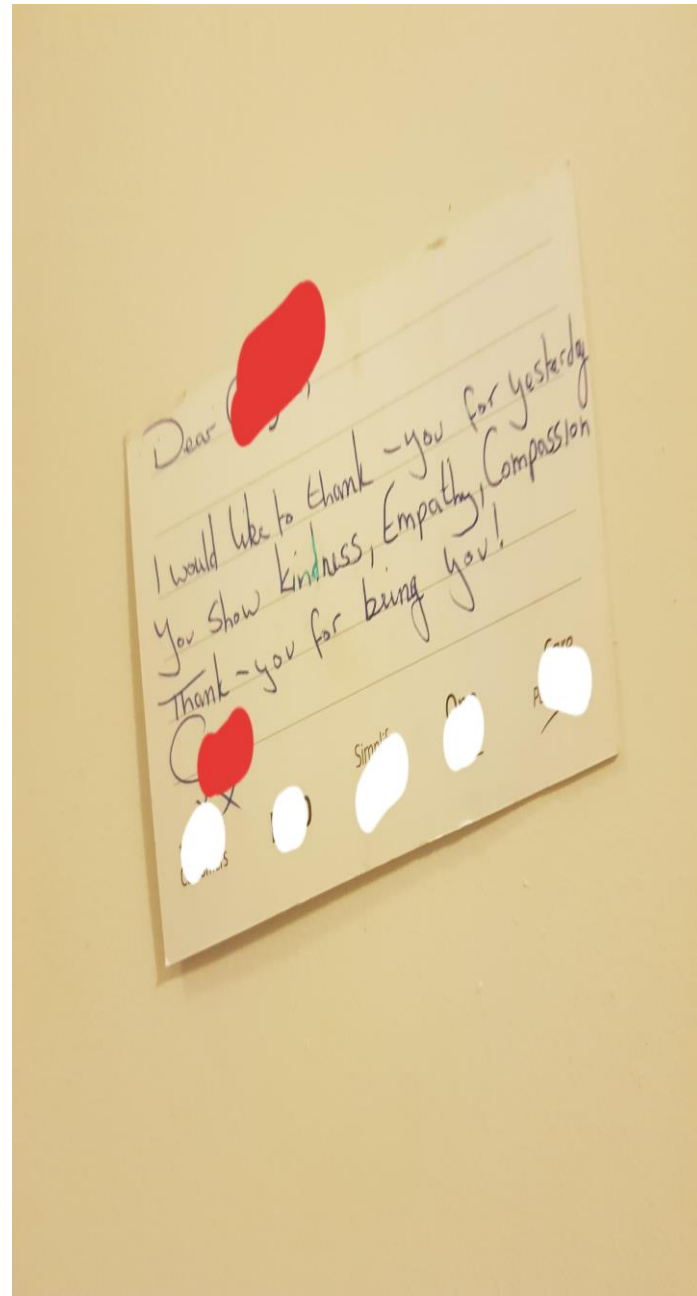
Trustworthiness, transparency & accountability

Trustworthiness and transparency can be challenging

- Practitioner: '*You can be like completely transparent and after every session, be like "I'm going to write this down." But then equally I think that you are at risk then of tainting the relationship... It's really hard to be completely transparent...*'

- Care leaver: '*Yeah, like literally like when there's someone sat in front of you, and they say "Oh, just be like an informal chat". But they're writing down everything you say, yeah, like without permission. And then you think, like "What are you writing?". Because they don't say "Oh, is it okay if we take notes?". They just write down and it's like, "Where does that go? Why do you need to write down this?"*'

Confidentiality 'gets a bit blurred'

- Manager: '*This is this child's record...... so it gets hard to then think "Who can I write about? What can I say?" .... Because if I write it here, everyone sees it and it's no longer confidential information. But I can't just withhold it because I have to put it somewhere..... But I'm going to write that really personal information in a record that everyone can access and read about them. I think it gets a bit blurred sometimes.*'

Case records often contain more than a single voice, and speak about significant others in the child's life

- Manager 1:*'One of the things we've been thinking about as a team is how, writing directly to the child, how we can support practitioners to continue doing that. There's some cases where I would think it would make more sense to write to the parent, but we write to the child…. So "Mom needs to do this"... I would've thought it would make sense that the action is written to the person who's got the action…. So it's kind of wanting to really think through Why are we doing it? Who is it for?'*
Manager 2: *'Accountability, isn't it?'.*

Challenge of writing 'for' the child, but likely the case record will be heavily redacted if/when the young person gets to see it

- Practitioner*: 'not to just say "Off you go and access your records," but actually help them with that process actively and say "What is it you want to know?" …. Because we know from experience that receiving an entire file with lots of bits redacted and quite often there's bits around the parents which aren't their data so they don't have the right to access….. So we are very mindful that actually [directly accessing their records] not always the right solution and that we can help kind of explore their story together.'*
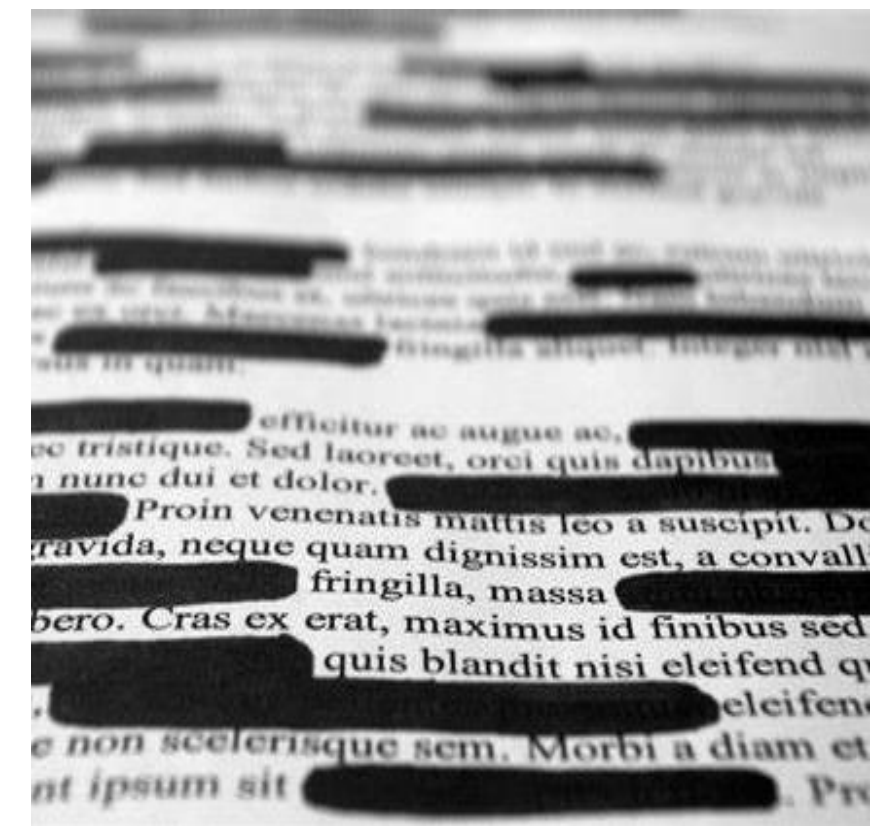
Digital tools become platforms for inclusion of 'everyday' voice

- Field note from conversation with practitioner: '[Young person A] has also said that she's pregnant. *"She WhatsApped me with a picture of 6 positive pregnancy tests*". [Young person B] *"She's great, a bit chaotic, but she's good at keeping in touch, she'll often WhatsApp me to tell me how she is doing".* As we were chatting, a WhatsApp message comes through. *"Here she is, saying "I can't get to my appointment because of a train strike". Reading between the lines, I think it's because she wants a lift"'.*

But young people aren't necessarily aware of the level of data recorded

- Practitioner 1: *'Generally I've put everything that I've got on WhatsApp on the system'.*
Practitioner 2: *'Oh, it's so much easier. Because you could type out literal verbatim, or take the screenshot and upload the screenshot'.*
Practitioner 1: *'I think that made some big changes when COVID, when we finally got access to WhatsApp and things really changed…. Oh, gosh actually we've never had this level of direct communication in the same way …'.*
Practitioner 2: *'It's a good point that…. But [previously] there was more kind of discussion and explicitness about kind of the way it's captured and held'.*

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Trustworthiness, transparency & accountability

Children's Information

Just because we can share or link data, does it mean we should?

Manager 1: *'So we can't see any other agency records unless they send that across'.*

Manager 2: *'But we'll know like, if we get an alert, if health is accessed or something…. We could be alerted to something like that young person doesn't want us to be alerted to as well. Do you know what I mean? We're there ringing them up. It's a minefield'.*

Manager 3: *'I suppose for me, if they, say, went for a sexual health appointment, would that come up? I don't know…'.*

Manager 4: *'I'm never quite sure how that health establishment gets to know that they're a care leaver. Do you know what I mean? I'm not sure how that information gets carried'.*

Manager 2: *'I don't know if they [health professionals] actually see anything. They just see that they're a care leaver and then it's an alert, isn't it….? And for some of our young people we wouldn't have known otherwise'.*

Manager 4: *'It's useful to know this. But then on other occasions it's maybe where they don't want us to know, when we do. Then we're poking our noses in, aren't we?..... It's just a tricky one'.*

Professional skills, virtues & culture

Is compliance enough?

- Legal framework and mandates (GDPR/Data Protection Act) *"You must have a valid lawful basis in order to process personal data"* (Information Commissioner's Office); 'privacy notices'
- Underpinning ethical principles: Respect, Connect, Care and Protect (Leslie et al., 2020).

- Manager: '*They would obviously be told at the beginning, with their privacy notice…..everything around what information we will gather, what we will hold…. … And obviously if there were then changes around that… I might think "Well there's another person or an external professional… can I have a conversation with them?"…. So I guess there are moments where I would ask for that kind of consent or check around this... or inform them of who I'm going to speak to about particular bits of information ….. But I kind of ultimately don't probably need their permission because I've kind of got that already…. But from the relational side of things…. I think [it's] just, us as practitioners, using our own awareness to think "At what points might I need to ask"?.*

Balancing knowing and prying

- Field note from conversation with practitioner: '[Practitioner] says that this young person is famously selective about the information that he shares .They know he has a girlfriend but, when asked, he said "*Nonna*". [Practitioner] said "*Oh Nonna, that's an interesting name, is she Italian?*". And the young person said "No, *nonna your business*".

Professional skills, virtues & culture

Ensuring information is heard and used for good purposes

- Care leaver: '*But if they're just going to like ignore our voices and just carry on, then it's going to make it worse ….. I think they write things down going "Yeah she wants to do this in the future and she wants to do this", making it look like a really positive output and they've done their job well. But actually there's nothing to support you …They write it in the form and they say - literally every form I've done says - "What do you want to do in the future? What do you want to be like, what's your plan?" And you write it down and you obviously give it to them. But they never like actually ask "How are you going to do it and what support there is?"'.*

Ensuring information practices complement and enhance relational practice

- Practitioner: '*Information recording, writing it down, who you write it to, the processes are also really closely linked to the reflection process. Actually, what does it mean that this person's saying? Why are they saying it to me? Why am I responding to it? All of that kind of thing. Which is really, it's not separate from practice, it's part of it'.*

What might voice-respecting, ethical, publicly accountable use of children's information look like?

Democracy, equality and justice

- support people to understand what it is to 'become data'
- develop and use meaningful 'measures' with diverse stakeholder input
- examine whose voices are heard, whose are silenced, and redress the balance
- include diverse voices on what is important to know, how information is collected, shared and used
- integrate voice-respecting checks and balances to monitor assumed benefits and social good

Trustworthiness, transparency & accountability (governance)

- foster trustworthiness through responsible information processes that emphasise individual and societal benefits
- ensure transparency, so people know what information about them is held, who sees and can use it, for what purposes
- embed multiple voices in framing information and data policies, and mechanisms for holding information practices to account

Professional skills, virtues and culture

- overcome compliance culture – includes questioning necessity of information practices
- ensure information and data processes fit within relational practices
- establish ways for children, families and practitioners to challenge aspects of data-driven technologies
- model & support professional virtues in information practices