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Parents as Service Users of Children's Services in England

Research Report

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October 2020

Preface

This report summarises two studies:

- My PhD thesis, that I submitted in autumn 2008 at the University of Warwick under the title: 'New Public Management, Citizenship and Social Work: Children's Services in Germany and England'.

- A replication study of the English part of the above study that I conducted as an Honorary Research Associate at Royal Holloway University London in 2019/2020.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of these studies or order an electronic copy of the whole thesis, please get in touch.

A big 'Thank you'

to 'Midcity' council, the English Local Authority who opened their doors twice to my research and supported me throughout and especially to the interview participants for their time, energy, and feedback. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to talk to me.

Best regards,

Katrin Bain
October 2020

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Introduction

Throughout the last decades, social work and public services in general have been exposed to a continuous stream of modernisation initiatives, mostly accompanied by budget cuts and, in the case of child protection, often as the result of child deaths that received a high level of media attention.

My own interest in the impact that these changes have on social workers and service users goes back to the early 2000s when New Labour was in power. The tools intended to achieve the modernisation of public services at the time were taken from reform initiatives commonly summarised under the term New Public Management (NPM). NPM aims at replicating the language, organisational structure, and market forces of the private sector in the public sector (Schedler and Proeller 2003).

Introducing the consumer

One central element of NPM has been the representation of public services users as customers or consumers. This challenges the traditional formulation of social citizenship which prevailed in the post-war welfare state which was based on rights bestowed on the citizen by the state. It is now assumed that service users' expectations of the public sector are shaped by positive consumer experiences in the private sector. On the one hand, an attempt has been made to model public services on their private sector counterparts by offering individualised services and choice, considering service users' views in performance reviews, and setting up complaints procedures. On the other hand, it is expected that citizens will take responsibility for their own livelihoods rather than being dependent on welfare (Budäus 1998, Clarke 2005).

Consumersim and involuntary use within Children's Services

The study explores the changes described above in the specific area of children's services. Children's services are characterised by providing preventive services as well as being responsible for the protection of children. This can lead to the involuntary use of services by parents. In the existing literature, concerns have been raised about the compatibility of consumerism and involuntary use of services. This has so far not been researched.

The impact of NPM and public services modernisation on service users

This is the starting point for a research study looking at the impact of NPM and public services modernisation on users of personal social services. This study is an exploration of how parents in contact with children's services are constructed in contemporary social policy and social work practice. Its overall aim is to uncover how citizenship is represented in national and local policy documents, in local organisational procedures and by social workers in children's services in England. This research was part of my PhD thesis which I completed in autumn 2008. The interviews were conducted in autumn 2005.

Parents as service users in Children's Services

Children's Services are child-centred. With the focus so firmly on the child the choice of this research to focus on parents might seem surprising. However, in most cases the success of children being able to continue to stay with their families depends on the parents' ability to make changes, and the interaction between social workers and parents plays an important part in this. It also shows the complexities of social work practice. This is acknowledged in the government paper *'Putting Children First'*:

> The fundamental purpose of children's social care is to make sure that our most vulnerable children – those who have been abused and neglected, or face other significant challenges such as a disability – can have a safe, dependable foundation from which to grow and flourish. This is achieved by supporting parents to provide the best possible care for their children or, where this is not possible, by giving them a stable and nurturing alternative home. (DfE 2016, 8)

Conservative Government Welfare Reform

Modernisation attempts did not stop with the Labour years. The Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition government and later Conservative governments continued the modernisation of public services and welfare reform, leading to a re-structuring of social security with cuts to payments and services (DWP 2010). The newly-introduced Universal Credit continued the agenda of getting people off benefits and back into work. While there is occasional mention of the customer, the term mostly used now is 'people'.

Reviewing Child Protection

In 2010 the Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition government felt that the child protection system could work better, and commissioned Eileen Munro to conduct an independent review of child protection in England (Munro 2011, NAO 2016). The results of this report as well as other initiatives throughout the years led to further changes in Children's Services.

Social Work Practice throughout time

Having followed these changes from outside of social work practice I started to wonder if and how they have impacted the way social workers work and the people they work with. I thought it would be interesting to replicate my PhD research to see what had changed and what remained constant. The analysis of the three levels of government, organisation and practitioner would provide insight into where changes have taken place, and the case vignette I used in the original interviews lends itself to a comparison. In autumn 2019 - 14 years after the original interviews - I once again conducted interviews with practitioners in the same English local authority.

Citizenship

This report uses the language of citizenship to talk about and make sense of the representation of service users in children's services. Citizenship in this context is understood as an academic and political concept as well as a lived experience (Lister et al. 2007, 1). Citizenship is thus understood as a multi-layered concept:

> Jones and Gaventa (2002) […] point out how citizenship as an identity and practice 'is likely to differ across the spaces in which people's lives are played out: the home and personal relations, local and national politics, to the global arena' (2002, p 19). (Lister et al., 2007, 10)

From this understanding it can be assumed that citizenship as a lived experience is not a coherent concept but a fluid concept defined and shaped by context. Similarly, the exploration of shifts from 'old' to 'new' should include scope for competing, overlapping and fragmented conceptions:

> Narratives of change structured around clear oppositions between past and present, or 'old and new', present an oversimplified view of change […], simple narratives of change that imply a general shift from the 'old' to the 'new' tend to tidy away some of the complexity and messiness of change. What is rather more interesting is to explore the way in which different elements of new and old are packaged and repackaged to produce organisational forms in which multiple regimes are overlaid on each other. (Newman 2002, 78)

The research design presented in the next section uses a framework that allows for competing, combined and overlapping understandings of parents as service users.

It is hoped that this report and the different conceptions of citizenship presented below can be used as a starting point to critically reflect on and discuss the impact of changes on social work practice and how to shape the relationship between social workers and service users.

A word on terminology

Social workers in both studies do not use the term citizen or think in terms of concepts of citizenship. This is a framework introduced by me to make sense of the data.

Service user is the general, official term used to talk about service users within the English local authority, and as such is used here to talk about parents in contact with Children's Services. Alternatively, parent or people will be used as appropriate.

Sometime between the original study and the replication study, the terminology changed from Children's Services to Children's Social Care. I have not been able to establish when or why this change occured. I feel that conceptually this change is difficult and will need to be carefully analysed. I will therefore be using Children's Services throughout this report.

Research Design

A qualitative case study was conducted in each research project (Yin, 2003). On the national policy and organisational level a documentary analysis was conducted. Managers and social workers were also interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and had three parts. The interviews usually started with a vignette.

> A vignette is a brief text representing a constructed case, usually a scenario of a person in a specific situation, that includes information about events […]. It is presented to an interviewee who is asked to judge the situation, propose an appropriate way of handling it, and (if necessary) justify the choices made. (Schnurr et al. 2001, 10)

The vignette was constructed as a referral received by a social worker of a case of neglect with no indication of possible causes. It is not a clear child abuse case. In both studies the participants said that this represented a typical case that could come through to them as a referral:

> You receive a referral on the Miller family. The three children - Marie 6, Hannah 2, and Michael 8 months - live with their father and mother. The health visitor is concerned that the parents are not looking after the children properly. The children often wear dirty clothes and standards of hygiene in the home are very poor. Neighbours have reported that Marie and Hannah are playing unsupervised in the street, sometimes until late in the evening. Marie's primary school teacher is also worried. She says that Marie always seems to be tired, has problems concentrating and comes to school without a lunch-box. The teacher's anxiety has increased recently because Marie has said that her parents leave all three children at home when they go shopping.

In the vignette, three people raise concerns: neighbours, a primary school teacher and the health visitor. The interview participants were asked to talk me through their response to the referral.

The second and third parts of the interview consisted of two sets of cards. The first set listed terms that could be used to speak about the parents with whom social workers work. The cards were a stimulus to get a better understanding of the roles in which social workers and managers see the parents they work with, as well as to gain an insight into the language used by practitioners in the organisation. The terms on the cards were: citizen, service user, client, customer, consumer, mother, father, parent. In the replication study I added mum and dad, as those were frequently used in the original study. Empty cards were provided so participants could add terms.

The second set of cards contained elements that might influence social work practice. The terms included were: manager, organisation, policy, education, training, personal values, professional values, literature, newspapers, journals, law, research findings, professional bodies. Again, empty cards were also provided.

The results of all three levels - government, organisation and practitioners - were analysed using qualitative content analysis with inductive category building (Mayring 2003, Mayring 2014). Each study was analysed individually before comparing and contrasting the results.

The research questions guiding the analysis were:

What conceptions of citizenship are being articulated with regard to service users in the 'modernising' social services policy reforms in England?

How are these conceptions of citizenship with regard to service users being interpreted at the local organisational level in social services?

How are service users represented by social workers and how do these representations relate to conceptions of citizenship?

Research Site

Midcity Children's Services has four neighbourhood offices across the city with specialist teams for fostering and adoption and children with disabilities. In 2005 I conducted interviews with social workers and managers in two of these locality offices. In the replication study in 2019 I interviewed participants from all four offices as well as from the specialist teams. In all cases, the participation was voluntary and interviews were conducted during working hours in the workplace. All participants were registered social workers.

The following table gives an overview of the interviews:

	2005	2019
Number of interviews	15	14
of which:		
Social Workers / AYSE	7	3 / 2
Senior / advanced social workers	4 / 0	4 / 3
Team Manager	2	2
Fieldwork manager / Children & Families Services Manager	1 /1	0
Qualified outside the UK	1	1
Agency worker	1	0
Length of time in current job: ≤ 2 years / > 2 years	9 / 6	10 / 4
Qualified: ≤ 3 years ago / > 3 years ago	5 / 10	3 / 11

Table 1: Composition of interview participants 2005 and 2019

In 2019 all interview participants were White British except for one Black African and one White European participant. In 2005 there was a wider range of ethnicities with ten White British, four Asian and one Black African participant. Both times four of the participants were men. I could not find a difference in responses based on gender or ethnicity.

Findings

The following section presents the findings. Quotes from the interviews are marked with a letter for the study (A for 2005 and B for 2019) and a number for participant.

Midcity Children' Services

The organisational structure of Midcity Children's Services and the handling of referrals has changed between 2005 and 2019.

In 2005 in Midcity's Children and Family Social Services each Local Office consisted of three teams (intake, long-term and family support), each led by a team manager who does not hold cases but who is closely involved in the decision-making regarding the cases.

Families that requested services or were referred to social services for the first time were allocated to the intake team. Once it was decided that a long-term intervention is needed, the case was transferred to a worker in the long-term team. The Family Support Team supported families as part of a child protection or child in need plan. Cases were allocated according to the social workers' workloads. Each team had a duty rota, with one social worker per day dealing with unallocated or new cases, or the cases of colleagues who were not in the office. There is a general phone number for each area office and admin staff answered calls, connected the caller to the social worker, or took messages.

In 2019 referrals are received by the Multi Agengy Safeguarding Hub (MASH) triage team, who passes referrals to the MASH team that includes staff from health, social care, the police, education and probation. The multi-disciplinary nature of the MASH team enables better information sharing. MASH decides whether a referral requires a child protection strategy meeting, or whether a child in need assessment is required. Cases are then passed on to the local offices. There is no longer any separation of intake and long-term teams anymore. Every social worker assesses families and keeps the case until it is either closed or the court has made a care order. This is designed to give families continuity with a single worker. Within each locality office are several teams with a team manager who does not hold cases but is closely involved in the decision-making. Each social worker has a work mobile phone and WhatsApp. Families can now contact the social worker directly by phone or text. Each locality office still has a team of family support workers.

The Children Act 1989 is still the main legal framework. It has seen some minor changes since 2005 but the main sections on Children in Need (Sec.17) and Child Protection (Sec.47) that are relevant for this research are still in place.

> I mean, obviously the law, that's standard. And the law hasn't really changed. I mean, there's been the odd tweaks, but generally since 1989, the Children Act is, you know, there's only been slight additions to it. It's always been the same. (B2)

<u>Technology</u>

The advances in technology of the last 15 years have had a direct, positive impact on social work practice:

Procedures online
All organisational procedures are now online, centrally updated and available to social workers from their computer or phone. This offers better accessibility than the printed manual available in 2005.

Research and literature
One of Midcity's Children's Services standards is to:

> Promote the use of Research in Practice and other learning resources that supports a research and evidence based approach to direct practice with children, young people, and their families. (Midcity Procedures 2019)

In the interviews many social workers reported regularly using Research in Practice and research summaries that the organisation emails them to inform their practice. Many said they actively search for literature around specific case issues they are facing and use online tools for direct work.

In 2005 social workers did not use research and literature regularly to inform their practice, and there was no organisational set-up to support their use.

Communication with parents
The interview participants consider it a big improvement in working with families, including parents who live abroad, that they now have a work mobile phone with WhatsApp.

> Yeah, we have a work mobile with a secure workspace and we'll have a WhatsApp within that [...] so people often text but also people that might be struggling financially and don't have signal but are able to get onto the WiFi they will use WhatsApp to text us rather than regular texts. I think a lot of parents now do prefer text or that sort of a message, that sort of format. So that helps in terms of just kind of making an appointment and that sort of thing. So that's quite useful that we are also able to do that. Because I appreciate that it is hard to get through our main phone lines to speak to us. So having our work mobiles and texting and WhatsApping makes communication with parents a lot easier. And it's not such a barrier for them getting in contact with us. (B5)

This is seen as the main reason for better involvement of fathers.

> I think we try trying to work more with mothers and fathers. I think that's something that's always been difficult. We focus our works a lot with mothers as the main carers, and those are the kind of people that we normally have contact with. We didn't, I think historically, there's been a absence of involving fathers, but we are trying to do that more and it's very important. So whether the fathers are abroad or wherever they are, we are involving them as much as we can. (B5)

Supervision and Accountable Management

In both studies, social workers had regular supervision with their managers. All social workers acknowledged the important part the team manager plays in decision making:

> The manager will ultimatley decide where the case is going and what needs to be done or advise, you so that impacts on practice. (A1)

> At the end of the day, all major decisions and plans are agreed by your manager (A2)

> Manager does play a big part in your decision making process. (B6)

> I'd say probably manager is like, one of the major influences. And essentially, if you want to make a decision and she doesn't agree or he doesn't agree, it can be quite difficult. Because ultimately, they sign things off, [...] and obviously, quite a lot of power in regards to your practice as well. (B12)

Others used their managers as a resource for reassurance, especially in the early days of working as a qualified social worker, as well as supervision as a space for reflection:

> I mean my manager is brilliant, I run everything past her, you know she is great, and you can just check things out (A6)

> I remember supervison in the early days was very much well, go for direction in terms of what is this, what is happening, on my case and being reliant on my manager saying well you need to do this, this and this (A9)

> I find my supervision really good as well, goes on for quite a long time. It verges on case management but you know, I can steer it back to sort of reflective practice if I want to. (B1)

> I'm very fortunate in that I've got a very supportive manager. I'm able to go in if I'm not sure about something or if I'm a bit kind of stuck in what decision I want to make or you know, I need a bit of guidance. I'm really fortunate that I've got a manager that's able to sit me down, kind of allow me to reflect on maybe a visit that has happened or a telephone call (B10)

While the role of the manager was described in very similar ways in both studies, the 2019 study introduced one new aspect. Some of the social workers commented on having manageable case loads, and for those that have worked in Midcity for a while, how their case load has come down. This was at least in part credited to the team managers who keep a strong focus on closing cases as soon as possible and not carrying them with you for years - as would have sometimes been the case in the long-term team before the restructuring.

Inspection and Standardisation of Services

Consecutive governments have tried to standardise and inspect Children's Services so that services are of equal quality across the country. The aim of national standards is to ensure people receive the same level of service independently of where they live and to minimise, if not eliminate, local variation (DoH 1998, NAO 2016). While it is questionable whether or not it is possible to achieve uniform services, it was certainly on the government's agenda in 2005 and 2019 and has not been achieved so far (NAO 2016).

Regular inspections of Children's Services are one attempt to achieve a nationwide standard. Service users do have access to the reports but are not in a position to use the services of a neighbouring council or cut taxes if they are not satisfied with their council's performance.

During the original study several social workers voiced their concerns about the inspections:

> I think it is one of social services' biggest faults, that the government lays down what it is going to give you a tick and a star for if you get enough ticks and that is, is the agenda to such a great extent that they forget about the other things that are much more preventative. (A2)

> With all the [...] inspections and I suppose it can look quite good on paper but the problem is they often don't measure the right sort of things. We have to keep details about children's dental appointments now. It is something a child should have a dentist and should have regular check ups but they don't ask some other obvious questions in the reviewing process like does the child have a toothbrush? (A11)

In the replication study none of the participants mentioned inspections. They are still happening, and are prominent in policy documents, but did not seem to be on the minds of social workers and managers. Two participants mentioned the rise of performance management and statistics that the organisation requires:

> In the years that I've been a social worker, there's been a constant drive in terms of performance management and stats and making sure that your stats are up to date. [...] And some of it seems to be disconnected from what we are doing. Some of it felt like just a requirement for some spreadsheet somewhere in the DfE rather than actually impacting and supporting children and families. [...] And that just for me, completely goes away from what I think social work should be about. I understand some of that, but only up to a point. I think the balance has probably tipped. (B9)

One possible explanation for the difference in significance of inspections is that in 2005 inspections had only just been introduced, and most interview participants knew Children's Services without them. Whereas after 15+ years of inspections social workers might be accustomed to it and consider it an integral part of their work within local authority Children's Services.

Contextual Safeguarding

In reading the local and national policy documents prior to conducting the interviews one new topic stood out: contextual safeguarding. Contextual safeguarding includes *"exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups such as county lines; trafficking, online abuse; sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation."* (Midcity Procedures 2019, HM Government 2018, 22) As it was so prominent in policy I included it in the interviews as an additional question.

Contextual safeguarding and especially gangs targeting young people is a new area of practice, and the social workers and managers in Midcity are still trying to find the most apropriate way of dealing with these cases within existing law and policy.

> I would say that, as typical gang culture, it was very under the radar. Vulnerable young children in vulnerable families in poverty areas, you know, who wouldn't speak to them. So I think it's always been in Midcity. But I think it's suddenly gone thorugh the roof. It's come from nowhere. And, you know, half the gangs that are in Midcity are in some way associated with the younger children, you know within our families that we work with. (B6)

Social workers are confronted with the task of protecting young people who often do not have an interest in changing their situation or are worried about the implications if they do. In cases of contextual safeguarding the Children Act 1989 still applies. Social workers might do a Sec. 47 enquiry and work with a child protection plan. As a lot of the changes in these cases need to be made by the young people rather than the parents, the results have not been good.

> I know we've had children that are in gangs that we've done section 47s or taken them to child protection and actually we're not achieving a great deal. (B14)

An alternative often favoured by the police is to move the whole family out of Midcity. That is financially, practically and emotionally not an easy task for the families and often costly for Children's Services. The only other alternative would be to apply for a court order to securely accomodate the child which is draconian and costly.

> There's lots of in all neighoubrhood teams, social workers dealing with children enrolled in the gang issues and consider whether we apply for care orders or support families to literally move to another part of the country. (B11)

Contextual safeguarding is a new challenge that social workers are facing and are trying to address in a community based, multi-agency way to destabilise some of the gangs.

I also explored whether working with parents is different if the risk of harm is outside the home instead of inside. The social workers views were multi-faceted and the results are included in the conceptions of citizenship presented below.

The vignette

The responses to the vignette are a good starting point to explore continuity and change within children's social work.

In both studies social workers would respond to the referral by visiting the family in their home. There is some variation in time frames (ranging from the same day to five working days), whether the visit is conducted alone or with a colleague, and whether other agencies are spoken to before or after the home visit. New in 2019 is that some interview participants stated that they often do a joint home visit with the police.

During the home visit the social workers
• give parents an information pack with a consent form and complaints procedure
• tell the parents about the concerns in the referral
• ask the parents to consent to the social worker seeing the children on their own and for agency checks to be done
• observe the home conditions.

The social workers in both studies were clear that different professional thresholds exist and that the home conditions might be better than described in the referral:

> You would be looking at standards of hygiene in the home and what is acceptable. Because [...] how other professionals see standards of hygiene can vary as well. (A3)

> I'd be going out and finding out sort of what the home conditions are like from my perspective because sometimes different professionals have different viewpoints on what's safe and what isn't. (B13)

In the end it is the social workers assessment which decides on needs and services offered.

Assessments are the cornerstone of social work practice in both studies. The tools used have changed over time. In 2005 assessment was a two-stage process with an initial assessment followed by core assessment if need or risk of significant harm was established. Both followed the assessment framework triangle (DoH, 2000,17). At the time assessment forms based on the triangle were available. The assessment framework triangle is still included in the newest version of *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government 2018) and in Midcitys procedures. The assessment tools used now are Signs of Safety and the Graded Care Profile in cases of neglect.

> Midcity "is committed to adopting a Signs of Safety approach across the partnership to ensure a commonality of approach and language amongst practitioners." (Midcity Procedures 2019)

We will see below that this has a direct impact on how parents are represented by social workers.

One question that social workers seek an answer to during the assessment is as to why the family is in the situation described in the vignette. In 2005 the social workers expected to find that a crucial event or a change in the family dynamic, like the birth of baby Michael, had triggered the referral:

> What has happened? What has happened before this to get to this stage? Some things significantly happened to the family there? Why has that not happened six months ago so you [are] looking at clearly something that has happened. (A3)

In 2019 the focus was less on an event that triggered the situation and more focussed the underlying issues in general.

> We don't really know much about the parents, what else is going on in the family that needsto be explored. (B5)

In both studies the social workers said it was a case of neglect, however the potential underlying issues varied:

	2005	2019
domestic violence	5	0
poverty / financial struggle	2	6
drink / drug problem of parents	2	2
mental health / depression	2	2
parents struggling to parent children	1	1

Table 2: Potential underlying reasons of the referral in the vignette 2005 and 2019

A few things are interesting about the response to the vignette in the two studies. The most frequently assumed reason in 2005, domestic violence, was not mentioned by any social worker in the replication study. The original study also generated a gendered view on parents with some social workers assuming that the mother might not be able to cope with three children and the father was either unaware of the situation as he was at work or had left the family. In 2019 there was no gendered conception of parenting and generelly the social workers were more reserved in making assumptions before meeting the family and assessing the situation. The biggest issue for social workers in 2019 when talking about the vignette as well as about Midcity in general is poverty and the impact of austerity on people (see below). Interestingly, Working Together 2000 lists social exclusion including poverty as a reason for need (DoH 1999, 9-10) whereas this is missing in Working Together 2015 and 2018 limiting it to "*family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as drug and alcohol misuse, adult mental health issues and domestic abuse*" (HM Government 2018, 13).

The possible responses are in accordance with the reasons given above. In both studies social workers would refer to family support workers and other agencies to support the family. In 2019 the social workers would also make sure the family has a benefit check and receives food bank, utility and clothing bank vouchers and other financial support (charity application for appliances or Sec.17 money), as appropriate.

Citizenship

In order to answer the research questions of how parents as service users are represented in policy, organisational procedures and social work practice I have developed a citizenship typolgy for each of the two studies. The research studies found that citizenship is not a singular concept. Based on different assumptions about citizenship present in policy documents, organisational procedures and in the interviews with social workers and managers, five conceptions of citizenship have been developed in each study. These conceptions are not rigid but should rather be understood as ideal types that constitute discursive resources that social workers can draw on, combine and redefine in order to make sense of their day-to-day interactions with service users.

The five conceptions in the original study have been designated as follows:

- the demanding-responsible consumer-citizen
- the franchisee parent
- the partner parent
- the non-compliant, failing parent
- the personalised-depersonalised parent

The five conceptions in the replication study have been designated as follows:

- the poor-neglecting parent
- the good enough parent
- the franchisee parent
- the respected parent
- the non-compliant parent

The following sections look at these conceptions and their impact for the social worker-service user relationship in more detail.

The demanding-responsible consumer-citizen

The 'demanding-responsible consumer-citizen' relates to the modernisation of the public services agenda of the early 2000s. At the heart of this agenda was a changed understanding of the citizen-state relationship and the rights and responsibilities attached to it. A big focus of this agenda was the responsibility to seek work and many benefits were conditional on this. Employment was also central to the restructuring of children's services following Every Child Matters: *'Parenting support also needs to be closely linked to advice on employment and childcare, for instance, through Sure Start Children's Centres, to enable parents to make the transition into work.'* (DfES 2004, 26)

In the area of public services, service users had been re-cast as consumers and a combination of individualist care packages and consumer choice complement responsibility in the attempt to individualise welfare. Except for one participant, all interview participants considered 'consumer' and 'customer' unsuitable to describe their relationship with parents as service users. Being a 'consumer' was understood as being linked to retail and the exchange of products for money, which was seen different from the social workers' understanding of their role as professionals:

> We are not in the market place, we intend to genuinely help people with difficulties, and we are not doing for economic gain or financial gain, so in my opinion using customer, consumer suggests that you are in the market place, and you are trying to market your product, trying to make a gain, which is not the case in this situation. (A4)

Choice is understood as the opportunity for citizens *'to select outcomes which are particularly appropriate to them'* (Office of Public Service Reform 2005, 3). The limitations of choice in a consumerist sense are most apparent in child protection:

> They don't have choice, they can't tell us to go away and they can't go, or generally can't go, somewhere else (A11).

Within the modernisation agenda the lack of choice can be mitigated by offering 'voice'. This predominantly relates to procedural rights, like the existence of a complaints procedure, having one's wishes recorded and receiving copies of minutes from meetings.

While social services are included in the government's modernisation agenda, the demanding-responsible consumer-citizen has little or no relevance for front line social work staff. This is still the case in 2019. None of the participants of the replications study use the term customer or consumer. It is also not dominant in policy documents any more.

However, elements of this agenda have been established in practice:
* Social workers give parents a leaflet explaining the complaints procedure
* Parents views are recorded and
* Labour market participation is still an aim in newer initiatives like the Troubled Families Programme or Universal Credit.

The franchisee parent (2005)

Within the English system there is a strong focus on the child rather than the parents or the family as a unit: *We want to put children at the heart of our policies, and to organise services around their needs.* (DfES 2003, 9)
Closer analysis of law and guidance does reveal the possibility of practising in a family-centred way, or at least to include the parents' needs in the assessment:

> Many children will be known to the new integrated children's services because of the social care needs of their parents or guardians. By failing to address the adults' needs, such as mental ill health and substance misuse, the solution to support children will only be partial. Collaboration is needed to ensure that both the child's and adult's needs are met. (CSCI, 2005, 168)

However, these family-oriented niches remain in the background and are justified by being in the child's interest. Overwhelmingly the child is at the centre of assessment and intervention: *Working with family members is not an end in itself; the objective must always be to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. The child, therefore, must be kept in focus.* (DoH 2000, 13)

This conception of citizenship has been designated the 'franchisee parent' as it accurately describes the relationship between parents and the state, often mediated through social workers. In the context of children and families social services parents are perceived as being the carer for the child rather than a service user with individual needs or indeed a citizen with rights. In that capacity, they are expected to meet certain minimum standards of 'adequate parenting'. In order to achieve the minimum standards of good parenting parents are expected to engage with social workers and the services provided:

> My expectation would be that they would take on board the concerns and recognise that it is not an acceptable situation. It is their children, they need to take responsibility for their children, and at the end of the day the children have got rights to live in a nice family home, and they have got a right to be safe. (A10)

If parents do not meet these standards, which amount to the franchise rules, the state intervenes:

> I would want everybody to be involved in the planning of that but particularly the parents, so that they are very clear what needs to change and what the outcomes will be, their role and what responsibility is in that, and what the expectations is and also what the consequence of that would be, if they don't, you know, so if this continued or deteriorated then you know you would be looking at moving it on into children protection, from support to child protection at the case conference. (A7)

If parents are unable to meet those standards, another franchisee, i.e. a foster carer or adoptive parent, is found (DfES, 2003, 20-21). It is more important that the child is well cared for, rather than by whom. The tension around parents' rights was apparent during the interviews and while most social workers were very clear about the priorities given to children's interests (as defined by the social worker), the were uneasy about it.

The partner parent

The term 'working in partnership with parents' was first introduced in the guidance to the Children Act 1989 as the central principle for family support services. The same terminology was used in relation to child protection, and the government guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (1999) set out 15 principles for working in partnership with families (DoH 1999, 76). A closer analysis of these principles showed that their main purpose was to minimise parental resistance (HMSO 1999, 76). Indeed the existing power relationship between social workers and parents prevented the possibility of a partnership based on *'a contractual agreement among equals'* (Smith 2005, 81).

> I: You said, 'working in partnership with parents', could you explain what that means?
>
> A1: I suppose I mean, essentially it is about co-operation, but really, we mostly work with children that are on the child protection register, so sometimes it doesn't feel, although we say the words like co-operation or working in partnership then we have got as a local authority a very specific brief, and a format that we have to follow, and sometimes it doesn't fit that comfortably. So that's the hurdle we have to get over, and I think it is about the skill of the individual workers in trying to work with parents, and saying "Look I know that you don't want social services involved in your life, but that there is a plan, we feel that your children is being harmed and is at risk, and there is a plan that we need to work together with you, and the quicker that plan gets progressed than the quicker the child gets off the register". I think it is being open and honest with parents as well. […] Yes it goes back to the spirit of working in partnership with parents and I think we need to be tightening up really, and being much better at the use of written agreements (A1)

'Being open and honest' was a phrase used frequently by social workers to characterise their relationship with parents. It is understood as '*[s]ervices that treat people respectfully, are clear about choices that can be offered and have decision-making processes in which outcomes are transparently made and reported'* (Policy Commission on Public Services, 2004, 40).

To facilitate participation, procedural rights have been introduced. These include a minimum level of parental involvement, such as making wishes and feelings known, being informed of decisions and being invited to meetings. More recently councils have adopted new ways to facilitate participation, like the use of advocates or family group conferences (FGC). These fell short of the government's ambition to *'put children and families as equal stakeholders in the planning and effective delivery of services that are there to support them and improve their wellbeing.'* (DoH 2001, 81)

By 2019 the rhethoric around working in partnership with parents had gone from Working Together (HM Government 2018) and other government publications. None of the interview participants talked about parents in this way. The Midcity Procedures still include partnerhsip with parents principles with regards to procedural rights, advocacy and FGCs.

The non-compliant, failing parent

'Non-compliant failing parents' are those who were seen as not willing to work with the social worker in the interests of the children, and thereby were seen as failing in their duty to care adequately for the children. The objective was to mould parents and/or children's behaviour to conform with social norms and to ensure that parents accepted their duty towards the upbringing of their children.

The main strategy to counter resistance was to increase control over families. This can be achieved through tight child protection plans, working agreements or by moving along the continuum of services from family support, to child protection, to care proceedings as necessary.

> To support them on child in need basis, but if there is evidence that they are not willing to work with you then you would have to go the child protection route. (A8)

> They will need to be involved in looking at how we are working with them and to be quite clear that you know they need to work with us otherwise if the situation doesn't change it could mean the children being removed. (A1)

Parents' only form of participation was to comply with social work intervention and/or court orders. Through the continuum of services from Child in Need to Child Protection to Looked After Child, non-compliance could lead to stricter control of parents and a higher level of (unwanted) services.

Social workers were asked to ensure that the reason for resistance and/or non-compliance was not based on the inter-personal relationship between themselves and the parent. If this were the case, it could have been resolved with a change of social worker (DoH 1999, A1 and A2)

The already tight controls on parents were even tighter for the non-compliant failing parent. In its deconstruction, several characteristics of children and families social services that have been identified previously became apparent. The parent's own needs, limitations and life history are mentioned as a possible reason for non-compliance, but no support was offered. Instead parents were expected to have enough of their own resources to 'pull themselves together' and look after their children properly:

> You really try and jolly people along, and get them motivated and everything, but sometimes people just can't do it, because they have such a wealth of problems they just can't pick themselves up and start making changes, which is very depressing, cos I do like a bit of positive change, but it is not that easy really. (A6)

The personalised-depersonalised parent

In the interviews the social workers said that they see service users mainly as 'parent', 'father' or 'mother'. The previous conceptions of citizenship have already pointed towards this understanding. During the interviews it became clear very quickly that social workers in fact talk about 'mum' and 'dad' to afford familiarity to the parents:

> I mean for some it is about getting the changes, and getting the relationships and those are the terms that the families relate to, they are used to being called mum, and dad and parent, that's familiar terms for them, they understand relationships that makes sense. If I started to call them citizens, client or service user, there is barriers attached to that. (A2)

> I think first and foremost you see them as children's parents, you know their Mum, their Dad, I suppose secondly you see them as a citizen, you see them as individual people (BS10)

The terminology of 'mum' and 'dad' both personalises and depersonalises parents. 'Mum' and 'dad' are very intimate forms of address, which are usually reserved for use by one's own children. They seem very inappropriate for a service user – professional relationship. At the same time, they are very impersonal forms of address, as they do not acknowledge the parent as an individual in his/her own right, but once again see him/her in his/her role as carer for the child.

The research was designed to be intentionally gender neutral, with the children in the vignette living with both parents, and without giving any further details about the parents so that they could not be stereotyped. Despite this ungendered set-up of the research project, gender was a dominant feature in the responses to the vignette by the social workers and managers. While all were very aware of, and reflected upon, gender stereotypes during the second part of the research, when asked to give their response to the vignette, the mother was automatically the first port of call. The mother was seen as the primary carer and social workers saw it as her duty to safeguard and protect her children.

> So it might be just a case that she hasn't got the support that she needs to manage the children. (A2)

> But again it is about understanding how the mother is feeling, are there any issues, are there any mental health issues, can she achive this task? (A3)

The perceptions of fathers were twofold: either the father was seen as the male breadwinner, unaware of the domestic situation as he was working outside the home, or he was the perpetrator of the problem and thus the trigger for social work intervention. When the second of these perceptions was the reality, intervention focused on the mother's protection skills because services for men, such as anger management, were virtually non-existent.

The poor-neglecting parent

> I think socially we see the effects of the Conservative government massively the poverty, the food bank voucher, you know, people are, even people that are working are under extreme poverty. […] So while it's not necessarily mentioned in the referrals, it's quite evident when you go out that one of the most underlying problems with a lot of the families, not with all of them, but with a lot of the families is poverty. (B2)

Poverty as a factor within Children's Services and especially cases of child neglect, has been prominent within this study. The Munro report lists poverty as one feature of family life that is associated with adverse outcomes for children (Munro 2011, 70), and the Midcity Procedures acknowledge it as an additional difficulty that some parents face. The *Triennal Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2014-2017,* that was published shortly after the interviews were conducted, is the first of its kind where poverty featured prominently, especially in neglect cases (DfE 2020).

In response to the vignette within the interviews the participants suggested immediate, practical support like food bank and electricity vouchers to support the family. There was little discussion of how poverty and other aspects of family life might interact long-term.

> When faced with families in situations of poverty, practitioners should seek to understand the pathways through which socio-economic issues interact with other factors to influence parenting and outcomes for children. It is important neither to ignore the impacts of poverty, nor to simplistically attribute the family's problems solely to economic hardship. (DfE 2020, 63)

It goes on to say that: *"This means that that practitioners cannot work to prevent maltreatment or mitigate its effects if the causes and consequences of poverty are not also addressed."* (DfE 2020, 224). Neither the report not the Midcity Procedures give any practical guidance as to how this can be achieved, especially in an environment of benefit cuts, shortage of housing and shrinking resources:

> The whole austerity I mean, […] constantly everything is shrinking and you have less resources. And you just wonder is that how that continues? (B8)

Some of the social workers trying to address parental poverty holistically find it is difficult and time consuming:

> Somedays I just feel like a housing and benefits worker that is all I do. Is to fight for people and that is exhausting, I know it is social work but it's not the nitty gritty of social work and it is just a constant banging your head, phoning people, checking out the law, checking out responsibilities, for local authorities, for benefits. [...] You know, and I've got loads of other stuff to do. But you know, it's a social justice role isn't it really? (B1)

While child poverty is not a new thing the awareness and impact of it within Children's Services has increased in recent years, leaving social workers with an additional dimension that adds to the complexity of their work.

The good enough parent

The good enough parent does not require statutory social work intervention as the care provided to the child is adequate. Good enough is the threshold used in organisational procedures and practice to make decisions around need and closing cases. It is important that children are *'consistently receiving a 'good enough' standard of care'* (Midcity Procedures) that is adequate. Within the Midcity Procedures *'adequately means sufficient to avoid harm or the likelihood of significant harm'* and it is further qualified as:

> The common factor in all styles of appropriate care is that they address the needs of the child. Neglectful care may have a host of common factors with various styles of appropriate care, but it fails to address the child's needs and falls below an acceptable standard. (Midcity Procedures)

This is still a very general definition and it is doubtful that parents would be able to understand how 'good enough' looks in their everyday lives. One social worker addressed the issue of language that is too general:

> Appropriate and not appropriate. So say like, dressed appropriately or appropriate use of physical force or not appropriate and unless you've been clear what those both mean in the context that's a bit of a non-word isn't it? And support being clear when you say they need support, like what type of what for? So I think there's some words we just reel off [...] and avoiding things like that. Just be careful not to use sweeping statements, [...] I think. (B11)

In the context of neglect this was criticised in the Triennal Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2014-2017 where social workers had changed the ambulance drivers report of 'unsanitary with a foul smell and a fire hazard' to the more general 'poor home conditions':

> The language we use can paint a vivid picture of the context and risks of child neglect and abuse when making a request for protective interventions. Conversely the use of stock, jargonised phrases can dilute or obscure concerns. (DfE 2020, 97)

The good enough parent is the only one of the citizen types described in this study that has the freedom to refuse social services intervention without the risk of being moved along the continuum into safeguarding, where parental consent is not required. It is however questionable whether parents are given sufficient information as to what good enough means in order to use those rights. Good enough parents might also not have access to services, as the care for their child is considered adequate.

The franchisee parent (2019)

As in 2005, in 2019 social work operates within a child-centred system in which the child's needs are paramount. Unlike in 2005, the social workers found this unproblematic and did not voice any unease about the potential tension between children's and parents' needs. Working with parents seems to have taken a back seat, with several social workers saying that they see the children in school to do direct work with them. The direct work with the children is seen as the main focus of social work:

> But we've got really good family support workers here that often help with that side of things. And allow us to focus on the children and doing the direct work with the children and understanding their views whilst the family support workers will work with parents about routines and kind of putting a bit more structure into that routine. But also, just making sure that day to day that parents are kind of aware with what they should be doing if they're not aware of that before. (B10)

In the context of Children's Services parents are still perceived as being the carer for the child rather than a service user with individual needs or indeed a citizen with rights. In that capacity, they are expected to meet certain minimum standards of 'adequate parenting'. Should they be unable to to provide this the state will step in to enable children to experience it elsewhere:

> All children have a right to a loving and secure home and, where this cannot be provided by their birth parents and wider families, children should have the opportunity to experience this through adoption, special guardianship, child arrangement orders or long term fostering. (Midcity Procedures)

Services will only be provided to parents if they positively impact the parents' ability to meet their children's needs (Midcity Procedures):

> Some of these services may be delivered to parents but should always be evaluated to demonstrate the impact they are having on the outcomes for the child. (HM Government 2018, 15)

> Although a focus of work is often on helping parents with their problems, it is important to keep assessing whether this is leading to sufficient improvement in the capacity of the parents to respond to each of their children's needs. This, at times, requires difficult judgments about whether the parents can change quickly enough to meet the child's developmental needs. (Munro 2011, 24)

In line with the focus on parents as caregivers, social workers address them often as 'mum', 'dad', 'parents' or 'family':

> I think dad, mum, parent, father, mother, family, they're the the sort of neutral and respectful terms. (B2)

> And parent is probably a mix between mother, father, mum and dad as to what their role is within the family. (B6)

The two sub-categories of the franchisee parent are the respected parent and the non-compliant parent.

The respected parent

Midcity uses the Signs of Safety framework to assess families. In addition to risk factors and safety goals, a Signs of Safety assessment includes statements about the strengths of the family, protective factors and things that are working well:

> So, are there any strengths within the family, is there a family network, is there anyone else can get involved and support them? (B13)

This widens the social workers perspective and has introduced a new, positive dimension to the interview responses. The social workers work together with the respected parent:

> And parents will share with us information around especially when we're looking at gangs and that sort of thing. They'll share with us, where the children have been, they'll share with us what they've said or what they've heard, and then we can build that in to kind of the police and also work with us. So they'll be helping us not just help their child but help other children as well. So we really do. Parents are there day to day so we have to work really closely with them in these situations. (B5)

More social workers are using the parents' names to address them and within reports to acknowledge them as individuals:

> I do try to instead use their name rather than just referring to them as mother and father because it's quite impersonal. (B11)

The respected parent is willing to work with the social workers and sees the need for change:

> All I would say is on the cases that work in terms of success for the children remaining in the home, it often is about the parent wanting to make that change. We can put the services around them. But to effectively make those changes, they have got to be in that right position. (B14)

This willingness is by no means optional. At the initial home visit parents are asked to consent to agency checks, an assessment and to the children being seen on their own. Within Early Help the parent can refuse consent. This is a theoretical right as in all but one case the social workers would consider escalating it to child protection, which would override the need for consent:

> So yeah, they don't have to consent but obviously I do explain to them that if my concerns, I look at the referral again with my manager, if the concerns are such and they don't consent then I might undertake section 47 inquiries, which would override their consent anyway (B2)

The conception of the respected parent is new in this study and shows how the organisation can influence the lens through which social workers see parents and how the relatively small change of including strengths in addition to risks in the assessment changes how parents are being perceived by social workers.

The non-compliant parent

> Relatively few children are removed permanently from their birth families and the main part of the child protection work is helping parents provide better care. (Munro 2011, 35)

Non-compliant parents cause problems for social workers as they do not engage with the support or protection plan. Non-compliance can have several causes, one of them being that the parents' life is so complex that they do not have the ability to listen or take in the concerns (DfE 2020, 67).

> Vulnerable or overwhelmed parents may not have the emotional capacity or material resources to be able to take up the services offered or to attend appointments. In such circumstances, professionals need to take time both to understand the underlying issues and to build a trusting relationship. When that happens, offers of help are more readily accepted. (DfE 2020, 68)

In some case the parent is the second or third generation to experience poverty, neglect or abuse, which

> can't be dealt with by superficial parenting programmes in my mind. Now Midcity offer lots of programmes: domestic violence, drugs and alcohol, parenting courses, they offer everything but in my mind, they touch the surface.' (B6)

This touches on one of the key questions: How do you bring about sustainable parental change within a child centred system?

Some parents might look like they are engaging without being fully behind the plan or without making the promised changes. This is commonly referred to as disguised compliance.

> It is also possible that a family may appear to engage with professionals but not follow through on actions – this is known as disguised compliance. Disguised compliance can include: a lack of measurable progress at reviews, despite apparent effort and co-operation from parents; parental agreement to change but not completing agreed actions to achieve it; change occurring due to the efforts of other agencies rather than the parents; inconsistency in the areas where change is achieved with parents opting to work with some professionals and not others or on some actions and not others; children's views differing significantly from that of the parents." (Midcity Procedures)

> I don't like to use disguised compliance because it doesn't make sense. But [...] the recommendations, the actions that have been set have been achieved. Yet, the parents are saying, we don't get the point of this. [...] But they've done what they've been asked of them. You can't have a go at them. You can't tell them they've not done something because they've done stuff which then makes it difficult for us. (B3)

And finally there are the parents who do not want social services involvement and are openly resisting the involvement. The most used intervention with the non-compliant parent seems to be the escalation along the continuum of services which gives the social workers more powers to intervene and override parental consent.

Conclusion

This report summarised two research studies undertaken in an English Children's Service to explore how parents are constructed in policy, organisation and social work practice in the context of public services modernisation. The results reported here are necessarily selective. The PhD thesis as well as the publications derived from this research offer a more detailed analysis and argumentation.

The findings of the studies suggest that 'citizenship' is not a singular concept. In each study five different conceptions of citizenship could be identified. These are ideal conceptions that serve as discursive resources that politicians, managers and social workers draw on in different combinations, depending on the situation and context.

It can be concluded that policy initiatives, organisational structure and social work practice are shaped by the wider historic and political context from which they emerge. In the context of the modernisation of social services, rather than emerging from consumerism as a dominant paradigm, conceptions of citizenship are competing, contested and combined in different ways.

Replicating the research study 14 years later has also shown that conceptions of citizenship and approaches to practice change over time and are combined in new ways. The continuity of a child centred system for example is faced with the societal changes that lead to poverty and contextual safeguarding concerns.

And then there are the goals that stay on the agenda without being achieved, like the desire for nationwide access to the same, high quality services:

> For example, the Department has a clear objective that, by 2020, all vulnerable children, no matter where they live, should receive the same high quality of care and support. However, it is not so clear how the Department plans to assess the success of its reforms. (NAO 2016, 43)

This goal inspired the inspection regime in the early 2000s and is still on the government agenda. The 2020 deadline has now been extended to 2022 as the *Putting Children First* (DfE 2016) lacked a plan for implementation.

If there is one thing we can take from this report it is to ask 'How?' more often. Whether it is a policy initiative, parental change or new practice areas like contextual safeguarding or poverty: How are we going to achieve this? How are we going to respond to this on a practical day to day basis?

It is hoped that the citizenship typology and the two data points help policy makers, managers and social workers to reflect critically on how they construct service users and the continuity and change of practice throughout time, and how they can influence it positively.

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