**The pre-proceedings process for care proceedings: mixing methods to examine operation and impact**

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The pre-proceedings process (PPP) consists of a requirement on LAs considering care proceedings to send parents a letter advising them of this and inviting them to a formal meeting: the letter qualifies the parents for legal aid for advice and representation at the meeting. It was introduced in 2008 with 2 main aims:1) to divert cases from care proceedings and 2) to enable courts to decide cases more quickly. The PPP was not developed through either professional consultation or piloting; it appeared to have no theoretical or practice basis. As such it presented an intriguing puzzle. How would LAs use the process? Would it achieve its aims? And if so,how?

Why and how to study PPP?

Both the interface between law and social work (Hilgendorf 1981, Grace 1994, Dickens 2004) and decision-making in care proceedings have been well-researched, both by socio-legal scholars (Hunt and Macleod 1999; Brophy 2003, 2005 Masson et al 2008) but this research shed little light on how PPP would be used. Effective design required understanding more about LA processes and establishing interest amongst practitioners to facilitate help facilitate access. This idea crystallised in a series of 3 seminars for LA lawyers, Social Work managers and Family Group Conference service managers to explore ideas implementing and operating the PPP. These helped to establish both the issues to be examined and ways that these could be explored. Also, there was a wide variety of practices within and between LAs, necessitating in depth work in several LAs Discussion indicated LA lawyers were involved in decisions to use the process and use was recorded in LA lawyers’ case files.

Why mix methods?

Both diversion and the effect on proceedings could be established from tracking case files, but could not help explain how or why the process was effective (if this were the case) or how the decision was taken (process and substance) to use PPP. There were no statistics on the use of PPP but the volume of legal aid bills paid for representation in PPP was collected by the legal aid authority.

The study involved 1) a file analysis of a sample child protection cases where the local authority had decided to use the process or to start care proceedings 2) interviews with LA lawyers, social workers and social work managers about decision-making about use PPP and/ or starting proceedings; and 3) observations of pre-proceedings meetings, interviews with parents about their views of the meeting, and with parents’ lawyers.

Methods in practice

Selecting LAs that used the process sufficiently; ensuring that sampling was not biased by omission of cases where PPP had/had not been used; establishing a diversion rate – assumes diversion is a possibility; observing meetings held at short notice and frequently re-arranged; interviewing parents with chaotic lives.

Key insight parents found the presence of a silent lawyer supportive.