Children's Information

Improving lives through better listening and better data

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

January 2026

Contents

Funder statement

Abbreviations

AI   artificial intelligence

CIP   Children's Information Project

ECHILD   Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data

EYFSP   Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

GUiE   Growing Up in England

IUP   information use project

MASH   Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub

SEND   special educational needs and disabilities

SLCN   speech, language and communication need

ToC   theory of change

Terminology

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

Summary

The Children's Information Project (CIP) has spent four years undertaking rich research into local authorities' use of information about children, young people and families (generically referred to as 'children's information').

We have developed a definition of ethical and effective information use in the context of children's information and a Framework setting out component Approaches, Practices and System Enablers. These have been developed together with and informed by partner local authorities and a wider Learning Network. The Framework will help local authorities, government and others working with children to clarify and sharpen their information use.

Information has perhaps always been at the heart of social, cultural and economic exchange. However, this has never been more apparent than during the emergence of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), when corporations and government agencies are not only using huge amounts of personal information but also developing and investing in technologies to act upon, learn from or monetise that information.

The CIP started from two core principles. Firstly, the use of children's information must be effective to meet needs, achieve outcomes, fulfil duties and justify costs. Secondly, it must be ethical – proportionate, equitable, transparent, and respectful of personal and democratic rights. These two principles intersect: ethical practice is more likely to secure trust and engagement, which are the prerequisites for effective change.

Our work has focused on local authority uses of children's information in the fields of Children's Social Care and Early Years policy and practice. We have aimed to support authorities that are seeking to use information both ethically and effectively in the delivery of their duties.

Understanding information use is obviously vital for anyone in the business of doing it, but the field of practice is surprisingly ill-defined. Our aim in this work has been to identify and define ethical and effective information use, and, through working with four partner local authorities and collaborating with a wider Learning Network, to develop and test a core set of Approaches and Practices that are essential to the realisation of ethical and effective information use.

This report presents our progress in developing a Framework of Approaches. It also discusses and illustrates our work to date on eight underpinning Practices.

Key messages

At this stage we have 10 key messages for those interested in improving local authorities' and other agencies' use of children's information:

1. Ethical and effective use of children's information is central to national and local government's ability to understand and address children's needs. It should be recognised and formalised as a field of practice.

2. Ethical and effective information use rests on core principles and Approaches, and involves defined Practices that extend beyond collation and analysis of data. We have developed an initial Framework setting these out in the context of children's information.

3. There is significant good practice around information use already. However, this should be more systematic, better understood and more thoroughly mapped. Use of our Framework will help with identifying and sharing good practice around information use, so it can be adopted elsewhere.

4. At present we cannot target children's needs effectively in Early Years or Children's Social Care because we have inadequate information on what these needs are. Information available for strategic use by government and local authorities is dominated by narrow statutory categories and thresholds, process measures, and performance management. Ethical and effective use of children's information should measure and capture what matters to children and families.

5. Design of information systems should be bottom up as well as top down, both within local authorities and between local authorities and central government. It should be driven by children's needs and priorities and whether these are met, as a more effective form of accountability.

6. Local authorities and third sector organisations hold a huge amount of children's information. Much of this information is rich and reflects the voices and experiences of children and their families, as well as their needs, outcomes and contexts. Ethical and effective information use requires that this information is much better exploited and used strategically and operationally.

7. When using information and designing information use systems, more should be done to amplify the voices of children, families and the practitioners who work directly with them. This includes integrating their voices within information and hearing their views on how their information, or the information of the children they work with, should be used.

8. It is important to build local-level capacity and ability to analyse and act on local information and data, within and across sectors. This includes developing new and more meaningful indicators, and mechanisms to make existing information more accessible and (where ethical and appropriate) more readily linked and shared.

9. There is the potential for digital technologies and AI to play a role in making better use of information that reflects voice, experience and needs. For these uses of children's information to be ethical and effective, it is essential to involve children and families in determining how their data are used.

10. The CIP Framework for ethical and effective information use can help with achieving improvements in the use of children's information. It will require clear strategic ownership at the local and national levels to drive it forward.

Steps in the final year

We will conduct both within-site and cross-site evaluations of the information use projects (IUPs) undertaken with local authority partners. These evaluations will identify the changes that have resulted and the enablers and barriers that have impacted them. They will also support further refinement of the Framework for ethical and effective information use.

We will put out a call for evidence and conduct a review of the current implementation of the eight Practices we have identified. This will enable us to map and describe the field. It will also allow us to bring to light key examples of local authority innovation and learning in their use of children's information, and to illustrate barriers and challenges faced, within a strong conceptual framework. Additionally, we will consult with children and families on our Framework and findings and their implications.

We will produce a range of outputs, including tools and resources to support local authorities in developing and implementing their own information use projects, and in applying the Framework within their own information use practices and systems.

Lastly, we will deepen the existing work on impact and engagement, including active engagement with government. The five-year project will conclude with a conference for practitioners in local authorities.

The Children's Information Project

1. Core Purpose, Principles and Framework for Ethical and Effective Information Use

1.1. Purpose and objectives

The Children's Information Project (CIP) is a five-year initiative – running from 2021 to 2026 – funded by the Nuffield Foundation to understand and test how local authorities use information about children, young people and their families (generically referred to as 'children's information') to improve lives. Our work has focused on improving the uses of children's information in the fields of Children's Social Care and Early Years policy and practice. The project team comprises researchers from the universities of Oxford and Sussex, the London School of Economics, Research in Practice, and four local authorities: Hampshire, North Yorkshire, Oldham and Rochdale. We also have specialist advisors from University College London and Manchester Metropolitan University.

Information use shapes thinking. Our purpose throughout the project has been to explore how improved approaches and methods for gathering and using both qualitative and quantitative information about children and their families can build a more comprehensive understanding of their lives, as the basis for improved services that can achieve higher-quality outcomes. If we want to think better and enhance policy and practice, our approaches and methods need to be based on an understanding of the range and reality of children's and families' experiences. Core to this is ensuring that diverse voices – including those of children, young people, families and practitioners – are heard more clearly within children's information, and that these voices influence how the information is gathered, shared, processed and used.

Information has become central to our lives. Consequently, the CIP has implications for children and families, those involved in national and local policy and practice, and anyone concerned with the quality of our democracy and the capacity of society to meet the needs of children and families and to realise their rights.

1.2. What are information and data?

The terms 'information' and 'data' are often used interchangeably, and they may also mean different things to different people. For example, children and families may be more likely to refer to their 'information', 'records' or 'files' rather than their 'data'; data analysts are most likely to use the term 'data' to refer to codified and collated information; while practitioners may use either term in reference to everything that is recorded about children within information management systems. Working co-productively with all of these groups, the role of the CIP has been to enable ethical and effective use of children's information at the individual and aggregate levels, not to prescribe the language used to denote it.

However, for the purposes of clarity and consistency, we use the term 'data' to refer to the information that becomes codified, collated, aggregated and often statistically analysed within administrative datasets, whether for national statutory returns or to inform local service planning. In contrast, we use 'information' as a more expansive umbrella term. It includes not only codified and collated data but also all the material (much of it qualitative) that is, or might be, gathered about and from children

and families, recorded within information management systems, and intended for use. In principle, children's information embraces everything that local authorities may need to know about the children they work with, in order not only to satisfy statutory requirements but also to plan and deliver services to meet children's needs and improve their lives.

1.3. Defining ethical and effective information use

Our starting point is that ethics are integral to effective information use. By ensuring that the ethical principles of respect, connect, care and protect (as described by Leslie et al., 2020) consistently underpin the processes and practices of information use, we achieve more effective information use, leading to better outcomes. By adhering to principles of proportionality and democracy, we more easily establish trust and ground our uses of information in meeting needs and realising rights. This leads to improved and more meaningful information being used in more sharply defined and appropriate ways, making it more likely that desired outcomes will be achieved.

Challenges can arise at many levels. In particular, there is a need to achieve a balance between, on the one hand, the use (including data linkage) of personal information in the interests of individual wellbeing and safety or public good, and on the other hand, respect for the privacy of 'data subjects' – those whose personal information is being used. Such complications are exacerbated when the calibration of this balance is not informed by the views of 'data subjects' themselves. Further challenges arise, as highlighted in Section 1.2, in ensuring that the information collected not only meets statutory requirements but also enables local service and individual case planning in ways that meet the needs of children and families, reflecting their experiences and respecting their rights.
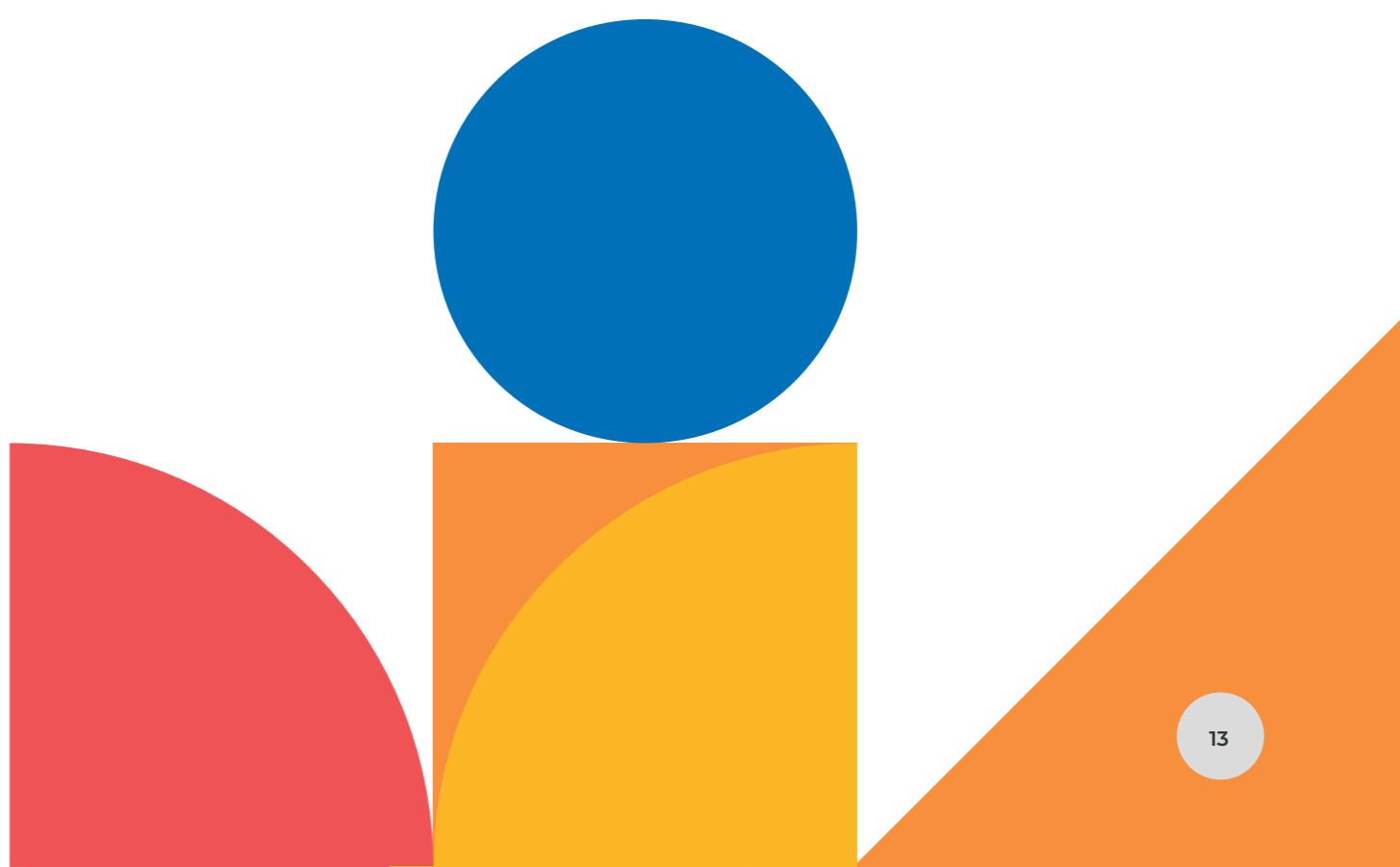
1.4. Voice

Like 'information' and 'data', 'voice' is a term that is much used but differently understood.

For the purposes of the CIP, we have taken it at its broadest sense, to mean the views, wishes, feelings and lived experiences of individuals and groups. From the outset, a core purpose of our work – and fundamental to our vision of ethical and effective information systems and practices – has been to improve how the voices of children, young people, parents and carers, and the practitioners who work with them are heard both within and about children's information and its use. This means:

- Children's information itself should comprise material that reflects their lived experiences, their perceptions of their own needs and desired outcomes, and their views on the support and services they receive or provide.

- Children's experiences, views, wishes and feelings about the use of this information should not only be expressed but also heard and taken seriously. This includes what is (or should be) known about them, how it is collected, and whether and how it is taken forward, shared, processed, understood and acted upon.

Achieving these aspirations is challenging. Voice itself is often thought of as verbal – either spoken or written, and something that can be extracted from its context and recorded or captured as a thing in itself. But voices may be expressed through non-verbal as well as verbal communications, and loudly, quietly or silently. They may be fixed or fluid, explicit or implicit, and expressed in the everyday or in more formal or public settings. Voices are invariably shaped by the contexts and relationships – including relationships of power – that enable or silence them. Some voices are much more readily expressed and heard than others; some are more understandable, predictable and palatable than others. Listening and hearing require attention to all aspects of voice. Our CIP work with partner sites and with a wider Learning Network (see Section 2.2) confirms that much of this happens in good, day-to-day relational practice with children and families in need of support. The challenge is to embed such attentiveness to the complexities of voice more deeply within ethical and effective information practices and systems. As yet, the pathways linking nuanced voice to strategic decision-making are often weak or missing.

It is essential to recognise that information and data are not neutral - voice is necessarily embedded within them. However, as several of the Practices discussed in Section 5 show, at present it is the voices – albeit implicit – of government, of performance management and (to some degree) of data scientists that speak the loudest within and about children's information, particularly in aggregate. It is these voices that determine what needs to be known, what is collected, and how it is codified, collated and processed, particularly for strategic purposes. They privilege the use of standardised measures (e.g. of developmental achievement) and measures of performance (e.g. rates of timely assessment or number of placements), rather than indicators of needs, lived experience or outcomes.

In contrast, children's and families' voices, along with other qualitative insights, diminish as their information is aggregated and translated into strategic reporting. As a result, strategic decision-making risks becoming disconnected from the needs and lived experiences of children and families, and also from practitioners' insights that may contextualise and further explain children's needs and outcomes.

Ethical and effective information use demands that the balance is redressed. Children's, young people's, parents' and carers' voices, including those expressed in everyday interactions and those that are 'harder to reach', need to be amplified, if local authorities are to provide services and support that can meet their needs and improve their lives. So too do the voices of the practitioners who work directly with them.

1.5. A new Framework for ethical and effective information use

At the outset of our work, the CIP team specified five core Practices for information use: voice, data, ethics, use and learning. This specification has since evolved through our collaborative work with partner local authority sites, consultation with a wider Learning Network and broader engagement with the field (see Section 2). We have now developed – and are continuing to refine – a Framework to define, map, and support ethical and effective use of children's information.

We plan to use this Framework in 2026 to support discussion with children, families and practitioners about uses of information and to review current practice across England. The Framework will also support work to develop accessible materials to guide improved information practice.

Figure 1 shows the core features of the Framework:

A. **Four core high-level Approaches** that are essential for ethical and effective information use:

  1. Integrating voice
  2. Understanding needs
  3. Making best use of available information
  4. Ensuring appropriate action and learning

B. **Eight information use Practices** required to achieve the ambition of ethical and effective information use:

  1. Bringing voice into co-design of information use
  2. Using theory of change to improve information use
  3. Mapping information
  4. Mapping systems
  5. Using broad sources of local information
  6. Integrating voice information into aggregate and strategic reporting
  7. Improving voice in operational information use
  8. Drawing from national datasets

C. These Approaches and Practices must be underpinned and sustained by **two sets of Enablers of supportive continuous learning and implementation** of ethical and effective information use:

  1. Infrastructure and governance
  2. Behaviours and culture

In this framework, infrastructure means the data architecture, standards, platforms and tools needed to collect, store, share and analyse information. Governance includes the policies, agreements and monitoring mechanisms that ensure data quality, privacy and interoperability as well as compliance across organisations and ethical use. Governance also clarifies roles and accountability mechanisms to ensure robust leadership at all levels while effectively managing risk. Together, infrastructure and governance create the essential environment for consistent, transparent and responsible information use.

Behaviours and culture are the shared values, norms, attitudes, and practices within and across organisations that influence how information is perceived, valued and used. These include leadership commitment to data-driven decision-making, openness to collaboration, trust among stakeholders and a learning mindset. A positive information culture promotes transparency, accountability and continuous improvement, enabling staff at all levels to engage confidently with data. By fostering behaviours and cultural norms that prioritise responsible, ethical and effective information use, systems can maximise the value of data to inform policies, drive innovation and improve outcomes.

Integrating these general Enablers with the Approaches and Practices more specific to information use will help us to refine the Framework further before the publication of our final project report in autumn 2026.
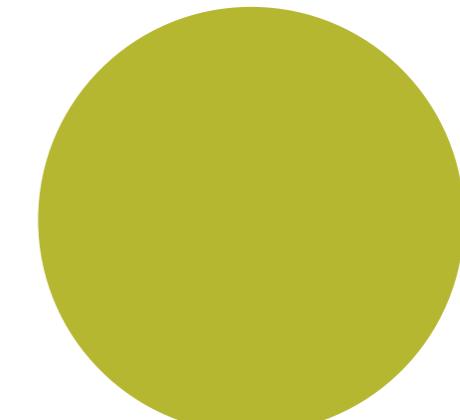
Figure 1: A Framework for the implementation of ethical and effective information use
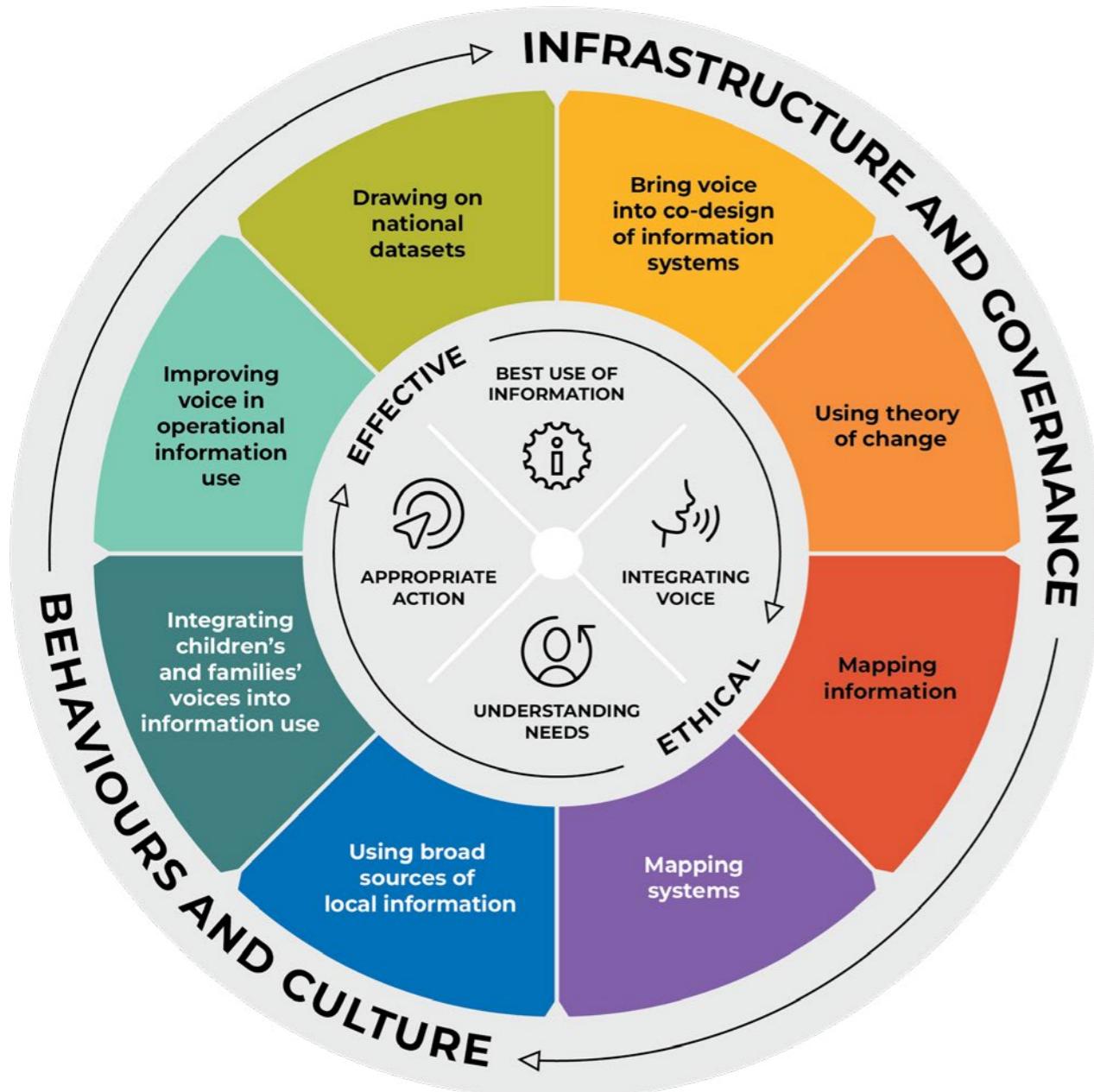
In the remainder of this report, Section 2 gives an overview of the design of the CIP and Section 3 describes the information use projects that have been designed and developed with each of our four local authority partner sites. Next, Section 4 outlines the four core Approaches to ethical and effective use of children's information, and Section 5 presents and illustrates in detail the eight core Practices and our learning about them to date. Finally, Section 6 discusses next steps planned for the final year of the project.

2. Project Design

The CIP, which led to this Framework, incorporates three essential complementary strands of work:

- **Co-producing and evaluating specific information use projects (IUPs) at four local authority partner sites**

- **Engaging with a wider Learning Network of 20 local authorities**

- **Reviewing national children's needs and outcomes frameworks**

2.1. Local authority information use projects

The four CIP partner sites are undertaking important work applying information use to topics that are significant for social policy and professional practices relating to children. At each site we have collaborated on a joint IUP with the lead local authority. Each IUP provides a basis both for a) improving the use of information at the site and hence improving experiences and outcomes for children and families, and b) developing and testing our emerging approach.

The focus throughout is not just on the information used but on how it is used – making the use of information a central practice that requires attention to who is involved (whose voices are heard) and the fit of information to decision-making.

To identify and select IUPs, we required that each IUP:

- be well specified (in terms of our five originally specified core practices: voice, data, ethics, use and learning)

- have influence and traction at the site

- have a reasonable likelihood of impacting lives and experiences

- have appropriate governance

At each site, the CIP team has been exploring how mixed methods – of collecting, recording, collating, sharing, interpreting and processing, and acting upon children's quantitative and qualitative information – can work together

to build a better understanding of children's lives, as the basis for an improved service offer. Core to this is ensuring that diverse voices – including those of children, young people, families and practitioners – are heard more clearly within children's information, and that these voices influence how the information is gathered, processed and used.

Accordingly, in Hampshire, the team is assessing how improved information use can enable children and families to receive support as early as possible when difficulties arise. In North Yorkshire, the focus is on testing how using good-quality information can improve the experiences and outcomes of young people leaving care. In Oldham and Rochdale, together with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the CIP is looking at how information can be used well to help younger children be better prepared to start school. Each individual site IUP is discussed fully in Section 3.

2.2. Learning Network

Nationally, the project has worked with a Learning Network of 20 local authorities to test the findings from the four sites and develop materials. This network, led by Research in Practice, has brought together children's services practitioners (including those whose roles focus on participation and voice), with policymakers, and those who handle or manage data, in collaborative inquiry. Adopting an action learning approach, the Network has worked in small groups defined by cross-cutting issues.

As well as reviewing and contributing to the research work of the CIP, the Network has run events on key topics designed to spark dialogue, build relationships and strengthen collective capacity across its members. These have concerned topics such as the Single Unique Identifier (proposed in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill), use of AI, and the 'Single View of the Child', as a usable digital overview of data currently held about a child.

In addition, Research in Practice has offered open-invitation webinars and podcasts for the wider sector. The webinars provide accessible, timely learning opportunities for a broad audience, featuring speakers, case studies and discussions (in either breakout or panel format). The podcasts have created an informal yet insightful platform for storytelling, reflection and knowledge exchange; we have found them an effective way to engage wider audiences in project content.

2.3. Reviewing children's needs and outcomes frameworks

We have also undertaken an in-depth review of existing children's needs and outcomes frameworks. This review looked at the adequacy of the information the frameworks use to assess children's needs and outcomes, and the extent to which they include the voices of children, families and practitioners. It was conducted with a view to informing and shaping further development of these frameworks in policy and practice, and deepening understanding of children's needs.

This review involved three strands of work. Firstly, we undertook an initial scoping and learning exercise with members of the CIP Learning Network during the project's 'discovery phase'. This included a half-day workshop on children's needs and outcomes frameworks and voice innovation with individuals from local authorities participating in the Learning Network, facilitated by Research in Practice. Secondly, members of the CIP team conducted a desk review of a wide range of children's needs and outcomes frameworks, identified through a scoping and learning exercise (during the discovery phase) and a search of academic databases. The desk review provided an assessment of the information used within each framework and the various methods and approaches that have been used in existing framework initiatives to capture, embed and amplify voice. Thirdly, to provide further insights and context, we undertook small-group discussions and interviews on the theme of children's needs and outcomes frameworks

and voice innovation. These were held with individuals from partner sites, other local authorities and national stakeholder organisations.

This work was essential to the development of the 'understanding needs' element of the Framework (as described in Section 4.2). Some of this work is also discussed in Section 5.8, in relation to the use of national datasets.
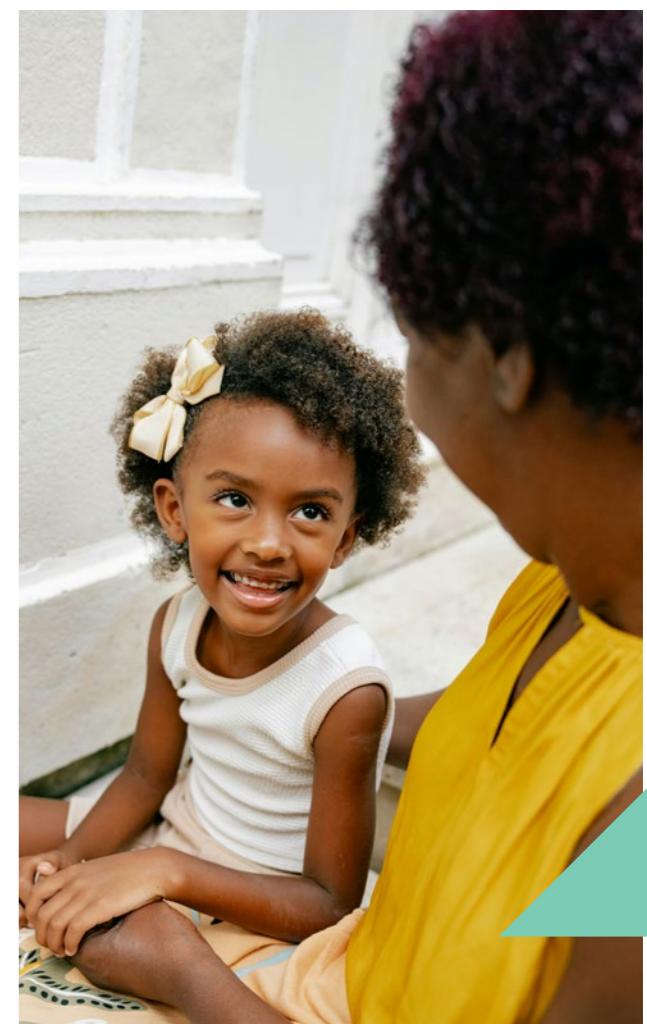
3. Site Information Use Projects

3.1. Hampshire: Integrating parents' voices to improve Early Help for children, young people and their families

Hampshire's work with the CIP is focused on improving the local authority's use of children's information to enhance the provision of Early Help to children, young people and their families who do not meet the threshold for statutory services. The aims are to identify and respond early to their needs, to prevent their needs from intensifying such that they require escalated support from Children's Social Care.

The specific focus of Hampshire's IUP changed significantly through several iterations, including our use of theory-of-change practice (as described in Section 5.2). The original intention was to develop and test the potential of predictive analytics to inform the targeting of services and prevent onward referral to Children's Social Care. Reconsideration of this aspiration paved the way for a new focus on creating real-time 'accessible case summaries' on an online dashboard, to provide a holistic 'Single View of the Child' and inform Early Help decision-making. As discussions continued, with the participation of a particular local Early Help team, it became clear that there was commitment and energy behind the idea of bringing diverse voices – including those of parents, carers, children, young

people and practitioners – more prominently into children's Early Help information, and considering how that information should be used. This in turn should assist practitioners and managers to make informed decisions about how best to provide timely support for children, young people and their families.

The IUP now chosen is making a start on integrating parents' and carers' voices in this way, building on and maximising the value of existing touchpoints. Following a referral for Early Help, practitioners routinely call parents or carers to let them know of the referral and to clarify data protection conditions. They will now take advantage of that call to listen to parents' and carers' views about their child's and family's needs and circumstances. These calls will be recorded as a Voice Note within the Early Help service's information system for reference in further planning and decision-making. The intention in the present IUP is that these efforts will primarily improve information use for operational purposes, allowing practitioners to work more ethically and effectively with individual children and their families. Further down the line, Hampshire colleagues may also explore whether and how these Voice Notes may additionally be used in aggregate to inform strategic planning.

The information use Practices we have used in Hampshire are particularly highlighted in Section 5.7.

3.2. North Yorkshire: Using better information to meet care leavers' needs and improve their outcomes

The North Yorkshire project seeks to explore how Children's Social Care and its partner agencies can most effectively meet the needs of care leavers through the better use of voice-informed data and information.

This IUP specifically focuses on:

- bringing appropriate information together to enhance individual work with young people
- aggregating meaningful outcomes measures to inform service changes
- enhancing the voices of young people in the use of information

North Yorkshire has a data dashboard for its care leavers' service that is used by managers, assistant managers and data analysts. The dashboard is fed by data collected in the case management system, where personal advisors working with care leavers enter case notes and monthly data returns. It is updated daily and is used to monitor the effectiveness of the care leavers' service.

However, the data in this dashboard focus primarily on the measures that are required by Department for Education data returns: accommodation, work, education and being 'in contact' with the local authority. Other geographical data are also provided, as well as the number of up-to-date Pathway Plans. Nevertheless, this leaves a number of gaps in

the holistic picture of the care-leaving cohort's needs and outcomes – consistently noted as central to improving care leaver outcomes. These data are also limited in how the voices of young people are included.

By the end of the project, we will ensure that North Yorkshire's data dashboard better reflects meaningful outcomes, as determined by young people and practitioners, rather than being dominated by outcome indicators as determined by government data returns. We hope that, in time, this will lead to improved outcomes for care leavers.

The information use Practices we have employed in North Yorkshire are particularly highlighted in Sections 5.5 and 5.6.

3.3. Oldham: Improving the use of information to meet Early Years speech, language and communication needs

The IUP in Oldham focuses on improving information on the speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs) of babies, toddlers and their families. It aims to improve the exchange of meaningful information between parents and practitioners to identify SLCNs, and to enhance the accessibility of that information across the wide range of services involved.

Improving information use for SLCNs requires knowledge and understanding of the vulnerabilities and social risk factors that can affect children's development and everyday communication experiences. Such efforts need to be grounded in a holistic understanding of children's development – including the links between their SLCNs and their socioemotional development – and in the knowledge that children's speech, language and communication development is situated within their social environment. Research has consistently identified that plentiful, socially meaningful and contextually rich interactions between children and their parents and carers are needed to optimise early development (Law et al., 2017).

Oldham's IUP aims to improve ethical and effective information use both operationally, with individual children and families, and across the wider local cohort. Our Oldham site partners are working to co-produce, with parents, practitioners and managers, new ways of engaging with individual children and

families. Specifically, these engagements aim to identify children's SLCNs and to document and share children's and families' own rich and situated insights into their own experiences. This should support improved and more meaningful screening assessments, and better decision-making to support families and signpost them towards the services best suited to their needs.

Oldham colleagues are also working to improve the accessibility and use of this information at the aggregate level. This effort should inform their analysis of SLCNs across the local cohort, helping them to plan and commission services that are responsive to specific contexts and appropriate to different levels of need. The aim to include wider and richer measures to identify and monitor SLCNs aligns with Greater Manchester's Speech Language Communication Pathway. The Pathway guides decision-making around the support and interventions offered to families and children relating to SLCNs within the combined authority's 0–19 services.

The information use Practices we have used in Oldham are particularly highlighted in Section 5.1.

3.4. Rochdale: Using more holistic, voice-inclusive information to support service commissioning and planning

The focus of Rochdale's IUP is 'school readiness'. The local authority is concerned with improving the quality – including the integration of voice – and accessibility of information that is collected across agencies to inform neighbourhood-level planning and commissioning of Early Years services to meet children's needs.

The local authority is divided into five neighbourhoods, which are aligned with its Family Hub service offer – for children 0–19 years, or 0–25 years for individuals with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) – and neighbourhood board governance structure. Each neighbourhood has its own priorities, with considerable contrasts and diversity within and between neighbourhoods in terms of the socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and stability or transience of their communities.

Amid this diversity, our Rochdale site partners are particularly concerned to ensure that the Early Years information they use includes the voices of parents and carers who are seldom heard. These are people who, for a variety of reasons, rarely access Early Years services or participate in parent panels and participatory forums that currently exist. As a result, their children's needs are likely to be less well understood and may be less well met.

Rochdale's IUP builds upon earlier work with children and families in their communities. This includes work with the Behavioural Insights Team to understand the barriers hindering hidden communities' uptake of Early Years provision for two-year-olds. Another example is Rochdale North's participation in the Greater Manchester Early Family Help Trailblazer Programme, which focused on bringing multiple voices (including children's and families') into planning community-led Early Family Help at neighbourhood level. In both of these projects, there was a focus on the stories behind the data.

The specific focus of the IUP is to undertake proactive work to engage with seldom heard families in order to co-develop a set of indicators that are as yet missing from school readiness assessments. These indicators would better encapsulate these families' voices about their children's Early Years needs and circumstances. They will be incorporated into a measurement framework that will be trialled and reviewed with parents, carers

and practitioners (and further refined, within the CIP period if possible, or afterwards if not). In the longer term, Rochdale intends that neighbourhood boards will have access to clear information about school readiness that better captures the voices of parents, including those who are seldom heard. This should afford more nuanced, contextualised understanding and service planning, to meet the Early Years needs of the diverse children and families in Rochdale's communities.

The information use Practices we have used in Rochdale are particularly highlighted in Section 5.2.

4. Core Approaches

The four IUPs were co-designed between CIP researchers and local authority partners to ensure they are of value, are deliverable locally, and are founded on sound research methods and ethics. Reviewing this activity, we identified four core higher-order Approaches that intersect but are distinct and essential to ethical and effective information use:

· **Integrating voice**

· **Understanding needs**

· **Making best use of available information**

· **Ensuring appropriate action and learning**

Each Approach is outlined briefly in this section. The four are supported by eight core Practices, discussed in detail in Section 5.
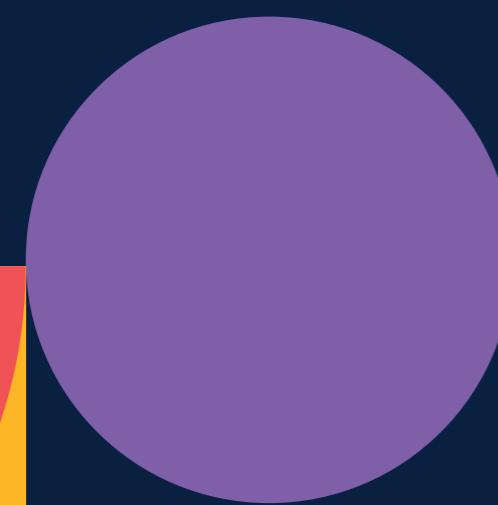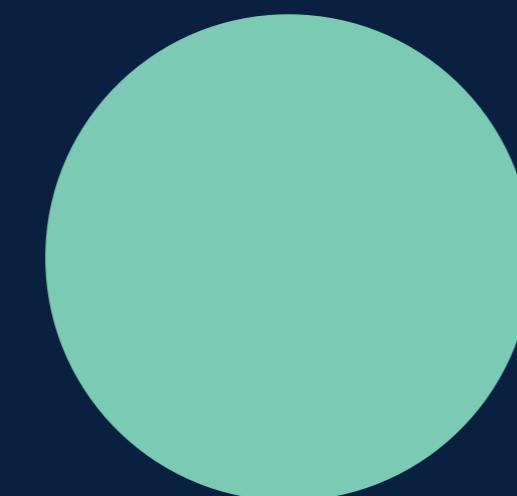
4.1. Integrating voice

It is an essential prerequisite for ethical and effective information use that the multiple voices of children, young people, families and practitioners are heard both within and about their information and its use. Their voices need to be integrated within children's information at the aggregate and individual levels, in ways that are meaningful and that can be accessed, analysed, understood and used.

As illustrated in several of the information Practices presented in Section 5, the CIP is seeking to develop information practices which recognise that voice is complex and relational. It may be expressed or silenced in many different ways, explicitly or implicitly and often in the context of relationships of power. At aggregate levels, not only the complexity of voice but also its diversity and visibility within children's information need particular attention. At present it is the government's voice – rather than children's and families' voices about their own lived experiences – that dominates within national and local administrative datasets.

Ethical and effective use of children's information also demands respect for individuals' democratic rights to have a say about what happens to their own information. There need to be robust, accessible mechanisms in place to invite, recognise and respond to the views, wishes and feelings of children, families and practitioners about

what information should be known, how it should be gathered, what should happen to it and for what purposes. This rights-respecting information Practice needs to be sewn into day-to-day work with individual children and families, and into collective mechanisms to inform strategic policy and planning. Consultation between CIP personnel and members of the Learning Network suggests that, despite many local authorities' commitment to participatory mechanisms in general, few if any of these have been established to air and hear children's, young people's or families' voices about how their information is used. Several of the Practices discussed in Section 5 seek to redress this.

4.2. Understanding needs

Ethical and effective use of children's information demands that there are suitable frameworks, relying on appropriate data sources, that are fit for purpose to provide authentic and meaningful understanding of children's needs and outcomes.

As discussed in Section 2.3, a review of Children's Needs and Outcomes Frameworks has been undertaken as part of the Children's Information Project. This identifies eight innovation challenges for Children's Needs and Outcomes Frameworks:

Challenge 1: Multidimensionality and focus on children's and young people's lives and experiences. This challenge is about building data infrastructure that focuses directly on children's lives and experiences and their real opportunities for wellbeing and flourishing across multiple domains.

Challenge 2: Life paths and unmet needs. The focus here is on providing rich information on children's and young people's life paths and trajectories, including robust evidence on patterns of interaction with multiple services and the dynamics of changing needs over time.

Challenge 3: Context informed. This challenge is about ensuring that the assessment of needs and outcomes is supplemented with meaningful information on the multiple environments with which children and young people interact as they develop and grow, including more complete data on household socioeconomic disadvantage and place.

Challenge 4: Voice enabled. This means capturing, embedding and amplifying children's and young people's voice information – that is, information on the views, feedback, perspectives, experiences, wishes, feelings and priorities of children and young people, or of parents, carers, practitioners or wider community groups or advocates acting in their interests.

Challenge 5: Equalities and inclusion of subgroups. This challenge focuses on tackling 'data exclusion' and building up more inclusive data infrastructure that provides robust information and evidence on the needs, outcomes, life paths and circumstances of children and young people from the most disadvantaged subgroups (sometimes referred to as 'vulnerable', 'marginalised', 'seldom heard', 'hard to reach' or 'left behind').

Challenge 6: Qualitative insight and learning. To maximise insights and learning, the information base used to assess children's needs and outcomes should incorporate qualitative as well as quantitative data.

Challenge 7: Localism. This challenge is about avoiding over-centralisation and more fully harnessing the decentralised information, knowledge and understanding of children's and young people's needs and outcomes embedded within local authorities.

Challenge 8: Empowerment, influence and action. Improved and meaningful assessment of children's and young people's needs and outcomes should not just be about collecting information. It should empower them to be agents of social change by ensuring that their information – including their voices – is heard and taken seriously, and influences decision-making, policy and practice.

These eight challenges have been integrated into our Framework for ethical and effective information use. Challenge 4 aligns with 'integrating voice'. Challenge 6 relates to 'integrating voice' and - with Challenge 7 - to 'making best use of available information'. Challenge 8 involves 'ensuring appropriate action and learning'. Challenges 1,2,3 and 5 are essential to a sound understanding of needs and relate to Practices 3 and 8.
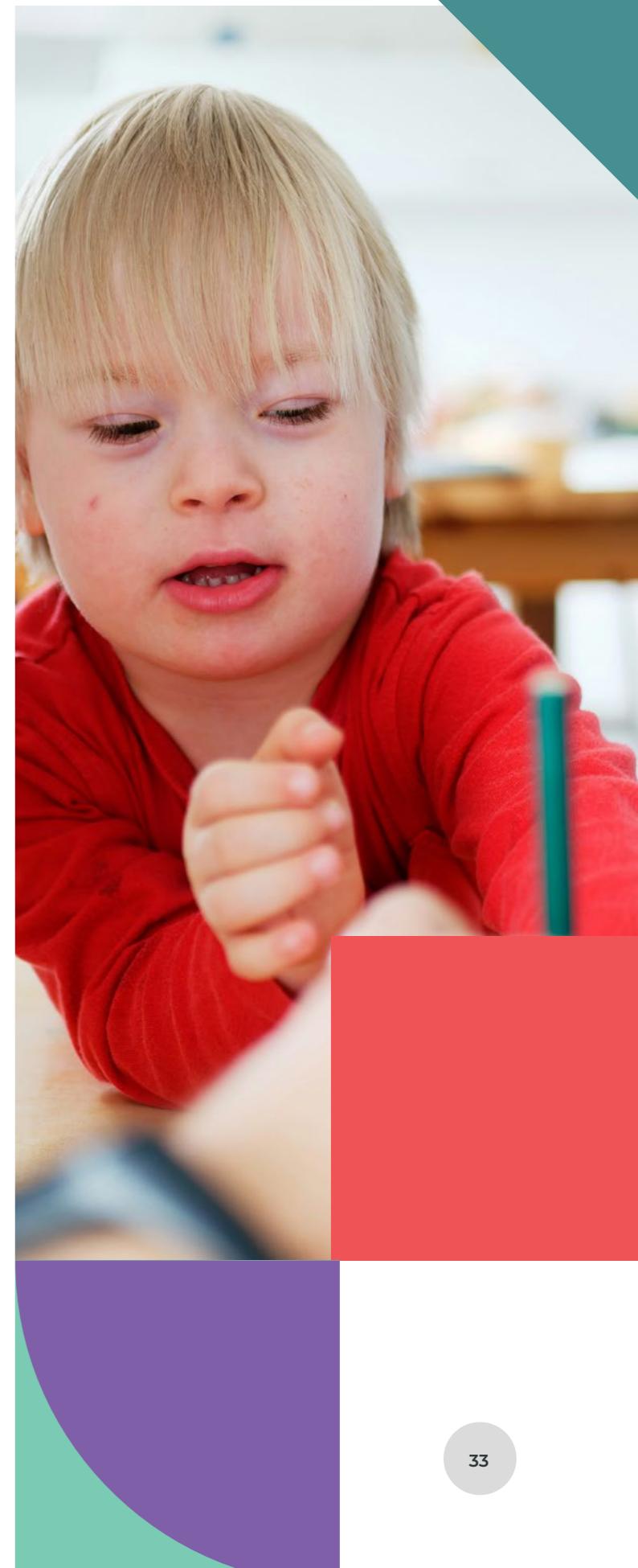
CORE APPROACH 3

4.3. Making best use of available information

A wide range of information may provide insight and knowledge to support decision-making in children's social policy and practice. Both central and local government often rely on readily available and recognised measures and data for reporting and strategic use.

However, these measures have significant limitations and may be of questionable validity. Many rely on proxy indicators – such as a parent's report on behalf of their child – or on information collected for different purposes from those for which it is now being used. Many focus more on service performance than on the needs of children or young people themselves: for example, the statutory indicator of care leavers' 'suitable accommodation' marks whether the local authority needs to (re)house them, not whether they are living near friends, education or job opportunities that help them to thrive. Additionally, as our work on Practice 3 (see Section 5.3) shows, as children's information becomes 'datafied' (codified for aggregate analysis), it is increasingly reduced to binaries.

These issues hinder the effective use of children's information at both national and local levels. Analysis is often limited to statistical benchmarking against nearest neighbours on national indicators. On the one hand, local authorities are required to record and report significant information according to criteria dictated by statutory requirements

rather than local priorities. Much of the other valuable information that they collect and codify is stored in their administrative datasets. It feeds their dashboards and may help with local strategic planning and decision-making, but it never reaches – still less informs – national strategic thinking. Even locally, effective use of this codified information may be compromised when it is stored in data silos, particularly where there are poor data links between agencies and services.

Still more striking is that local authorities also gather much richer information about children and families, but this commonly rests

within management information systems, particularly individual case records, and goes no further to inform local, let alone national, strategic thinking. It is primarily within this information that the voices of children, families and practitioners are recorded, and here is where much of the more nuanced, often qualitative information that can serve holistic operational decision-making in day-to-day practice can be found. However, even within this plethora of information, there may still be 'voice gaps', and the absence of accessible, up-to-date summaries can make it hard for practitioners to find the right information at the right time. Meanwhile, very little of this voice-rich information becomes integrated within administrative datasets to enable analysis that can inform local, let alone national, strategic planning.

These gaps and limitations need to be addressed in order to achieve ethical and effective use of children's information. This will require commitment, time, and a combination of ambition and practicality. Several of the Practices discussed in Section 5 offer ways forward.

4.4. Ensuring appropriate action and learning

Appropriate action and learning are vital outcomes of ethical and effective information use. Two of the eight challenges express this: Challenge 7 Localism; Challenge 8 Empowerment, influence and action.

We have found it valuable to apply the theory-of-change discipline to information system design. Doing so draws a transparent, ethical, effective and proportionate link between information use and intended outcomes, with a clear mechanism for influence on decision-making. This is necessary for effective action and to support learning, action, review and continuous improvement.

The Enablers (see Section 1.5) are also important here. Local leads in information use must have strong support, and good governance must be in place to achieve long-term improvements. If the aim is to influence decisions, there must be a clear path from information collation to use, with sound local understanding of the quality of information used as an aid to decision-making

5. Eight Practices for Ethical and Effective Information Use

In this section we introduce the eight Practices through which we have sought to operationalise the four core Approaches outlined in Section 4. We hope that breaking things down in this way will make the requirements and opportunities for ethical and effective information use more tangible. The Framework of eight Practices is a working model that we will use to design a call for evidence to better map examples from local authorities across England and to co-design improvements to our Framework with children, families and practitioners.

Four of the Practices are foundational. In an ideal world these would be prerequisites for readiness in establishing an ethical and effective IUP:

- Bringing voice into co-design of information use

- Using theory of change (ToC)

- Mapping information

- Mapping systems

The next four Practices comprise ways of improving information use to support decision-making that have been observed in the four local authority projects:

- Using broad sources of local information

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

- Improving voice in operational information use

- Drawing on national datasets

These eight Practices intersect and operate together to support continued learning and sustained improvement. Local authorities will need to emphasise different Practices at different times, and they will package them together in different ways in different uses of information. Together they are a clear set of Practices that can help us to define and map what is needed to implement ethical and effective information use.

Together they are a clear set of practices that can help us to define and map what is needed to implement ethical and effective information use.

The following discussion is intended to explain and illustrate the eight Practices, drawing on the work of the CIP and our learning to date. The CIP research team and the partner sites will work with Research in Practice and the Learning Network over the next year to develop clearer and more practical tools to support these Practices (see Section 6 for next steps).

We will use these eight Practices as a device to help us seek and map other examples from across England in order to learn about the successes and challenges of achieving ethical and effective information use.

PRACTICE 1

5.1. Bringing voice into co-design of information use

In this subsection we look at the co-design of information use and the importance of integrating voice into the design of IUPs and related endeavours. We draw out general lessons and then explore the example of the CIP's work in Oldham to support understanding and documentation of SLCN information at the operational level. We briefly describe the stages involved, links to other Practices and some of the challenges faced.

The nature and ambition of co-production

A core ambition of the CIP has been to work co-productively with children, families, practitioners and managers to improve how children's information is used. Co-production can mean different things in different contexts. For the CIP team, it means that from the outset – and throughout the work – everyone concerned with the use of children's information should, as far as possible, have

the opportunity to shape decisions about which projects to pursue, their purposes, the theories of change underpinning them and how they should be implemented.

This approach requires co-productive design that is:

· **Consultative:** Mapping perspectives and current information use practices and systems, and noticing where voices are missing

· **Collaborative:** Encouraging inclusive dialogue on what needs to be improved and why

· **Stakeholder-led:** Ensuring all voices carry real weight in shaping direction

These ambitions have created opportunities but also significant challenges. Experiences gained through the CIP offer important lessons for others seeking to improve the use of children's information through co-production.

Flexible and iterative approaches to dialogue

In practice, the CIP has sought to bring together as many voices as possible in the co-design of IUPs. This means building on existing networks and relationships while also seeking new ways to involve groups whose voices are missing.

We have used a wide range of consultative and dialogue-based methods, including round-table conversations, individual interviews, focus groups, ToC workshops, shadowing activities and reviews of case records. Importantly, we have used these methods iteratively – each informing and adding to the value of the others. For example, the voices of parents, young people and practitioners heard through reflective interviews about their experiences of information use were fed back to site teams, prompting further reflection and adjustments to IUP design

and planning. There was no single formula for when and how these activities should happen. They varied across sites depending on the type of information project and what it involved, the (sometimes shifting) circumstances in which it was taking place, and organisational readiness for change. For instance, IUP planning in Rochdale was delayed due to staff resource issues; in Oldham the timing, sequencing and IUP focus were impacted by a wider service review; and in Hampshire staff changes introduced new voices and priorities. Flexibility is essential – not only for effective co-production but often simply to keep IUPs viable and of value.

Challenges and opportunities for stakeholder-led co-production

Inclusive, stakeholder-led co-design of IUPs has proved more readily achievable with managers and practitioners than with children and young people, and at times more so than with parents and carers too. One key reason is specific to the CIP and need not affect IUPs developed by sites for themselves. Because our project involves partnership between researchers and local sites, university research ethics and data protection

requirements meant that the IUPs had to be quite well defined before children and families could become involved at all. One way of addressing this early on was for sites to draw on their own work with existing participatory groups, such as children in care ambassadors and care leaver apprentices in North Yorkshire, and parent panels in Oldham and Rochdale. These early, voice-informed insights helped to shape projects before direct engagement with children and families became possible.

Other challenges, however, are more generic. Some children, young people, and parents or carers are harder to reach, especially those who are marginalised and/or less able to participate and express their views, or less confident or trusting about doing so. Even where participatory forums exist (such as children in care councils or parent panels), their members may not fully represent wider groups. In Rochdale especially, the IUP focuses on seldom heard families, whose voices by definition are not represented

within existing parent panels. Mechanisms for hearing and acting on voices expressed through these forums also vary. Practitioners sometimes worried about asking families what improvements they wanted when they lacked the power to deliver the desired changes.

Underlying all of this is a fundamental power imbalance between those using and providing services. It is important that attempts to achieve inclusive co-design of information use never overlook this. Whether children's and families' voices can effectively be heard depends on agencies' commitment to a genuinely inclusive practice and learning culture, and children's and families' confidence that sharing their views will make a difference.

Building shared understanding and a practicable vision

Another challenge is that the concept of 'information use' is not always familiar or meaningful to participants. Children, parents and carers, practitioners, and managers may interpret the term differently – or may not recognise it as a practice in itself, let alone a priority for improvement.

> **Whether children's and families' voices can effectively be heard depends on agencies' commitment to a genuinely inclusive practice and learning culture.**

Our experience during the CIP has highlighted that inclusive dialogue is essential to build a shared understanding of what information use is and why it matters, and to agree on practicable priorities for improvement. This also means bringing together and aligning strategic and operational perspectives, sometimes across several services. In Hampshire, for example, an initial, strategically led vision for using predictive analytics to better target Early Help shifted to a more grounded initiative, with shared commitment across service management and a local delivery team, to bring parents' voices into operational information use for Early Help. In Oldham and Rochdale, efforts to improve Early Years information have required joint understanding and commitment across multiple agencies. Achieving this kind of engagement and consensus in any context can be slow and resource intensive, but it is essential for genuine co-design and buy-in.

For children, young people, parents and carers, the question of how their information is used was sometimes familiar – especially to those who had repeatedly been asked the same questions but felt their answers had not been heard. However, for

many, an invitation to express their voice about how their information might be used can be confusing or abstract. We found it was particularly important to frame meaningful, accessible questions before children and families could feel motivated and engage confidently in dialogue about the use of their information.

Supporting co-produced change at a local level

As our work with the various sites has progressed, we have learned more about how voice and information practices happen locally, and how change can be co-produced. Making cultural and system-wide changes is not easy. Staff can sometimes be cautious about change, especially when it involves trying out new or untested ideas.

One particular lesson learned is the value of having local 'drivers of change'. These people can inspire others, build enthusiasm, and help to bring about both cultural and system change. In North Yorkshire and Hampshire, for example, such colleagues have played key roles in developing and progressing IUPs and have found ways to build on existing good practice and local strategies. In Rochdale, Early Years team members have assumed the role of

'practitioner-researchers', taking ownership of testing, adapting and learning from the IUP work directly. This bottom-up approach has the potential to generate valuable learning for the future, empowering operational teams with the confidence, resources and support to reimagine and help to realise the potential of children's, families' and practitioners' voices to guide information practices.

Our review of existing children's needs and outcomes frameworks (see Section 2.3) identified several examples of frameworks that have made, and are making, clear efforts to integrate voice. Specifically, we noted three distinct stages at which children's and families' perspectives can be brought in:

- **Framework development, design and governance:** Involving children, families and practitioners in shaping the framework, what it measures and monitors, and how it is used

- **Framework operationalisation and implementation:** Ensuring that voice is captured, collected and reflected in framework data and indicators

- **Framework influence:** Making sure that the insights gathered through the framework actually shape decision-making, policy, strategy and action

This typology is summarised in Figure 2. It aims to help policymakers and practitioners at all levels to think about where and how voice may be integrated within their own frameworks. It shows how several of the core Practices for ethical and effective information use might be linked: co-design to ToC, to achieve integration of voice into strategic and operational uses.

Figure 2: Life cycle of voice in children's needs and outcomes frameworks

Voice in framework development, design and governance

Methods and approaches:
- Advisory groups and panels (e.g. parent panels)
- Interviews and focus groups
- Participatory methods
- Delphi method
- Working groups, meetings and workshops
- Surveys
- Case studies

Voice in framework operationalisation and implementation

Methods and approaches:
- Experience and voice-based surveys
- Coded and open text responses
- Assessment approaches
- Subjective well-being measures
- Self-reported measures
- Observation
- Case studies and notes

Voice as influence and action

Methods and approaches:
- Voice-based service information
- Changes to services resulting from voice-based information
- Voice in practice decision-making: children have choice and control
- Voice audit mechanisms
- Empowerment of children and young people as decision-makers
- Parent panels with decision-making

Example: Co-designing better use of information on children's speech, language and communication needs in Oldham

Oldham provides a useful illustration of how voice can, to a significant extent, be brought into the co-design of an IUP through consultation, dialogue and reflection. Our iterative process is shown in Figure 3.

The discovery phase work began with discussion between the researchers and senior local authority leads to pinpoint a particular area where the use of information concerning children's Early Years and school readiness could usefully be improved. Together, the Early Years lead, individual service leaders and the in-house data analyst decided to prioritise collection and use of more holistic information on children's SLCNs, for both operational and strategic use. The next step was to widen participation through dialogue with Early Years service leads and practitioners working with individuals with SEND and SLCNs. However, our efforts to engage parent panel members were largely unsuccessful, highlighting that the goal of the IUP – to incorporate parents' voices within and about their children's information – is both

Figure 3: Research cycles of design, test, evaluation and reflection in collaboration (adapted from Fraefel, 2014; Sayre, 2023)
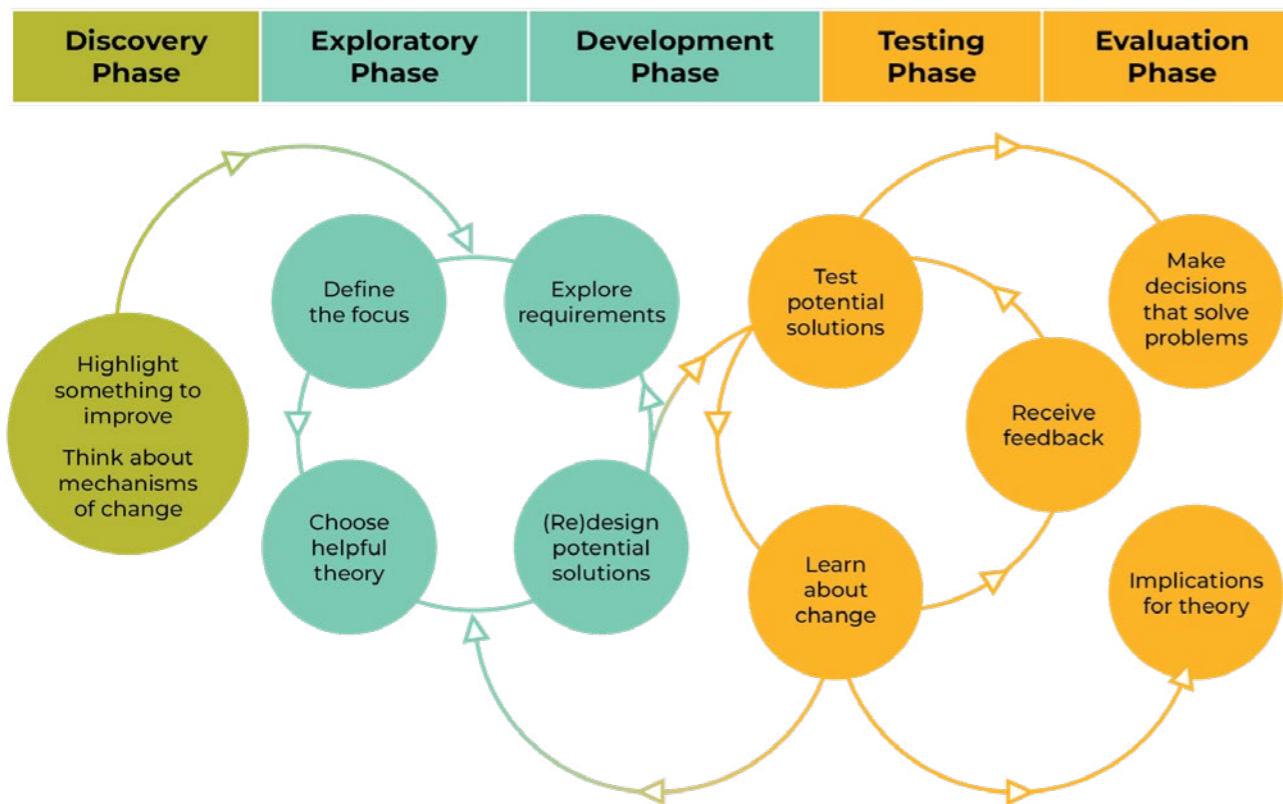
important and challenging. At an initial ToC workshop (see Section 5.2), strategic and service leads, and the manager of a SEND parent forum, discussed desired outcomes and identified mechanisms of change to pursue when implementing an SLCN-focused information project

Next followed an exploratory phase of information mapping (see Section 5.3). Researchers reviewed documents and interviewed and held group discussions with service managers, health visitor team leaders and practitioners. These activities mapped how children's information is currently collected and used both for day-to-day operational work and for strategic planning. Insights from these conversations were then shared back with leaders, practitioners and managers to allow further reflection, deepen understanding and refine the IUP's focus. Through this phased and iterative process, participants developed a shared understanding of what SLCN information was collected, where the gaps and challenges were, and how an IUP might improve the holistic quality, value and use of this information.

One caveat, as noted earlier in this section, is that parents were less involved in the initial conversations than we hoped, which meant they had limited influence on early planning and decisions. Since insights about early SLCNs often come from parent–practitioner relationships, it is essential to capture parents'

voices consistently, and to integrate them into both operational and strategic decision-making. Along with the site partners, we increased our efforts and succeeded in doing this better during the CIP's development phase. For example, we commissioned and co-created an attractive and accessible video to explain what information use is, outline why parents' voices matter and appeal to them to get involved. Parents – as well as practitioners – joined focus groups, consultations and ongoing discussions, raising broader questions about what SLCN information should be collected and how best to engage parents meaningfully in processes. They also reviewed existing practice tools for SLCN screening and assessment, highlighting their strengths and limitations. Practical barriers such as childcare demands and language differences could still limit participation at times. Attention needs to be paid to preparing and supporting parents to participate in workshops and co-design sessions that make their involvement easier and more meaningful.

We recognise the limitations mentioned above. Nevertheless, through multiple consultations and feedback cycles, we have refined our early ideas into a draft voice-informed toolkit to support more holistic and consistent documentation of SLCN information at the operational level. We are continuing to co-design and review early materials through workshops and interviews with practitioners. The agreed toolkit will be tested by practitioners and parents in routine developmental screening appointments. Researchers, practitioners, parents, team leaders and service leaders will then evaluate its usefulness, acceptability and potential to support both more parental engagement and more responsive strategic planning and service delivery.

Attention needs to be paid to preparing and supporting parents to participate in workshops and co-design sessions that make their involvement easier and more meaningful.

PRACTICE 2

5.2. Using theory of change

Why use a theory-of-change approach?

ToC is a well-established practice in the fields of implementation science, innovation and evaluation, and it has been central to the CIP's work with local authority sites. Working with the ToC approach to improving information use is a practical way to help sites think critically, clarify and agree on:

- the information use challenge they want to address

- the outcomes they hope to achieve

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

- what needs to be monitored and measured along the way

Our co-productive approach meant bringing as many stakeholder voices as possible into workshop-based dialogue, identifying shared priorities to improve the quality and use of

children's information, and planning IUPs. Given the range of participants involved, they often come to the table with very different views of the meaning of 'information', 'data' and their 'use', and 'voice'. These differences, if left unspoken, can hide important risks and assumptions built into their shared or divergent understandings of what needs to change and why. ToC workshops give participants the opportunity to surface, share, test and align their perspectives, leading to a clearer shared model of change. ToC work can also encourage participants to look at the current information landscape within and across their children's welfare and Early Help services before imagining improvements. Site participants need to ask: how is information currently gathered, used and acted on? Once they understand this, it becomes more possible and realistic to envision and plan for more effective and ethical approaches.

Keeping voice at the centre

As discussed in Section 5.1, when it comes to planning, designing and progressing IUPs, there are many challenges to fully integrating the voices of all those involved, particularly children, parents and carers. Nonetheless, ToC work has been invaluable in supporting site partners to develop IUPs co-productively, in ways that place voice at their core.

Target-driven pressure from government and statutory reporting requirements push local authorities and services to return quantitative – often performance or accountability driven – rather than qualitative, voice-informed data about children; too often, this can miss the lived experiences and insights of those most affected (see Sections 4.1, 4.3, 5.6 and 5.8). For some

stakeholders, envisaging information use through the lens of voice demands a shift of focus that may be desirable but requires significant effort. Foregrounding the integration of multiple voices when shaping and reshaping ToCs helps to keep voice firmly at the centre of measures to improve ethical and effective information use.
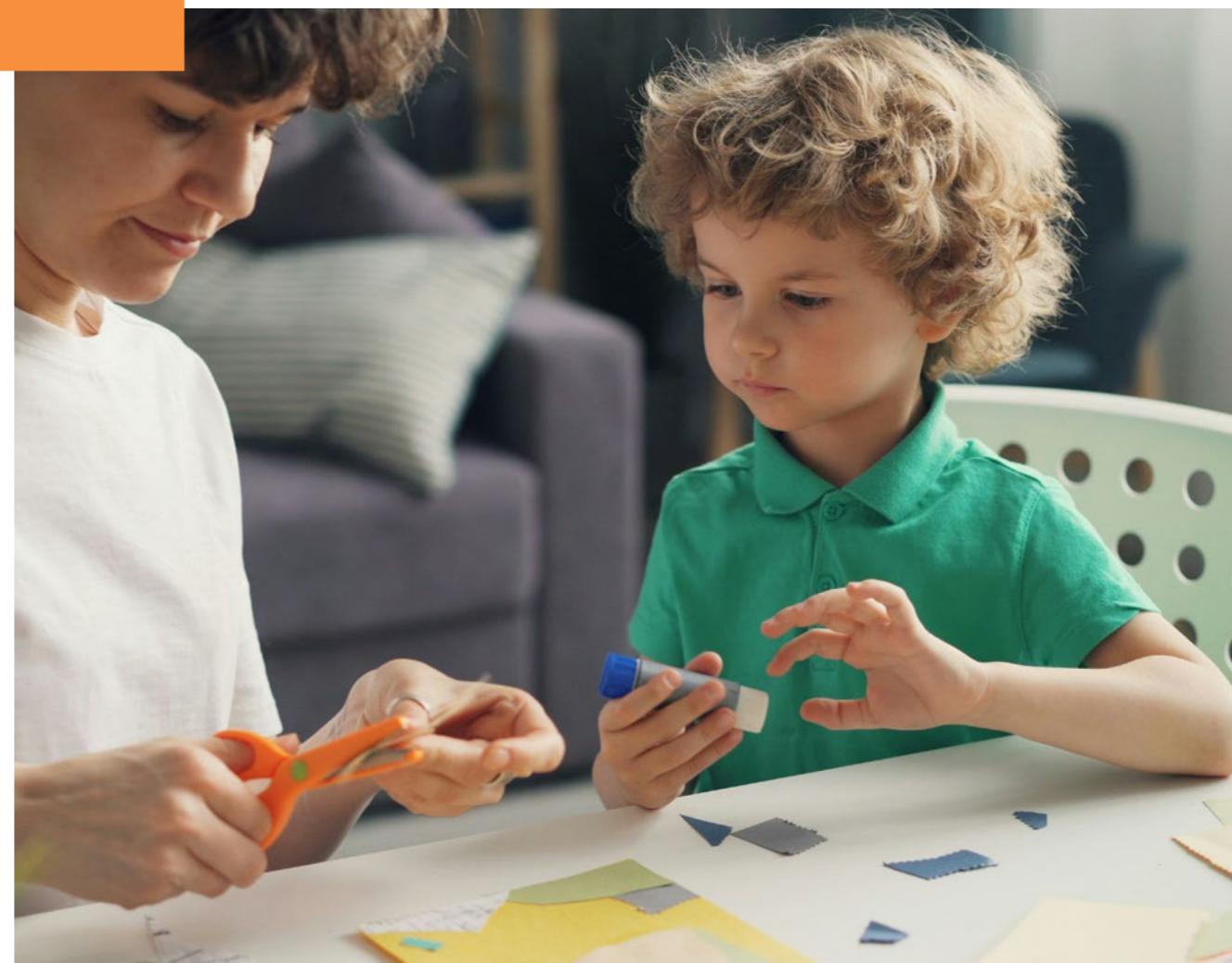
An iterative and flexible process

ToC is not static – it evolves. Typically our ToC work with each partner site has begun with a workshop during the discovery phase. It has then developed iteratively, through successive workshops, as their IUP becomes specified and moves forward. There is no one-size-fits-all approach: each site's journey looks different, shaped by its – sometimes shifting – priorities, circumstances and resources. In Rochdale, as the example provided at the end of Section 5.2 illustrates, site colleagues in the Early Years service began with a broad vision for change. Within this, the first ToC workshop highlighted diverse priorities across sub-teams. A follow-up workshop narrowed the focus to a more modest but achievable IUP, with genuine value for the local context. In Oldham, like in Rochdale, participants used the ToC process to agree priorities and gradually refine a clear focus and an inclusive plan for improving information use for holistically screening children for SLCNs in their early years.

North Yorkshire and Hampshire provide contrasts. In North Yorkshire, the first ToC workshop confirmed a clear, shared set of priorities

and desired outcomes focused on co-productively developing and using meaningful indicators of care leavers' outcomes. Our ToC work with North Yorkshire helped to refine voice-informed principles, processes and planned direction of travel, providing a consistent frame for ongoing work. A follow-up ToC workshop in late 2025 has reflected on progress and refined plans for the final year, ensuring the project remains achievable and productive. Conversely, Hampshire's journey shows how the ToC process supports adaptability. Initially, the focus was on using predictive analytics to target Early Help for teenagers. With staff changes and shifting priorities, the project evolved, first into developing an accessible and holistic summary 'Single View of the Child', then into a more modest and achievable yet valuable initiative to capture parents' voices in the early stages of Early Help encounters.

All these examples demonstrate the value of ToC work in aligning diverse perspectives into a shared, actionable project. They show too the strength of co-producing a ToC and using it as a living document: it

All these examples demonstrate the value of ToC work in aligning diverse perspectives into a shared, actionable project.

provides focus but also allows adaptation, helping projects to stay on track or evolve as circumstances demand.

Surfacing and resolving ambiguities

Different people bring different assumptions, levels of digital literacy, and degrees of familiarity with existing information systems and measures. Without deliberate attention, these differences can go unnoticed and can lead to misunderstandings and slow progress. ToC workshops help to surface these ambiguities early. By creating

a structured space for inclusive dialogue, they make it possible for participants to recognise where they are not aligned, reach more shared understandings, and genuinely co-produce plans for improved, voice-informed information use.

Balancing ambition with pragmatism

Local sites work under significant pressure, including limited resources, competing priorities and frequent staff changes. These constraints can make it hard to devote time to IUPs and, more specifically, to participating in ToC workshops; planning, designing and developing the initiatives; critically considering their

assumptions and risks; and continually revisiting and reviewing the ToC. Here, pragmatism matters. Our ToC work with partner sites has shown that projects do not need to be perfect in order to be useful. The important thing is to make steady progress in realistic ways, while holding on to the core principles of voice-informed, ethical and effective information use.

Wider system learning

At a wider level, a well-structured ToC has benefits beyond any single site. It provides a valuable tool that makes the thinking behind a project transparent – its logic, assumptions, methods and intended outcomes. This

visibility allows others to learn from the ToC approach, even if the focus, content or context of the project is different.

The ToCs developed with the CIP partner sites will be useful exemplars for other local authorities. They show not just the outcomes aimed for but also the reasoning, pathways and decisions determined along the way. Importantly, what is transferred is not the specific details of each site's plan but the ToC framework itself. Other authorities can adapt a ToC framework to their own contexts to improve ethical and effective information use in ways that integrate voice and lead to better outcomes for children and families.

Example: Theory of change to improve Early Years voice-led information from seldom heard families in Rochdale

The problem identified by the Early Years team in Rochdale was that standard Early Years data – in particular the current 'Good Level of Development' measure collected and used locally and for statutory returns – do not incorporate the views and needs of seldom heard families when ostensibly measuring children's developmental progress at age 5.

In line with the wider ambition of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Rochdale would ultimately wish to see more holistic, meaningful and contextualised measurement. For its present IUP, the aim is to develop a measurement framework that includes seldom heard voices within Early Years children's information, to better inform service planning. This framework would then be integrated with statutorily collected information and trialled locally within neighbourhood teams.

The CIP team and site partners took time, first

of all, to understand how information is currently used in Rochdale and the particular barriers faced. Rochdale was inclusive in engaging a wide range of colleagues across the Early Years service in an initial, in- person ToC workshop. Inclusive engagement of this sort can be helpful for wider buy-in and support for a project. Yet, given the differing needs and priorities of the various representatives and sub-teams, it became clear that no single IUP could address everyone's priorities within the limited timeframe of the CIP.

Therefore, a follow-up ToC workshop was held with a smaller group of core Early Years team members. This dialogue fed in ideas and perspectives from the wider Early Years team but was steered towards agreeing a narrower focus – essential for an IUP that would be manageable within the time available.

Discussion at both workshops also focused on how to reach the voices of seldom heard parents. The Early Years

service has been proactive in seeking to hear the voices of families. But, with a diverse and fluctuating population, the team is aware that some voices are not being heard. Even when they are, there is no mechanism to ensure these voices systematically inform decision-making and service planning. As a result, there was no way to bring parental and carer voices from seldom heard families into IUP planning at the outset. The team agreed that a mechanism more likely to succeed would be to reach out and offer to these parents and carers bespoke opportunities to engage with Early Years services on an ongoing basis, rather than solely for the duration of this IUP.

The outcome of the ToC work in Rochdale to date, as illustrated in Figure 4, is that site partners have arrived at a planned IUP that includes:

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

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

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

Additionally, within the CIP schedule (if time allows) or extending beyond it, the IUP will trial this measurement framework, analysing and

reviewing the added value of these voice-informed data in relation to children's achievement at age 5.

An intermediate outcome for Rochdale is that information and data from the new measure, alongside routinely collected data, will help to inform neighbourhood boards' understanding and decision-making in response to the needs of children in their locality. In the longer term, Rochdale intends neighbourhood boards to have access to clear and accessible data that captures the voices

of seldom heard parents, to enable more nuanced, contextualised understanding and decision-making relating to commissioning and providing services to meet children's needs at age 5. This demands that the framework be developed and shared in a format compatible with other data sources. The Rochdale team has engaged early with neighbourhood boards and plans further collaborative work beyond the timeframe of the CIP to ensure these objectives are realised.

Figure 4: The Rochdale information use project's theory of change

Big vision:
National government-level change in conceptualisation of where a child should be at age 5 in a way that is wider and more holistic than is set out in the current Good Level of Development measure

Activities

Build on community knowledge and established relationships with families and communities formed through the Trailblazer programme, engagement which brokered information with seldom heard families (Bangladeshi families and families in temporary accommodation) living in Rochdale North.

Interviews conducted with these families to explore parents' priorities and conceptualisation of school readiness for their Early Years children.

Develop a set of items that collect key information (to reflect parent voice) currently missing from 'school readiness' assessments.

Outputs

Infographic for use with parents to show what data are collected/held on Early Years children and how they are used.

Framework to capture the information shared by seldom heard families.

Measure capturing parent voice on school readiness.

Short-term outcomes

Practice with individual children and families

Understand the landscape of seldom heard families and their networks (necessary for engagement).

Understand what is important to parents but missing from current measures/assessments/data, and how current measures are used.

Develop parent groups within the seldom heard community enabling systematic capturing of parent views.

Intermediate outcomes

New measure used for monitoring at local level of missing information identified by parents as important.

Analysis of new parent-informed data in relation to achievement at age five.

Information/data from the new measure, alongside routinely collected data will help to inform neighbourhood boards about the needs of children in their locality and allow them to address these needs by commissioning appropriate services.

Aggregate or strategic level

Long-term outcomes

Seldom heard families see themselves reflected in school readiness outcomes and have an improved understanding of how these relate to them and their child's development.

Neighbourhood boards have clear and accessible data, capturing parent voice, allowing a more nuanced understanding of need. This information is used to contextualise other standard Early Years data to make better-informed decisions about service provision, to meet the needs of seldom heard families.

Improved Good Level of Development scores across the Borough for all children.

PRACTICE 3

5.3. Mapping information

Conceptualising and mapping information pathways

Understanding and identifying the potential of information is fundamental to the progression of other Practices. Co-design of information use without transparency about what is available may lead to unrealistic promises. Mapping information was one of the first activities that we carried out (as part of the discovery phase) in all sites, developing a conceptualisation of information pathways (see Figure 5). This conceptualisation sets out the various stages, from collection to use, presenting fundamental questions at each stage.

We subsequently adapted our approach and categorisation of mapping to align with the focuses of the different IUPs in the sites – including, for example, the categorisation of universal, targeted and specialist service elements in Oldham highlighted at the end of Section 5.3.

Mapping information is necessary and useful for multiple reasons (described briefly below). It often requires and crosses over with mapping of the systems of organisations through which information flows, and the relationships between the people to whom the information refers and/or those who collect it in their day-to-day work.

Learning from information mapping

Mapping information has helped us to better understand how it is used, with a distinction between aggregate information used for strategic purposes (e.g. experiences and outcomes of cohorts of children and families) and individual data used to inform operational practice (e.g. tracking the experiences of individuals over time). This distinction is essential to understand how different pieces of information can sometimes be used for different functions locally.

There are also potential opportunities for the integration of more meaningful information (as determined by children, young people, parents and carers, and practitioners), as exemplified in Practice 5 (using broad sources of local information). Adopting a comprehensive and systematic approach to information mapping has led us to identify gaps in each of our IUPs and to explore how these gaps may be filled, either by using other forms of information better or by adding additional pieces of information.

**Figure 5: Five stages of information flow from source to use**
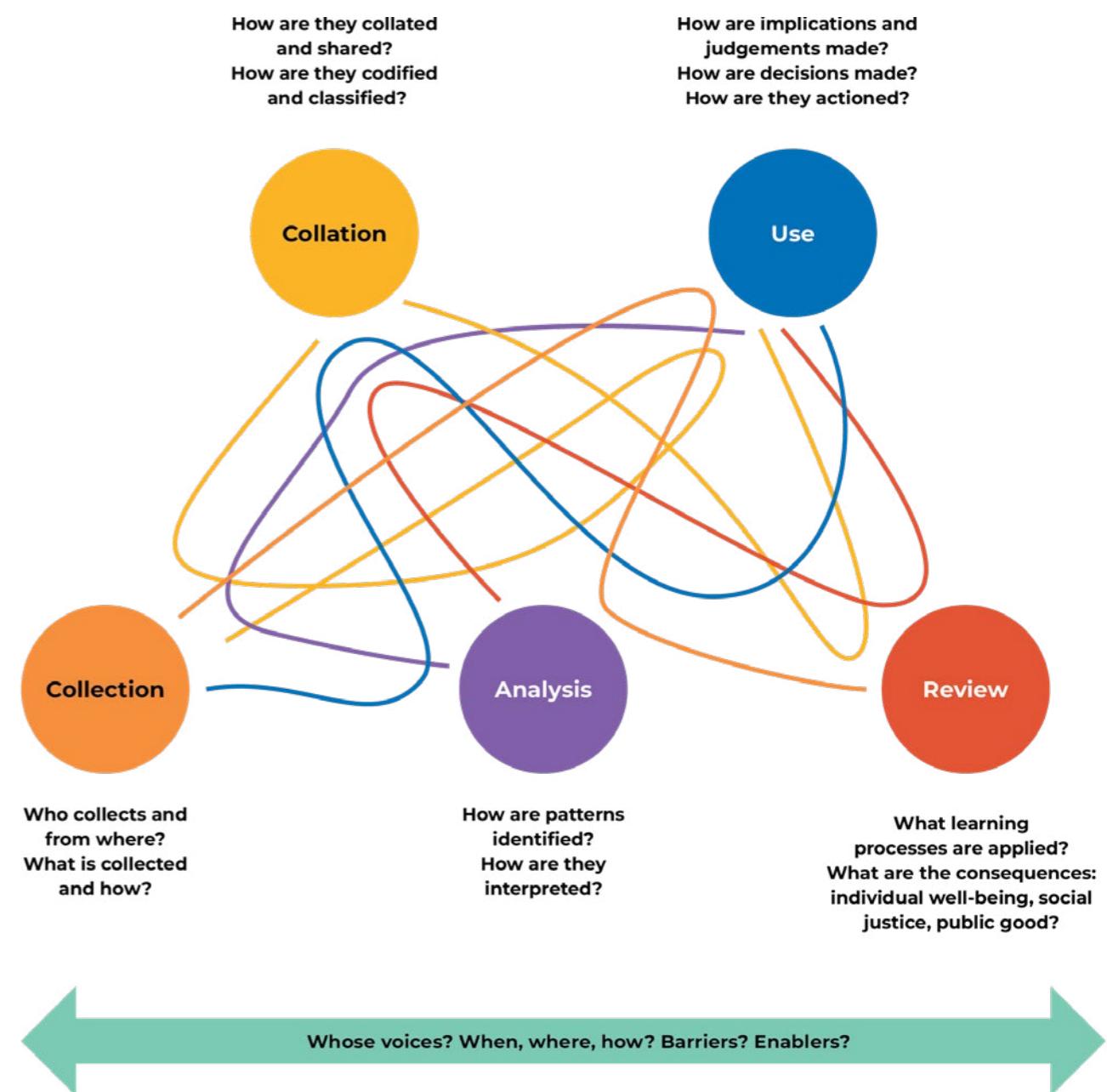
Our work to date has highlighted the dominance of government voice and the loss of child and family voice as information becomes datafied for strategic reporting. For example,

the IUP in Hampshire examined potential sources of information across a range of local agencies, and whether they captured information over and above the variables required for statutory

reporting. This helped to clarify where there was voice data within existing sources, including aggregate data. This is visualised in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Map of information sources in Hampshire**

A diagram taken from the UK Gov (2022) 'Early Help Systems Guide' and amended by the Hampshire team to show data accessible to children's social care. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

Figure 7: Mapping the core data pathway from a visit with a young person to strategic decision-making (North Yorkshire)
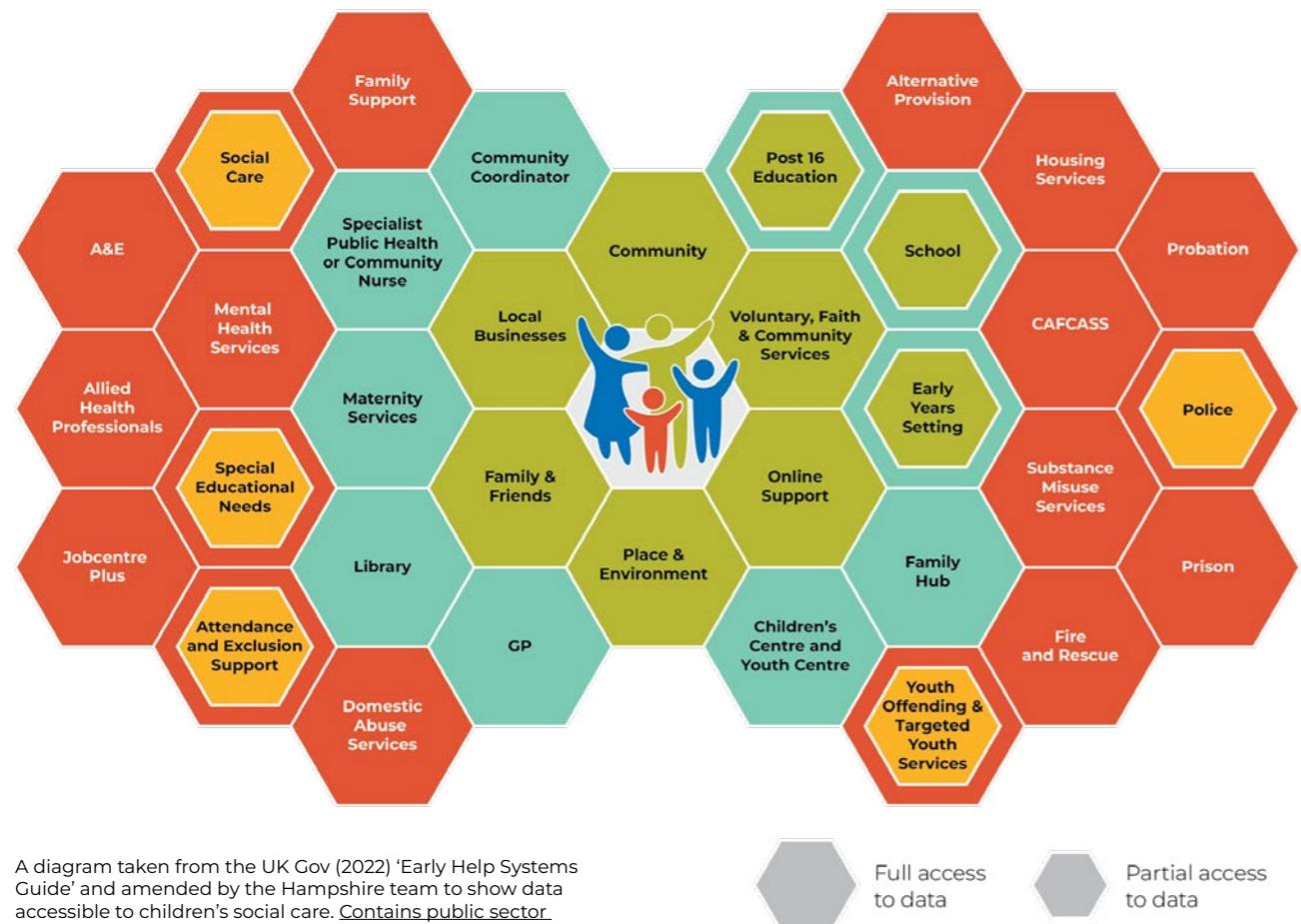
Another example is the work undertaken in North Yorkshire to map the 'data journey'. This work looked at the rich data nested within the broad range of local information sources, examining whether, how and where it travels and is used. Our data journey visualisation (see Figure 7) demonstrates how – during each stage of the process of datafication – rich, relationally grounded information becomes distilled to binary indicators, determined by government for performance management purposes. With this, the young people's voices diminish too. For example, by the time their aggregated information reaches national government, care leavers' experiences of their living, learning and working circumstances are reduced to binary indicators and percentages of those in suitable accommodation, education, training or employment.

There is a reliance on data items that are part of national mandatory annual data returns rather than information that is of most relevance to children, families and practitioners. This is as a result of limited capacity to analyse other forms of information and of the emphasis placed on performance management (e.g. in readiness for Ofsted inspections) and benchmarking between local authorities.

Example: Mapping Oldham's Early Years information

In Oldham we set out to see the information landscape clearly: which sources exist across Early Years services, how information moves between services, and where information is used for day-to-day work with families and/or for aggregated strategic reporting (see Figure 8 below). This work was designed to create a common, readable picture that local teams can use to reflect on their information environment.

We combined document analysis with network analysis to build a collection of linked maps. We aimed to gather together all documents that inform the local system supporting children in their early years, spanning the early learning, healthcare and wellbeing, and safeguarding sectors. To this end, we assembled a corpus of 25 national, regional and local resources that specify what information is gathered and why.

We coded each document for information type, where it is generated and held, and the relationships implied between collectors, users and decision points. From these codes we produced the map which traces information used in relation to the seven strategic priorities of Oldham's Early Years system. We distinguished individual-level records used operationally from data that are rolled up into aggregate returns and dashboards. Where relevant, we cross-referenced nodes and flows to national frameworks (e.g. Early Years Foundation Stage Good Level of Development and the Healthy Child Programme) visible in a separate network, so that the local maps showed how national-level requirements shape local recording and reporting.

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

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

The information use map shows that the flows are clearer in safeguarding and health than in early learning, and that important qualitative insight (e.g. a practitioner's observation or a child's experience) is not consistently integrated into decision-making. As a result, the functioning of the whole system can be hard to see from strategic reports alone, even when frontline practitioners are gathering relevant detail.

Our immediate priority is to test and refine the information maps, using a short programme of fieldwork in Oldham to further align the mapping with the focus of the IUP. In 2026, we will conduct research to capture the 'microflows' of day-to-day referrals and information exchanges. This will allow us to check whether the mapped positions and flows match what people actually do; identify where universal services prevent, detect and respond to SLCNs; and document where important operational information still fails to appear in strategic reporting.

Figure 8: Oldham Early Years information map

Oldham Early Years information map

A system map of Early Years information showing how the seven priorities, governance, health and development reviews, keeping children safe, supporting parents, equality and reach, service improvement, and workforce, connect to national and local data sources and outcome measures. Coloured boxes and arrows labelled "informed by" and "measured by" show how certain information types, such as GLD, safeguarding data, and take-up information, cluster around each priority, while thirteen information sources sit outside these clusters.

↗ = INFORMED BY
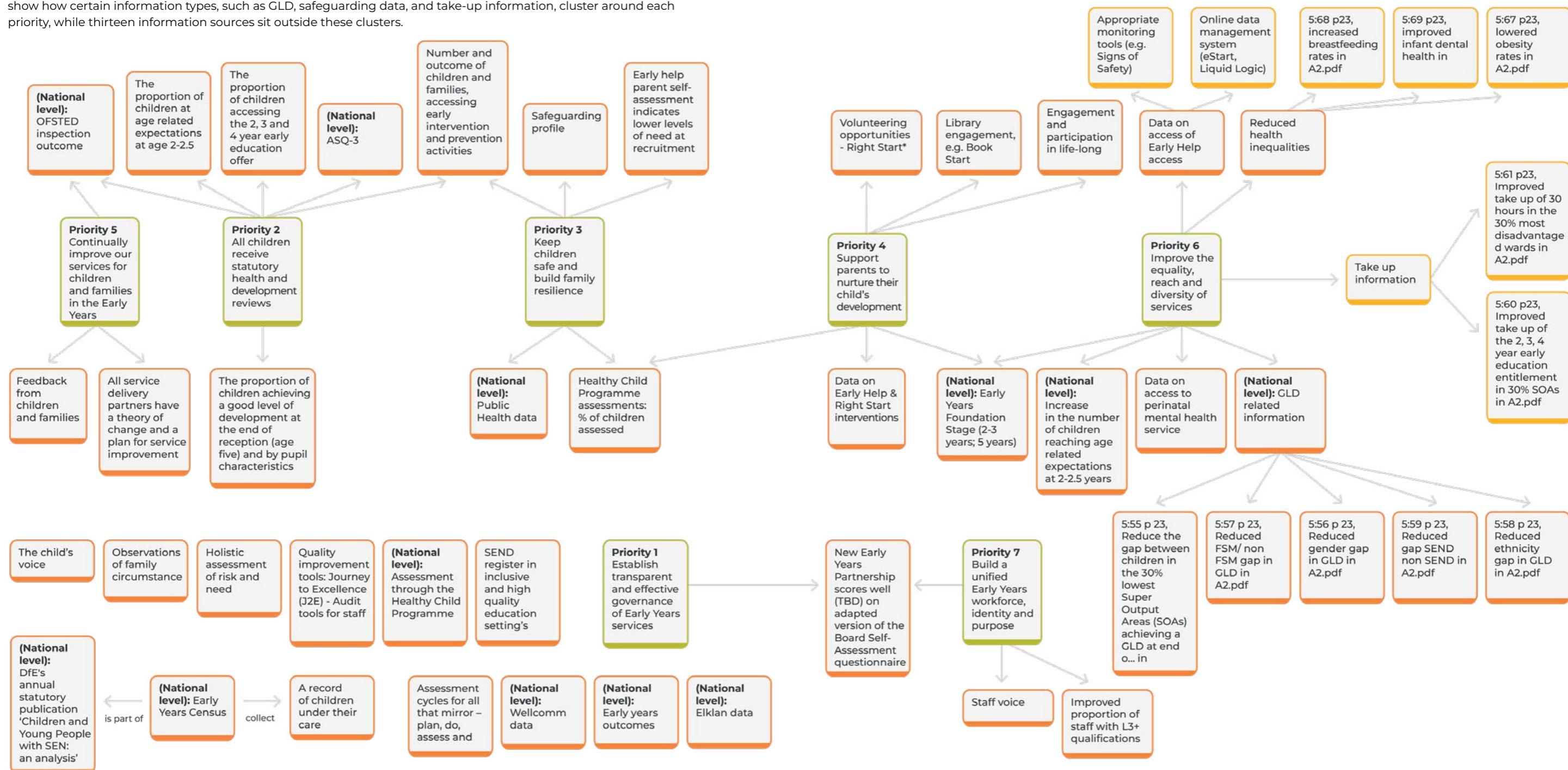
PRACTICE 4

5.4. Mapping systems

Combining analyses to map information systems

We have learned from both the ToC work at the partner sites (see Section 5.2) and the information mapping work (see Section 5.3) how information relevant to supports and services in any one area of policy flows is held in multiple agencies.

We used network analysis to build a relational view of the Early Years system in Oldham and Rochdale. We looked at how agencies, workforces and families connect across early learning and SEND, safeguarding, and health and wellbeing to show how the system is organised, where decisions are made and how information flows. We started from a set of documents describing policy, strategy and guidance in these fields. From there, we combined document analysis with network analysis to build a collection of linked maps that show how local priorities, service structures and workforce roles interact with children and families.

We assembled local, regional and national materials that specify Early Years structures and responsibilities, then coded entities (agencies, roles and processes) and the ties and relationships between them (referrals, information flows and governance links). From this, we generated seven linked maps – some primarily descriptive and others more analytical.

The descriptive maps set out how the system is designed to work. For example, a 'System Architecture and Governance Map' shows how Early Years, safeguarding and healthcare structures interlock locally (leadership lines, forums and reporting). Three sector-specific service maps – the 'Early Learning and SEND Services Map', the 'Health and Wellbeing Pathway Map' and the 'Safeguarding and Early Help Map' – show the provision of different levels of service, specifically the tiered nature of universal, targeted, and specialist services, and the workforces involved.

The system maps show how relationships and information function within each structure. For example, a 'Workforce Brokerage Network Map' models relational ties, with health visitors centrally positioned as brokers between families, Early Years settings, health services and social care. Taken together, the seven maps give Early Years partners and researchers a single, shared reference for how the system works, who is connected to whom, where leadership sits at different points, and how responsibilities move across universal, targeted and specialist activities.
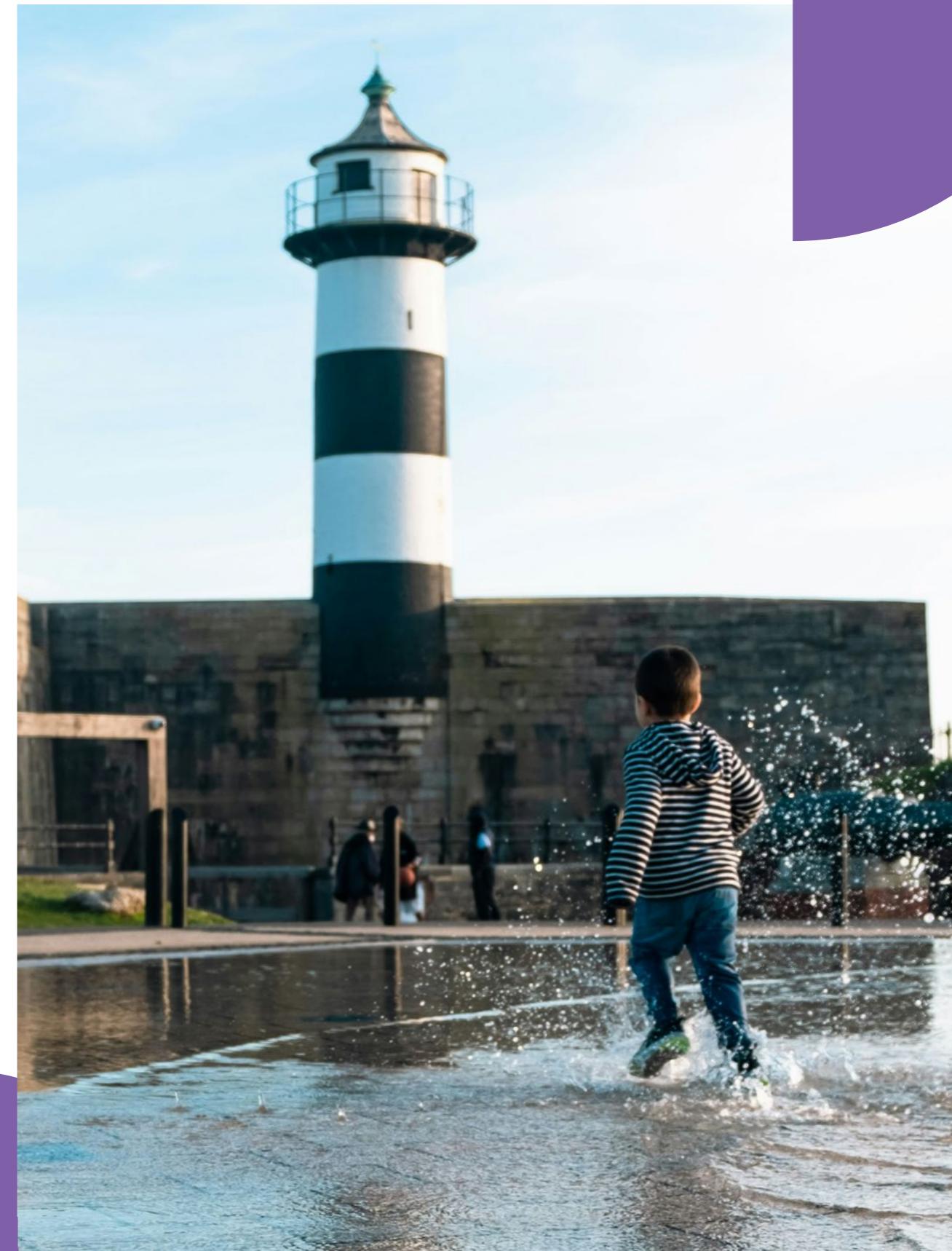
Example: Learning from Oldham system mapping

In Oldham, the combined document-analysis and system-mapping approach outlined in this section has mapped all the information about Early Years development that is recorded, measured or reported, and that flows within and between local agencies.

The findings powerfully expose that:

- most of these data are shaped by national government requirements

- these metrics often do not align well with local strategic priorities

- locally generated insights are frequently hidden or excluded

- the voices of parents, carers and young children are almost completely absent

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

Across Oldham (and in Rochdale) the system is densely connected: early learning, SEND, healthcare and safeguarding all operate at the universal, targeted and specialist levels, with many overlaps between institutions and roles. As is well known, families may encounter several agencies at once, each pursuing a different aim – learning and inclusion, health and development, or safety – and the system must then coordinate these contacts so that help is timely and coherent rather than duplicated or delayed. The maps show where those overlaps occur and where coordination risks arise.

Safeguarding stands out as more tightly specified than other domains. Our system mapping shows that mandated touchpoints in sector-specific service maps of health and safeguarding are clearly defined, whereas the corresponding pathways in early learning are less explicit. In safeguarding, the statutory referral pathway (from universal provision through targeted responses and, where necessary, into specialist social care) is laid out as a clear sequence, with defined points of escalation such as Universal Plus, Family Connect and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This level of specification helps to explain why routes into protection tend to be more consistent and auditable than routes into other kinds of support in the Early Years system where guidance typically provides less detail about how concerns should progress across tiers. Yet the mapping also shows that even within safeguarding, operational challenges remain. For example, coordination across agencies can be limited when multi-agency Family Connect processes (which coordinate targeted support) and MASH (which triages statutory safeguarding concerns) duplicate aspects of each other's work, and when constraints on data sharing make it difficult for services to exchange information effectively.

The workforce network places health visitors at the centre of many of the ties between families, Early Years settings, health services and social care. Their centrality is a strength for early identification and referral, including where SLCNs are raised in the course of routine health visiting appointments. However, it is also a vulnerability if capacity is stretched, because so much of the information flow depends on a single professional group.

PRACTICE 5

5.5. Using broad sources of local information

Exploring broad sources of information

Much of our CIP work exposes and seeks to address gaps in uses of information and sources beyond those that are included in national administrative datasets. The techniques and methods we have used in our four sites have varied, and have been determined by the specific IUP.
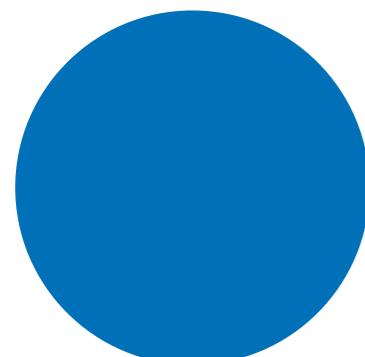
Our exploration has comprised an examination of existing documents and data within each of our four sites, as they relate to information use. We have identified the various sources of information (see Section 5.3) found within case management systems, and in other mechanisms to address specific questions and/or issues. We have also worked in partnership with our sites to understand the role and purpose of data dashboards (see Section 5.2), as highlighted in our Practice example below. These activities have helped us to understand what potential exists for broadening the range of currently collated information that might be used to support decision-making.

Maximising the value of broad sources of information

We have identified that an abundance of information exists locally and that this is used to varying degrees. However, it is often fragmented. Information

is commonly held or used separately, on different systems, collected in different formats for different uses. Furthermore, there is a range of intersecting barriers to sharing information, including interpretations of data protection legislation. Localised development of protocols and procedures for data-sharing arrangements between partner agencies is leading to duplication of effort, and to date there are no readily available mechanisms for sharing learning. These are all barriers to using information for insight.

There are emerging examples, from the CIP partner sites and Learning Network, of how broad sources of information are coming into use to inform local operational practice and strategic planning. We illustrate this here with the example of improvement to care leaver dashboards in North Yorkshire.

## Example: Using multiple information sources to examine care leavers' data journey in North Yorkshire

Our IUP in North Yorkshire Council focuses on care leavers and has sought to understand how Children's Social Care and its partner agencies can most effectively and efficiently meet the needs of care leavers. We aim to understand what support

mechanisms are needed to improve the outcomes and life chances of care leavers.

The data in the existing care leaver dashboard focus primarily on measures that are required by Department for Education data returns: accommodation, work,

education and being 'in contact' with the local authority. Other geographical data are also provided, along with the number of up-to-date Pathway Plans. This leaves various gaps that compromise a holistic picture of needs and outcomes for North Yorkshire's care-leaving

Figure 9: Outcome domains for North Yorkshire care leavers
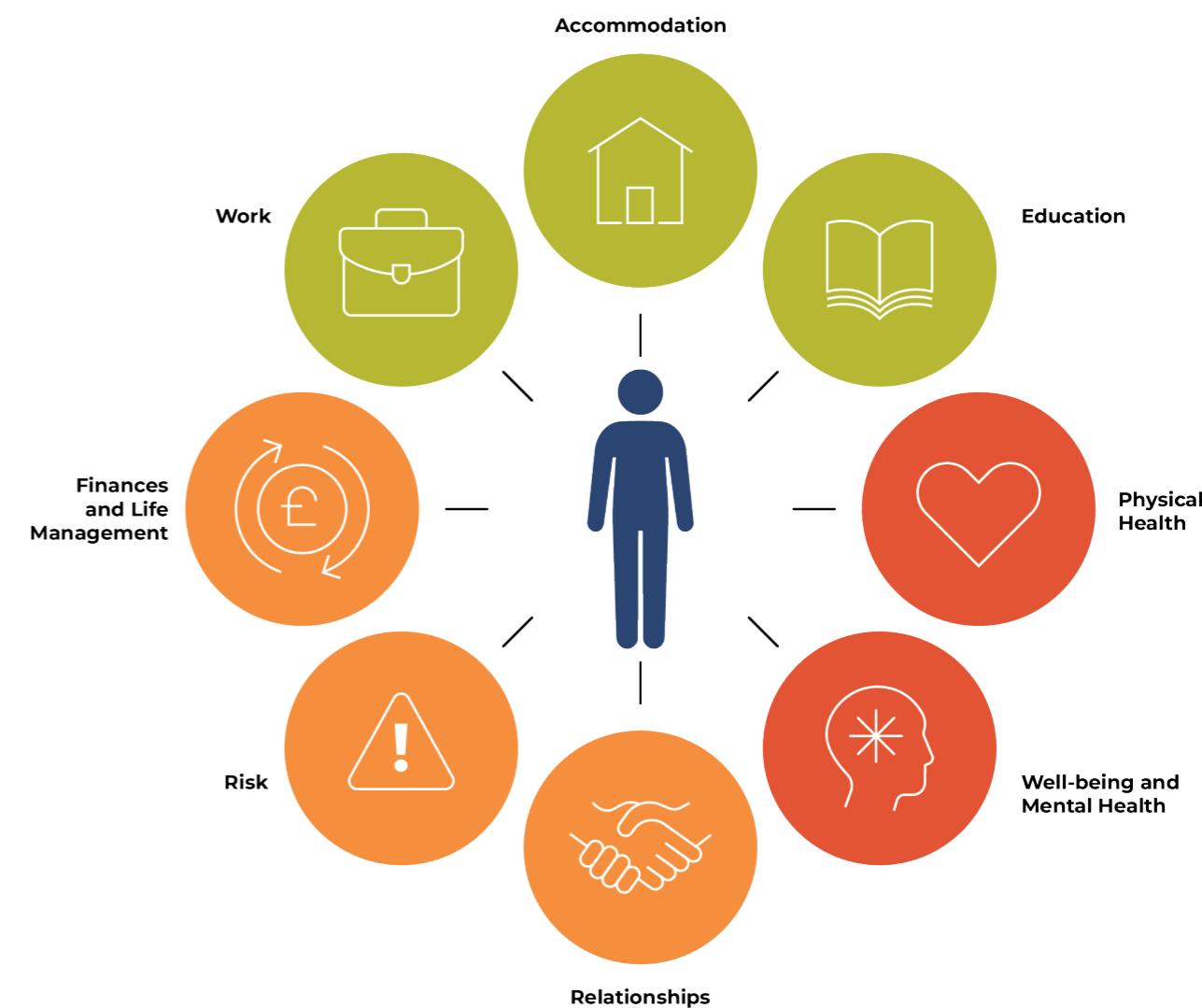
cohort, despite the fact that a clear understanding of the holistic picture has consistently been noted as central to improving care leaver outcomes.

Our starting point was an exploration of the care leaver outcomes that are routinely recorded and used by the local authority. We then considered how these relate to the outcomes identified by care leavers, and those working in the care-leaving service. During the project's discovery phase, we consulted with care leaver apprentices (see Section 5.1), senior leaders and representatives from the care-leaving service in North Yorkshire. This led to the identification of eight outcome domains, as shown in Figure 9.

The identification of the domains led to fieldwork (see Section 5.3) to explore the sources and information that are locally recorded. This fieldwork also examined the 'data journey' from the point of interaction between care leavers and their personal advisors through to the information that is captured on local care leaver dashboards and submitted to the Department for Education via national statutory data returns. An integral part of the fieldwork

was shadowing a 'day in the life' of personal advisors. This was followed by an examination of corresponding case records to assess the presence of voice in case records, how it is captured, and how it can be and has been collated for analysis. Our fieldwork also included a series of focus groups with care leavers, personal advisors, and those working in data analysis and performance management roles.

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

the perspectives of the young person are documented in the case notes about each point of contact.

Among the other mechanisms used to listen to and record young people's experiences are surveys, the Mind of My Own app, monthly reports of the Voice and Participation team, and 'learning space' records. While some of this rich information is recorded in the form of numerical data – with tick-boxes and drop-down codes often entered directly into the case management system, for subsequent extraction into the dashboard and collation for national reporting – much is not. On issues such as accommodation, education and work, detailed information is recorded, including young people's views about whether they feel safe, stable and in possession of meaningful work that is relevant to their future. But it is not consistently collected in numerical data or in a qualitative format that can be extracted and further used.

Information about care leavers that is used by central government constitutes a small proportion of the broad information that is recorded locally. Some of this broader information could be better

Table 1: Question topics in the Pathway Plan mapped to outcome domains

Pathway Plan Question	Outcome Domain Areas
Your future in five years	All
Your relationships	Relationships, Accommodation
Your family	Relationships, Accommodation
Your home	Accommodation
Learning at school, college, university or work	Education, Work
The things you like doing	Physical Health, Well-being and Mental Health
Feeling safe and well	Risk
Looking after yourself	Well-being and Mental Health, Physical Health, Finances and Life Management
Your identity and culture	Well-being and Mental Health

used to understand the experiences and outcomes of care leavers, in a way that is more meaningful to care-experienced young people and those working with them.

We identified that some information was being captured on case records but not being included on care leaver data dashboards. This information was being systematically recorded both quantitatively and qualitatively as part of the care leavers' Pathway Plan , and was being updated on a six-monthly basis. The question topics included in the Pathway Plan process, mapped onto the eight outcome domains, are shown in Table 1.

This exploration led to the development of a new version of the care leaver data dashboard that now includes now includes a scale of 0 to 10 for each of the question topics above. Separate scales are used from the perspective of the care leaver, and their personal advisor as part of reviews of their Pathway Plans. There are also qualitative statements comprising the voices of care leavers that become visible when the dashboard viewer hovers the cursor over a number. Additionally, we carried out a descriptive analysis of the use of the Pathway Plan scales to assess missingness in the data and whether there are similarities or points of

divergence between the two scales from care leavers and those from practitioners.

Next, we need to determine whether the updated dashboard resonates with other local authorities. Furthermore, we need to find out whether the inclusion of qualitative statements from care leavers (capturing their voices) as part of the Pathway Plan process can be replicated in other local authorities. We will do this as part of online workshops, and we will also invite other local authorities to share any experiences or examples of trying to integrate the voices of care leavers into dashboards that are used for strategic planning.

PRACTICE 6

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

Why voices matter in aggregate data

The CIP began with an important observation: the information that local authorities are legally required to report to central government often does not meet their own needs for planning services. Even more importantly, it rarely reflects the actual voices and lived experiences of children, young people, parents and carers.

During our Discovery Phase conversations with local authority partners and members of the wider Learning Network, this problem was repeatedly confirmed. We also learned something striking: a lot of information that does capture the voices of children and families already exists in management information systems and individual case records. This information might be used day-to-day when working with an individual child or family,

but it rarely gets codified or collated into aggregate datasets. That means it doesn't inform collective understanding or strategic planning.

Recognising this gap, three of the four CIP partner sites chose to focus their work on creating better indicators - measures that are more meaningful because they bring in qualitative information and the perspectives of children, young people and families, that may be used strategically, in aggregate, and operationally in day-to-day practice. These new measures are intended to improve on those determined by government for statutory returns. Instead, they aim to provide insights that local authorities can use to understand the needs of children and families cross their localities, plan services more effectively, and track progress.

Matching vision with system readiness

Turning these ambitions into viable IUPs requires both creativity and patience. To achieve this, we have drawn on many of the co-design approaches described in Section 5.1: maximising use of existing opportunities, creating new ones where possible to include the voices

Our learning to date indicates that there are significant opportunities to find ways that integrate children's, families' and practitioners' voices into information that local authorities can use for aggregate reporting, analysis and strategic planning. Rather than treating quantified measures and qualitative and voice information as 'either/or' options, it is possible to gain strategic insights through approaches that combine datafication and meaningful engagement with voice.

of all stakeholders who are involved in and affected by the use of children's information, and negating the challenges of genuine co-production.

A key lesson has been the importance of understanding and working flexibly with system readiness - the existing culture, infrastructure and relationships in each site. No two sites start from the same place, so different approaches are needed in different contexts.

In North Yorkshire, as illustrated in the detailed example in 5.5, the project's focus has been on developing indicators of care leavers'

needs and outcomes that are directly informed by their own voices, as well as by the insights of practitioners who support them. These indicators also underpinned by their qualitative statements and are being integrated into a Care Leaver Data Dashboard to inform strategic decisions. This IUP has very much benefitted from a well-established culture and infrastructure to support youth participation in North Yorkshire, shared vision between frontline staff and senior leaders, and a longstanding, trusted partnership with the research team. The system-ready

environment has meant that it has been possible collaboratively to embed voice-led indicators relatively quickly and effectively.

Integrating voice into wider aggregate information systems and frameworks

The CIP has also been exploring how far the voices of children and families are - or are not - integrated into wider information systems and outcome frameworks. The findings provide valuable lessons for all those concerned to improve strategic use of voice-informed children's information.

Example: Integrating voice into aggregate and strategic reporting of care leaver's information in North Yorkshire

As set out earlier in this report our IUP in North Yorkshire Council has focused on care leavers and has sought to understand how Children's Social Care and their partner agencies can most effectively and efficiently meet the needs of care leavers. We aim to understand what support mechanisms are needed to improve the outcomes, and life chances of care leavers.

The integration of Pathway Plan scaling questions (see Practice 5) is an example of utilising information that was historically recorded, and used for individual level monitoring (i.e., changes in recorded pathway plan scales for an individual young person over time) for strategic purposes. The integrated information in the revised Data Dashboards facilitates aggregate analysis to assess the care leaver population across the different domains (as shown in Figure 10). We have also identified that using the information in this way, at an aggregate level, for strategic purposes, also facilitates sub-group analysis, for example, the unaccompanied asylum seeking young people cohort, to explore whether there are differences in the scales for different groups of care leavers. As we progress into the final year of the project, we will be working together to assess whether and how the integration of this information leads to changes in strategic planning of delivery of services.

PRACTICE 7

5.7. Improving voice in operational information use

Meaningful voice information use in practice

One core ambition of the CIP has been to explore ways that voice information can be improved to support the operational level of service delivery. During the CIP discovery phase, we spent time mapping information pathways within each site (see Sections 5.3 and 5.4). This included looking at how information that expresses the voices of children families and practitioners is gathered, interpreted and used at an operational level. It highlighted the importance of how information is used to inform day-to-day practice with children, young people and families, and the role of practitioners as mediators and advocates for these voices through the information they gather. It also highlighted many examples of careful, respectful and sound information use practices that were already embedded within day-to-day relational practice with children and families.

However, our mapping work also exposed how time pressures, restrictive record systems and systemic issues often limited what could be recorded and used. For example, in Hampshire (as illustrated below), the Early Help teams described how their systems and processes limited opportunities for parents' and carers' voices to be included in referral processes. In Oldham, practitioners identified that prioritising reporting according to national statutory measures limited their opportunities to record voice- and context-rich qualitative insights gleaned from parents about their children's development and needs. A key discovery in these early stages of the CIP's work was the common challenges and barriers that practitioners face in meaningfully integrating voice into recording systems –

often contrasting starkly with their strong desire to access and use high-quality voice information.

Introducing local insight into operational vision

In all four sites, through practitioner interviews, team consultations, shadowing observations and walkthroughs of record systems, we have been able to develop operational insights into 'information in practice'. These perspectives, sometimes drawn from multiple operational teams across different services (see Section 5.1), have helped to steer the strategic vision for IUPs, providing key insights into opportunities for enhancing voice information within aggregate data. They also have helped to shape and sharpen IUP focus on improving meaningful and holistic information for day-to-day operational use. In Oldham, for example, a focus on the WellComm screening appointment

(intended to identify any speech or language difficulty or delay) has highlighted concerns that the screening tools are weighted more towards reflecting professional judgements than parents' or carers' voices. The IUP has therefore set out to develop new materials that support practitioners' ability to listen to and record

parents' concerns during screening appointments and that help to facilitate holistic conversations that provide a fuller picture of children's SLCNs.

Consultations with young people and parents have also involved asking questions about what information they would like to be known about

them, their experiences of having their information used, and whether they have found this helpful or unhelpful. Such insight can contribute as much to informing the support specifically offered to them as it can to informing services provided to other care leavers.

Example: Developing a parent/carer Voice Note to inform Early Help in Hampshire

From the outset, the Hampshire IUP has been focused on reducing the rates of re-referrals of families to Early Help and escalations to Children's Social Care.

Through successive iterations, this has led to a focus on families' voices in Early Help referral processes and to reflections on how improving opportunities for families' voices to be heard and recorded might contribute to better understanding their needs and views earlier in the referral process. Specifically, the Hampshire IUP targets improving parents' voices in operational information use and the important collaborative role an Early Help district team can play in identifying the specific intervention to pursue.

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

During early interviews and discussions with the CIP researchers, senior members of the Early Help district team raised concerns about this absence. They described how a previous version of the Early Help referral form had given space for parents' and carers' voices to be noted, but explained that there was no requirement for this in the latest iteration. Team members described how what they refer to as a 'GDPR call', made to meet data protection requirements when informing parents or carers of the referral, had in practice become the earliest and main opportunity for Early Help practitioners to hear parents' and carers' views. Interviews with parents or carers who had experience of Early Help support within the district underscored the need for more formal opportunities for their voices to be heard. As one parent we spoke to described:

"I've even voiced that I am struggling and this is the situation. […] I'm asking for help. I don't know what help that might be, but even just to have felt heard and supported."

It was through these discussions that the idea of the parent/carer Voice Note, to be made soon after referral, took shape. It utilises an existing practice of Early Help teams: calling families to inform them of their referral. The intention is that the conversation, and the resulting Voice Note, will elicit and then quote or paraphrase the parent or carer's view of their child and family's situation and their needs at this early stage in the referral process. The note will be stored as an accessible record in the Early Help service's information system and may then be returned to during future points of contact with the parents.
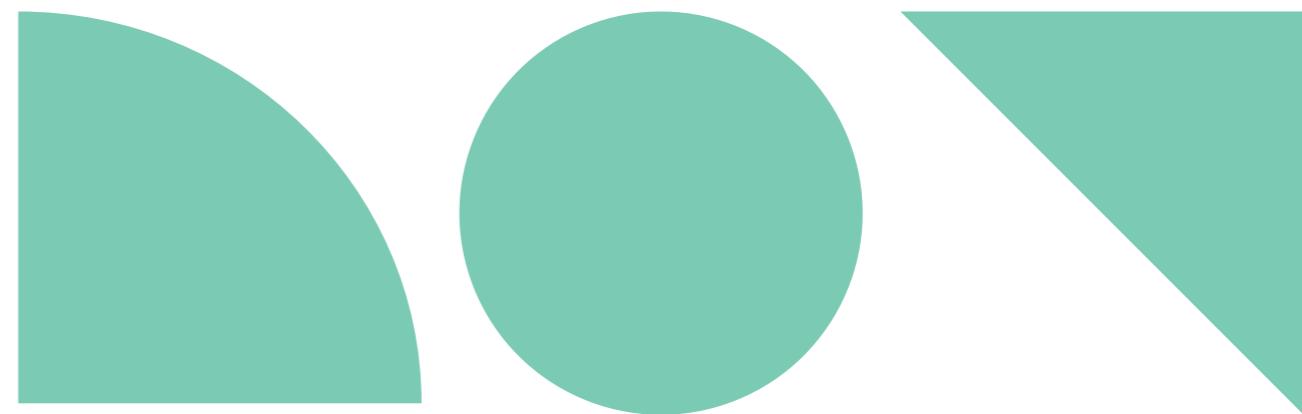
We have already learned a great deal from the process of co-developing the parents'/carers' Voice Note. Identifying a single modest yet potentially valuable change to existing information practices – one that local Early Help team leaders are willing to champion and take ownership of – has involved developing collaborative partnerships with senior practitioners over an extended period. These have enabled us to hear and understand practitioners' reflections on what currently works well and what they consider could be meaningful and relevant changes to information practices. Creating the Voice Note is a manageable addition to the demands placed upon practitioners. It builds, and places additional value, upon practices that many of them are already doing informally. As the core focus of an IUP, it exemplifies taking the opportunity to address a strategic priority for the local authority through modest and meaningful changes at the operational level.

One key learning point so far is that local champions are needed to support development, engagement and implementation of an IUP. Another is that the initiative itself is most likely to gain traction when it can realistically be implemented, taking into account teams' potentially limited resources or capacity for more work. Continuous dialogue with parents and practitioners is needed not only to ensure that their voices are integrated within the IUP but also to be clear about why and how the initiative might benefit their Early Help services and outcomes.

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

PRACTICE 8

5.8. Drawing on national datasets

Members of the CIP team have also been examining national datasets, insofar as they relate to our two main policy areas: Children's Social Care and Early Years. We have focused on the datasets that form the basis of statutory data returns that local authorities submit annually to central government. Our primary purposes here have been to a) see how local authorities use national datasets and how analysis might be deepened to offer insight and b) examine which data items are included and which – of the many that local authorities are collecting, collating and analysing locally for operational and/or strategic purposes – are not. Here, as in Practice 7 above, we are concerned with the presence or absence within these statutory datasets of the voices of their data subjects.

In both policy areas, our analysis to date highlights significant gaps. Much of the data collected and analysed locally for Children's Social Care is not included in national datasets – nor are most measures that capture the voices of the children and families concerned. For Early Years, in the absence of stronger policy drivers or supporting analytical strategy, the Good Level of Development measure remains descriptive and aggregated, offering limited insights for local authorities' use.

Children's Social Care datasets
In the Children's Social Care context, national datasets draw on statutory returns that local authorities are required to submit to central government annually: the Children in Need Census (this includes Children in Need and child protection data) and the Children Looked After Census (the SSDA903 return, which provides data on looked after and adopted children and young people). These statutory returns

focus on a government-defined set of administrative reporting categories, and broader information (including voice information provided by children, young people and families) is systematically absent from the national datasets.

Learning from the CIP highlights that statutory returns only constitute a small proportion of the data that are collected, collated and used locally in the Children's Social Care context. The analysis of 'data journeys' in North Yorkshire (see Section 5.5) exemplifies that valuable children's information generated locally through interactions between children, young people, families and practitioners is often rendered invisible through iterative processes of centralisation and datafication as data flows from the point of contact with a child (the 'start' of the data journey) through local and national administrative

systems (the 'end' of the data journey).

Early Years datasets
In the Early Years context, we focus on national data collection through the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) (Department for Education, 2025), with a particular focus on how data are analysed. Here we see a similar omission of voice information provided by children, families and carers from the existing national datasets and measures. Additionally, key EYFSP measures are based on the 'Good Level of Development'. The government's Plan for Change sets out the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England will have a 'Good Level of Development' by 2028 as part of its 'opportunity mission' (HM Government, 2024). Learning from the CIP highlights the limitations of measures that focus on averages. It additionally reveals the importance of focusing on birth-to-five journeys and on individual pathways to school readiness (or 'distance travelled') as children grow up and transition into reception.

Our learning also underlines the importance of context-informed and placed-based analysis. The broad range of

factors that can interact with free school meal eligibility (e.g. SEND, English as a second language, pandemic effects, rapid demographic change, and childcare workforce quality and capacity) can influence school readiness and can explain inequalities and trajectories at individual and local levels.

Local data linkages
Looking forward, one model for improving data infrastructure is to deliver better data linkages at the local level. This includes building improved local data infrastructure, with data linkages both across different children's services and over time, so that needs, interventions and outcomes can be better tracked for individual children.

Through our Research in Practice Learning Network discussions (see Section 2.2), we have identified that there are emerging examples of local linkages, driven by a need to inform local strategic planning and commissioning. This work is underpinned by substantial preparatory work focused on data-sharing protocols and agreements, alongside governance arrangements.
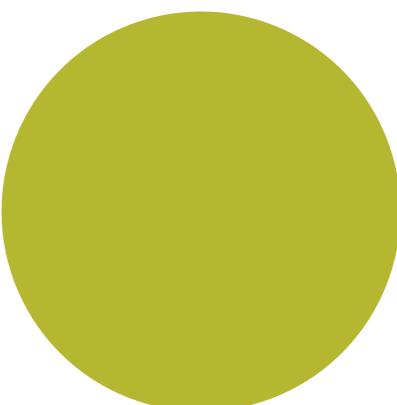
While to date we have explored some local linkage between datasets, we have now started to explore the use of administrative data that have been linked nationally. Initially, we have focused on experimental linkages of administrative data from the education and Children's Social Care systems to population census data. We are situating this work in the context of the wider data linkage work funded by Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK, 2025a, 2025b), and in particular their Community Catalyst for Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes sector engagement work (ADR UK,

2025c), which is especially important for sharing learning between researchers and others interacting with administrative datasets about meaningful analysis. Following the recent announcement (Local Government Association, 2025) that the Department for Education is working with the D2I consortium (Data to Insight, Coram, the Local Government Association, ICT Revolutions and Social Finance) to design a Centre of Excellence – a support offer for data and digital work in Children's Social Care – we are exploring synergies between this new work and the CIP.

National data linkages

Additionally, a new generation of national administrative datasets linking information from multiple children's (and families') services is becoming available. We will explore how new national administrative datasets might be further developed and used to better understand children's needs, life paths and service interactions in local areas. We will draw lessons for local authorities about where limitations and barriers are encountered, and will develop recommendations for improvements to administrative data content and use.

Example: Using national datasets to understand children's needs and service interactions in local areas

Over the next year, we will work with the CIP's local authority partners to explore the potential of national datasets for building better understandings of children's needs and their interactions with different services within local areas.

Our first activity will involve assessing the value-added of new and planned data linkages between population censuses and administrative data. Local authorities already use population census data to understand the needs of their local communities. Looking forward, the emergence of new data infrastructure that links population census data to administrative data from different children's services will be increasingly important.

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

from the Data for Children partnership between the Office for National Statistics, ADR UK and the Children's Commissioner for England as a follow-up to the Commissioner's 'child vulnerability' reports. The research exercise harnesses several unique features of GUiE. This includes England-wide population coverage; the availability of large analysis samples for sub-group analysis; and the new opportunity to bring together rich information on household multidimensional disadvantage from the population census and longitudinal administrative data from the education and social care systems.

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

domains (household level employment, housing, education and health/disability deprivation - Wave 1 GUiE) and information on Free School Meals (FSM) from administrative education data (Wave 2 GUiE).

After a rigorous process of sensitivity testing, we will use the finalised Child-MDH index and linked longitudinal administrative data to build up new evidence on the relationship between multidimensional household disadvantage and children's contacts with the children's social care system. This analysis will focus on the relationship between (1) multidimensional household disadvantage observed on Census-day 2011 and (2) first recorded episodes as a Child in Need (including episodes as a Child Looked After) observed during a four-year time-window following on from Census-day 2011 (up to financial year 2014/15 or age 18). Subpopulation/multivariate analysis will use Wave1 census variables (age, sex, ethnic group, individual health/disability, household reference person NS-SEC,

family type/lone parent status, local authority).

The findings from the research exercise will be shared as a stimulus for broader discussions with CIP's local partners. These discussions will address how local authority partners might make better use of new and emerging linked population census and administrative data infrastructure as a basis for understanding children's needs, life paths and service interactions. The focus will be on knowledge transfer, capacity-building, local priorities, barriers, and lessons for future linkages between population census data and administrative data.

As part of these discussions, we will also explore the potential of other national datasets, such as Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data (ECHILD) (UCL 2024). This dataset links administrative data from the health system to administrative data from the education and Children's Social Care systems. We will address local partner perspectives relating to ECHILD's analytical capacity and value added, the utility of the information provided on under-5s, the extent of locally returned information on community health services (health visitors), and the potential for new exemplar analysis.

6. Key Messages

At this stage we have 10 key messages for those interested in improving local authorities' and other agencies' use of children's information:

1. Ethical and effective use of children's information is central to national and local government's ability to understand and address children's needs. It should be recognised and formalised as a field of practice.

2. Ethical and effective information use rests on core principles and Approaches, and involves defined Practices that extend beyond collation and analysis of data. We have developed an initial Framework setting these out in the context of children's information.

3. There is significant good practice around information use already. However, this should be more systematic, better understood and more thoroughly mapped. Use of our Framework will help with identifying and sharing good practice around information use, so it can be adopted elsewhere.

4. At present we cannot target children's needs effectively in Early Years or Children's Social Care because we have inadequate information on what these needs are. Information available for strategic use by government and local authorities is dominated by narrow statutory categories and thresholds, process measures, and performance management. Ethical and effective use of children's information should measure and capture what matters to children and families.

5. Design of information systems should be bottom up as well as top down, both within local authorities and between local authorities and central government. It should be driven by children's needs and priorities and whether these are met, as a more effective form of accountability.

6. Local authorities and third sector organisations hold a huge amount of children's information. Much of this information is rich and reflects the voices and experiences of children and their families, as well as their needs, outcomes and contexts. Ethical and effective information use requires that this information is much better exploited and used strategically and operationally.

7. When using information and designing information use systems, more should be done to amplify the voices of children, families and the practitioners who work directly with them. This includes integrating their voices within information and hearing their views on how their information, or the information of the children they work with, should be used.

8. It is important to build local-level capacity and ability to analyse and act on local information and data, within and across sectors. This includes developing new and more meaningful indicators, and mechanisms to make existing information more accessible and (where ethical and appropriate) more readily linked and shared.

9. There is the potential for digital technologies and AI to play a role in making better use of information that reflects voice, experience and needs. For these uses of children's information to be ethical and effective, it is essential to involve children and families in determining how their data are used.

10. The CIP Framework for ethical and effective information use can help with achieving improvements in the use of children's information. It will require clear strategic ownership at the local and national levels to drive it forward.

7. Next Steps for the Children's Information Project

7.1. Overview

The final year of the CIP will build on the strong foundation of learning and evidence developed to date in order to achieve the project's overarching objective, present from the outset: to help local authorities improve the lives of children and families and achieve wider impact with better information use.

To do this, we will further develop, test and refine the Framework for ethical and effective information use, in the following ways:

- We will continue our research activity with our partner sites, with a greater focus on evaluation and further testing key ideas, principles and practices.

- We will conduct a call for evidence and review how the eight information use Practices we have identified (see Section 5) are being employed. This will enable us to map and describe the field, showcase key examples of local authority innovation and learning, and bring to light barriers and challenges faced, within a strong conceptual framework.

- We will consult with children and families on our Framework, our findings and their implications.

- In work led by Research in Practice we will develop and produce a range of outputs, including materials to support local authorities and practitioners in understanding and implementing the four core Approaches to information use (see Section 4) and the eight key Practices (see Section 5).

- We will deepen work on impact and engagement, including active engagement with government. The CIP will conclude with a conference for local authority practitioners.

- We will work with academic institutions and Research in Practice on a sustainability model intended to support continued use of the project learning and materials.

We anticipate that this programme of activity will support improvements in:

- local, network and national collective understanding of the importance and value of children's information and its use

- national public acceptance of ethical uses of data

- national datasets and their use

- national and local policy and practice

7.2. Call for evidence and further consultation

We will review evidence of practice examples from across local authorities and the wider children's sector that relate to the goals, Approaches and Practices set out in the Framework. This will contribute to our work in further developing the Framework itself

and will provide illustrative examples that may be transferred or adapted elsewhere.

We will also consult with children and families on our findings and their implications.

7.3. Evaluation of site information use projects

Site-level evaluations will be led by the CIP's academic advisors. These will involve reflective workshops and in-depth interviews with leaders, practitioners and managers to explore what changes have resulted from engagement in the work of the CIP, the enablers and barriers to improved information use, and the enablers and barriers to the cultural change that is crucial to support and sustain this improvement.

The academic advisors will also facilitate cross-site evaluation through a shared learning day. Representatives from each local authority partner site will be invited to share their reflections on their own and the others' successes and challenges in their IUPs, and to contribute to a joint exercise to collate their learning from the process.

7.4. Producing Framework resources

In the final phase of the CIP, we will increasingly focus on producing resources to enable local authorities to develop and implement their own IUPs and to apply the Framework in their own information use practices and systems.

Research in Practice will work alongside the research team to create practical resources in support of the broader information use Framework, applying the eight key Practices and taking into account the enablers and barriers that local authorities may face. These materials will be co-designed with users to ensure relevance and usability, helping teams to navigate complexity and embed innovation in their everyday practice.

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