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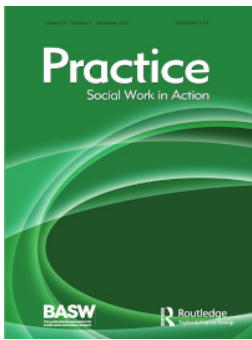
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Practice

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Reflecting on Early Help with Migrant Families: A View from Practice

Koyrun Begum, Tracey Flint, Grace Hunt, Andy Jolly and Amy Stringer

This paper describes a practitioner reflection on early help for migrant families with no recourse to public funds. We used Maclean's 'weather model' to examine the positives and challenges of the work. The reflection led to positive changes in programme delivery, but also highlighted tensions between following a structured practice manual and allowing practitioner autonomy, and the friction that 'hostile environment' restrictions caused between statutory and voluntary sectors, and between service users and local authority social workers. We suggest that the experience highlights the need for future service development which includes the voice of social workers.

Keywords: early help; reflective practice; NRPF; migrants; children and families

Introduction

This view from practice presents the reflections of a team involved in delivering a new way of working with children and families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). The NRPF rule is a restriction in the UK immigration rules that prevents most temporary migrants in the UK from accessing welfare services including homelessness assistance and social security benefits. Although it predates the 'hostile environment' policy, the British government extended the condition in 2012 to cover people with temporary leave to remain in the UK on the basis of family life, a decision which has since been ruled unlawful in the High Court.¹ However, the rule still applies to many children and families, leaving them at risk of destitution because of their lack of access to most welfare support.

The No Recourse Early Action Model (NOREAM) uses early help principles to prevent migrant families becoming destitute, rather than responding to the

¹ST & Anor v Secretary of State for the Home Department [2021] EWHC 1085 (Admin).

consequences of destitution (Jolly 2021). NOREAM is currently in a one year pilot phase, and is being evaluated by an independent team of researchers (Ott et al. 2021). The pilot is located in an inner London local authority, and families are voluntarily referred to the project through local third sector organisations and other local partners. The project is overseen by a steering group involving third sector partners, other local authorities and experts by experience. The reflection to which this article refers took place during a team meeting to discuss the first three months of the pilot.

As members of the project delivery team we make no claims of a detached objectivity, but are embedded within the everyday running of the project itself. However, this reflection should be seen as a contribution to an emerging discussion from a practitioner perspective. We aim to achieve two objectives. First, to provide contextualised information about both the positives and challenges of developing early help approaches with migrant families, which might help others who are considering this approach to NRPF support. Second, to highlight a practitioner's view of support for families with NRPF. There is a small but growing literature on NRPF social work which explores practice in the context of 'everyday bordering' (Farmer 2017), children's experiences of neglectful legislation (Jolly 2018), and the ethical tensions of professional complicity with harmful and exclusionary immigration policies (Farmer 2021; Wroe 2019; Humphries 2004). However, this is the first reflection from a local authority social work practitioner perspective, and therefore presents a unique window into social work practice at the uneasy intersection of child welfare and immigration control. Although our reflections are rooted in our own experiences and the particular context in which we practice, we suggest that there are useful transferable learning points for other contexts.

Ruch (2007) argues that reflection in social work has focussed on individual practitioner characteristics, rather than broader practice contexts, and advocates a holistic model of reflective practice. We have attempted to address this by reflecting as a whole team, taking into account the complexity of social work practice and the environment in which it takes place, and including perspectives of team members with different disciplinary backgrounds. By doing this we aim to integrate formal and informal theoretical learning into practice (Knott and Scragg 2010). We do not attempt to prioritise either evidence-based practice approaches or practice wisdom, but rather to reflect, integrate and critically examine both in the light of experience (Ruch 2007). We believe that collective team reflection on practice is a useful tool in social work, with inclusive and participatory potential, capturing perspectives and insights which would otherwise be missed.

Methods

Members of the team have different practical experiences and expertise. One is a housing advisor from the third sector, two are local authority social

workers, one is a local authority consultant social worker and one is an academic with a social work background. The team is completed by an immigration advisor, who had not yet been recruited at the time of the reflection. We used Maclean's (2016) 'Weather model', which invites practitioners to reflect on:

- Sunshine - what went well?
- Rain - What didn't go well?
- Lightning - what came as a shock or surprise?
- Fog - what didn't you understand?

Each of us completed an online reflective exercise using 'PollEverywhere' to share and rank anonymised responses to each of the four questions. These reflections were discussed in real-time during an online team meeting, written up and shared for feedback.

Reflection

Sunshine

Fortnightly team meetings have been held since the beginning of the project, and these have helped with communication, particularly for team members from different agencies. For instance, referral routes for housing advice have been smooth. This interagency working (especially with the voluntary sector) has felt positive, there has been less of an 'us and them' attitude which some of us had experienced in the past when working with families with NRPF, where the advocacy role of migrant support organisations has sometimes conflicted sharply with local authority policies and procedures. The project has also benefitted from a multi-agency steering group, a factor which has been identified as a key facilitator of successful multi-agency working (Sloper 2004).

The independent evaluation team have consulted with team members, service users and others, and this input from the evaluators and a wide range of other stakeholders (including through the steering group) has been invaluable in developing and supporting practice. There had also been a lot of goodwill towards the project from within the local authority, with an appetite for more work across the borough to support people with NRPF, and on early help approaches more generally. The project has highlighted how complex and difficult immigration issues are for families from an early help perspective, and the need for joint working within and beyond the borough. This recognition is perhaps a localised factor which might not be present in other local authority contexts.

Although the overall structure of the programme is laid out in the NOREAM manual, we valued the parts of the programme where there was flexibility. For instance, the manual has been amended as the project has progressed in

response to practitioner feedback. Early experiences of practice itself were also positive, families have chosen to engage with the project voluntarily, and support needs were straightforward, although we had concerns that this might mask a reality that people in the borough with more complex situations were not accessing the project. We felt positive that thresholds for assistance are low and that we could offer specialist support to families who might not otherwise be eligible for Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. The practice of sharing the assessment with families in the form of a letter has been received positively - it feels less like a 'statutory' intervention and reduces some of the administrative burden.

Rain

Despite broad positivity towards the project, some of us found that working with other teams/services has been difficult at times, and although there has been good will, it has been difficult to maintain continued voluntary sector involvement in the project. This can perhaps partially be attributed to the well-documented challenges of inter-agency working, including differing policies and professional identities (Moran et al. 2004; Sharley 2020), however there are also specific tensions around the role of social work with NRPF which can sometimes make inter-agency working particularly challenging (see discussion in lightning section below).

The challenges of working on a pilot project were also felt by all of us, and there was recognition that we are still working out the practicalities of how the project works in practice, with policies still being developed and refined, which has resulted in procedures which have felt unclear at times. A by-product of this has been that practice has sometimes felt quite process heavy and inflexible, with relatively large amounts of new documents to become familiar with. The minutiae of casework has taken the majority of the team's time and efforts, so there has been less capacity to work at a higher/strategic level - such as developing migrant aware practice, outreach with civil society, and cross-departmental case consultations.

At the beginning of the project, immigration advice was a problem because there was no immigration advisor in post as part of the project team, and this has slowed down progress. In the absence of a regular immigration advisor, some families have sought help elsewhere and received what they considered as poor quality immigration advice. The lack of access to immigration advice in London is well documented, and demand for advice far outstrips supply (Wilding, Mguni, and Van Isacker 2021). Immigration advice was a particular difficulty for many of our service users. It has felt like we cannot make significant progress for families without good quality and timely immigration advice. Change of conditions applications were one of the most common immigration issues that the families faced, and a more straightforward and faster system of applications would help.

Lightning

The role of qualified social workers was an area of discussion amongst team members. Much of the role was very different to the more familiar statutory social work roles and tasks we had previously been involved in. Some of us felt that the role could be performed by a family practitioner, while others felt that the training and value base of a social worker were a useful foundation for the role, and NOREAM could be an example of reclaiming a broader, more person-centred vision of social work, more consistent with social work values than the current direction of social work in the UK (Ferguson 2008).

As a pilot project, it was difficult to predict demand for the service, but on reflection, there had initially been fewer referrals to the project than we expected. Following discussion with colleagues from other services, we ascertained that this was not unique to NOREAM, and there had been fewer referrals to services across the borough than was usual at the time of year. We did not have reliable evidence for why this might be. It may have been a result of the unusual circumstances of the particular stage of the pandemic where people seeking help had already been accommodated under the ‘everyone in’ instruction of March 2020 (Hall 2020).

However, we also reflected on the fear and distrust that service users sometimes felt about accessing local authority services, which may have acted as a disincentive for referrals. There are longstanding and well documented trust issues between statutory sector, voluntary sector and service users themselves in work with precarious migrants (Farmer 2017) and although our experience has been that distrust was reduced with the NOREAM approach, there are structural issues such as local authority duties to share information with the Home Office in Schedule three of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) which can make families understandably nervous of engaging with local authorities.

Another surprise was the immigration status of the families who have been referred to us. There have been surprisingly high numbers of asylum seekers, and children with a British citizenship. Undocumented migrants have been underrepresented, which is perhaps reflective of the nervousness that undocumented migrants might have about accessing council support unless they were forced to by a crisis situation.

Fog

The project has been ‘rolled out’ in a staged approach over the first few months. Individual case work was established first, followed by multi-professional case consultations, and finally cash grants to families. Perhaps inevitably when working on a pilot project, there were a number of areas of practice which were still developing or were unclear. This could be disorientating for those of us who are familiar with more clearly structured, established projects based on existing

statutory duties. All of us on the project delivery team have existing roles which were running concurrently with the NOREAM project, and implementing a new project alongside our 'usual' jobs has been challenging.

Another issue which we wrestled with was how the project can be both flexible enough to meet families' unique needs and allow for professional judgement, but also have a consistent enough structure to be evaluated and potentially replicated in different local authorities in the future. This raised questions about the relative priority of practice wisdom and practitioner autonomy against a more rigid structure based on an external evidence base. One way that this could be resolved is through more social worker input into the initial version of the manual at the development stage. However, the ambivalence felt by practitioners between adherence to programme guidelines and the demands of practical work was not unique to NOREAM, and has also been recognised in other contexts when working with migrant children (Moberg Stephenson 2021).

One element of the programme which had not been implemented at the time of the reflection was the family grant scheme. This was designed to provide one off cash grants to prevent families falling into destitution. We discussed how this scheme would work in practice, and the most effective means of using the grant money. These discussions reflected wider questions about the merits of structured, targeted support versus more informal universal support. For instance, whether families themselves could apply for grants themselves, or if this should be led by the project team based on assessed need. Similarly, whether the grants should be targeted to those with most need, or be a universal offer to all families accessing the project?

Finally, the difficulties of developing a strategy beyond the project which embedded migrant aware practice across the borough was another area of uncertainty. We were unsure of the project's place within the existing migrant support sector, and how our offer could and should distinguish itself from that offered by the voluntary sector. Part of the solution seemed to be in outreach to organisations outside the council to find out the support that was available and how the project fitted into existing support, but this also raised the question about how the programme could be expanded to other authorities, and which factors are unique to our borough.

Discussion

The weather model proved to be an effective means of structuring our reflection, which although previously unfamiliar to us, was easily understood without additional preparation or explanation. This made it particularly useful for a multi-disciplinary team setting where no single model of reflection was familiar to every team member. The process of using an online tool such as 'PollEverywhere' to anonymously respond to the four questions was an additional advantage which allowed us to share perspectives for discussion and

reflections in a more participatory and collective way, which did not privilege some voices over others.

The reflection resulted in positive changes to the project. For instance, following our discussion, we decided to make a small one off payment available to all families accessing the project, rather than providing a larger sum to fewer families based on assessed need. This opportunity for practitioners to engage in reflection not just on individual practice, but on service design and delivery itself is not always possible in statutory social work with an established legislative or practice framework.

However, the reflection also highlighted the tensions of developing new systems, and the contradictions of the need for the programme to be both structured enough to be able to be a consistent model of practice which could be applied elsewhere, and flexible enough to respond to local needs.

Finally, the tensions between the voluntary and statutory sector, and the distrust and anxiety about accessing statutory services felt by families with NRPF were lessened but never completely transcended. These were largely due to factors outside the control of the project such as the punitive nature of UK family migration rules (Dickson and Rosen 2021) and the contradiction between the ‘everyday bordering’ of immigration controls in social care and our professional obligations as social workers (Humphries 2004).

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