

Evaluation Report

Me and My World: Developing Practice and Procedure with Children in Care

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Me and My World approach to working with children in care was introduced by Brighton and Hove City Council in June 2016 as a key component of its relationship-based Model of Practice for children's social work. It addresses previously-researched shortcomings of direct work and recording for children in care and comprises three main components:

- the promotion of continuous relationships for children in care
- statutory review meetings which promote relationships and support participation
- a recording system which supports social workers and IRO's to write their reports directly to the child, and foster carers to write a letter to the child in their care every six months

This evaluation was undertaken to review progress since the implementation of the model and to identify the impact that it has had on practice for social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, foster carers and the experience of children and young people. A mixed methods evaluation was undertaken which included:

- documentary analysis
- focus groups with social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and foster carers
- semi-structured interviews with children and young people.

Key Findings

Significant Achievements

Me and My World has been received positively by social workers, IRO's and foster carers. Practitioners welcomed the personal, humane and empathic approach to recording and relationships which they felt gave meaning to their role with children in care. There is agreement with the principles of the approach and a commitment to implementing this in practice.

Writing to the child has achieved clarity about who the report is for. It reminds practitioners that the report is likely to be read by the child and instills a responsibility to attempt to get the report right for them. This also enables practitioners to connect with the child's emotional experience and empathise with their perspective.

The Me and My World approach allows for flexibility in what practitioners write, adapting reports to the specific needs of individual children and allowing a greater focus on strengths

and achievements. There are exceptional examples of social workers and IRO's recording significant events in children's lives and providing explanations for why they are in care.

The model has facilitated changes to the language which IRO's and social workers use. Practitioners recognize the need to provide explanations that can be understood by the child, for example, a simple, direct writing style with a decrease in the use of jargon and acronyms.

Me and My World supports relationship-based practice by encouraging practitioners to reflect on their relationships with children, promotes conversations about life stories and allows children to know what workers have noticed about them and their world.

The foster carer letter has achieved a valuable addition to the lives of children in care. Foster carers enjoy the process of writing the letters and children and young people value receiving them. There is clear evidence that these letters help bring 'the child alive' and promote conversations about life story and memories.

Practitioner's commitment to promoting children's participation in review meetings has been strengthened by the introduction of the model. Children are now able to exercise more choice in what happens in their reviews and more children and young people are present in their review meetings.

There is also evidence that the model may provide a foundation to promote the involvement of children's families in the review process. The focus on the child, their strengths and achievements may help avoid blame of parents which could aid their involvement in the process.

The model has also had an impact on some relationships between social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers with customary hierarchies between the IRO and social worker shifted to feature more collaboration, humour and fun.

Opportunities for Further Development

There is still some inconsistency in the detail of what social workers and IRO's write in their reports. Social workers and IRO's tend to take an individualistic approach which focuses on the child's internal feelings and emotions, achievements and events at the expense of more holistic information which roots the child in a context of community, culture, identity and relationships with birth and foster families. Some explanations of why children are in care are vague and lack specificity to the child.

Children's voices also continue to be absent in some reports with a lack of detail of what the child has explicitly said, their thoughts, wishes and feelings and how this has impacted on decision-making. There is a risk that the report being 'for' the child could lead to a one

directional approach where the adult practitioner's perspective is prioritized and given 'to' the child.

Me and My World review reports do not yet have a life beyond the computer screen with the mundane, formulaic formality of templates blamed for this. This limitation restricts the impact of the approach by contributing to a lack of meaningful sharing of reports which might allow children and young people to contribute to the co-construction of their reports.

Direct work, and children and young people's participation has been inconsistently embedded, with examples of children and young people not attending their reviews and no direct work being offered. In some circumstances children's involvement falls short of full participation with their inclusion being undertaken separately from the perceived main task, function and decision-making of the meetings.

Where the aims of Me and My World have not been fully embedded, this is attributed to a number of factors including:

- the confidence and values of individual practitioners in building relationships with children and young people
- professionals' defenses against feelings about the circumstances of some children
- the child or young person's expectations and previous history which results in an unwillingness to engage
- the approach of some IRO's which takes priority
- anxiety regarding how to demonstrate core statutory function.

Recommendations

- To continue to embed the model, writing to the child and promoting relationship-based direct work to promote emotional connection and enable children to understand their experiences.
- To further develop relationships between social workers, IRO's and children and young people; to enable them to explore and write about children's voices; support co-production of reports; children's creation of their own stories and evidence how what children have said contributed to decision-making in review meetings. Where children and young people continue to be marginal in the process for this to be acknowledged, the reasons why explored and where appropriate potential strategies to be included as a recommendation within reviews. For those that have been pioneers of the approach to share their experiences with other practitioners who are at an earlier point in engagement with the approach.

- For IRO's to explore together differences in approach, reasons for this, what this means for children and young people and what steps might help address it.
- To offer further ongoing workshops and integration of discussions in group supervision to support social workers in their direct work with children in care with particular emphasis on children's histories, why they are in care to ensure these explanations are created with children and are meaningful and specific to the child in review reports.
- To consider minor tweaks to the Me and My World review reports to prompt social workers and IRO's in giving more consideration to culture, identity and wider relationships and community for children in care.
- Work in collaboration with ICS providers to make Me and My World reports more inviting, with use of color, pictures and photographs and shared with children on an ongoing basis, rather than something that is returned to later in life.
- For the wider organization to declare their commitment to child-centered practice and for practitioners to embody the values of children's voice and evidencing participation to help mediate the risk of professional dissonance between child-centered practice and statutory function.
- For social workers and IRO's to: (i) find collaborative, reflective spaces to talk together, give feedback and 'review the review'; (ii) consider each other's experiences of one another; (iii) to challenge traditional hierarchies and consider what might be going on within and between workers, children and young people and their families; (iv) ensure children's voices are more consistently integrated into their review.
- Further research to be undertaken regarding the issues that professionals feel unable to talk about with children present, the reasons why and steps to address this.
- Also, additional research regarding the role of parents in Me and My World reviews, exploring best practice in this area and the direct experience of parents, in order to contribute to further development of the model and to secure their engagement and participation in the future.

Introduction

The Me and My World model was introduced by Brighton and Hove City Council in June 2016 as a key component of its relationship-based Model of Practice for children's social work. The Model of Practice, the Team Around the Relationship, involved a move to small social work teams which would support children from the assessment stage through the whole of their journey across social work services. Me and My World built on this approach by developing a model to promote a whole system change to strengthen relationships, review and recording for children in care. This report comprises of an in-house evaluation which aimed to identify how social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, foster carers and children and young people have experienced the implementation of the model and the impact this has had on their practice.

The relationships that children in care have with social workers and how their experiences are recorded has been identified as a key area of development for social work practice. Social workers are required to fulfil multiple tasks and competing functions, evidencing core statutory tasks for regulatory accountability on the one hand, and the child and their need for meaningful relationships and records on the other. Historically, the regulatory function has tended to win out, with records included within the Integrated Children's System dominated by the tracking of key performance indicators resulting in routinized and homogenized case files which "tend to assume both a rationality and universality of experience for looked after children" (Holland, 2008). This is mirrored in the statutory review meetings where research shows regulatory functions dominate with children left bored, alienated and excluded from decision-making (Leeson 2009). This focus has led to a marginalization of children's own voices from records and an emphasis on problems. Care experienced adults returning to view their files have spoken of discovering information written about them, rather than for them, with fragmented, redacted accounts which fail to capture their individualized voice and experience (Hoyle et al 2019). Relationships with social workers have been identified as similarly problematic with frequent changes of worker and a struggle to achieve meaningful work in the contexts of these relationships, with many children lacking an explanation of why they are in foster care (Holland 2009, Family Rights Group 2018). These limitations in practice have been researched to have a negative impact on children and young people's emotional well-being, self-efficacy and felt security (Leeson 2009 and Staines and Selwyn in press).

Despite ongoing recognition of these challenges and the lifelong impact that they have on children in care, there has been little consideration of ways to meaningfully address them in day-to-day social work practice. Most often, the shortcomings of the ICS system and imposing

regulatory bodies are positioned as the problem, and direct work and relationships as the solution, but they are often considered in isolation from one another with little consideration of how models could be developed to enable both functions to co-exist and potentially complement one another. Most often individual social workers are left to navigate the tension on an individual basis with some inevitably retreating to prioritize the needs of the bureaucratic system, with others attempting to retain their core values in supporting the children they are responsible for, but with little recognition or support of this in the wider organizational systems in which they are operating.

In 2016 Brighton and Hove City Council developed and launched an approach to promoting child-centered relationships, recording and review for children in care called Me and My World. Central to the model was its attempt to utilize a key statutory mechanism - the child in care review - to be an effective, meaningful intervention for the child. The intention was to adopt a space 'in between' statutory function and child-centered practice and to fulfil the needs of both. Me and My World comprised of three main components.

[The Three Components of Me and My World](#)

(i) Relationships

Firstly, Me and My World placed relationships between the social worker, Independent Reviewing Officer and child as central. This built on Brighton and Hove's Model of Practice which ensured that children and their families who entered the social care system received support from the same team and worker from initial referral to long-term care planning if needed. Me and My World attempted to maximise the opportunities of these continuous relationships to promote purposeful interactions between social worker, IRO and child and direct work to support explanations, understanding of life story, and the child's participation in the review process.

(ii) Statutory meetings

A second component were changes to the six-monthly child in care review meeting which was now held in two parts. The first takes place a month before the review was scheduled and comprised of a pre-meet between the social worker and IRO. During this meeting a preliminary form was completed which addressed key statutory requirements and performance indicators and input these on a separate form on the ICS system. In addition, the pre-meet incorporated a discussion to consider how to prepare for the review meeting itself and how to support the child's

attendance, participation and direct work activity to share information and promote understanding of themselves and their life story. The main Me and My World Review meeting was held a month later. The aim of this meeting was for a purposeful encounter to take place between the child, their parents, carers and the professional team. Practitioners were encouraged to utilise the meeting to promote relationship-based practice, enable participation, model strengths-based approaches to understand the child and their world, and make an active contribution to the child's memory, life story, the development of their self-efficacy and understanding of who they are. Conversations about their experience of family life, their interests, new experiences, what they enthuse and get excited about, key successes and achievements were to be encouraged and celebrated in the meeting. It was hoped that these conversations would be remembered by the child and become part of their life story and identity.

(iii) Recording

Finally, the recording system was overhauled with social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers writing their review reports directly to the child. The template to record these reviews was simplified to promote a narrative approach which allowed social workers and IRO's flexibility regarding what was recorded to make this specific to the child and their experience. The questions included were designed to prompt practitioners to focus on relationships, identity and life story rather than statutory processes. Key questions included 'Why am I in care?' 'Summary of my experiences since my last review'. Information included was intended to be strengths based and holistic and not only include information as it relates to the regulatory system. Practitioners were encouraged to encapsulate a sense of the child now, in their broadest terms, their sense of self, belonging, personality, key relationships, progresses, hopes and the many ways in which the child has changed. Alongside this template was the introduction of a letter which foster carers were expected to write every six months to the child in their care. Foster carers were encouraged to write of magic moments in family life, times when everyone had clicked, key experiences for the child and any worries and how the foster carer had tried to help.

Each of these components were underpinned by core principles of building relationships, promoting strengths, purposeful direct work and emphasizing participation and co-production with the child.

Through the implementation of these changes it was hoped that a key statutory process for children in care could become a meaningful intervention to promote child-centered practice. The aim was that children and young people in care would experience greater continuity and purpose in their relationships with their social workers, where they could explore their life story and identity and that social workers and IRO's would understand this as an integral core function and task. A further hope was that more children would be present, actively participating in their reviews and contributing to decision-making. Finally, that the records of these meetings would be unique to children and their experiences and provide useful information that would aid understanding of their life story now and in the future.

[Preparatory Work](#)

Social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and foster carers were prepared for the launch of Me and My World by a series of workshops delivered by a Lead Practitioner who developed the model. The workshops provided an overview of the key principles of the approach and an opportunity to share tools which could be integrated into the model. Throughout the implementation regular informal and formal consultation was provided by the Lead Practitioner to reflect on experiences and address problems or challenges.

In July 2018 Me and My World received its first test when Brighton and Hove received its first Ofsted inspection since the project was launched. The Local Authority received an overall judgement of 'Good'. Inspectors identified that the standard of work with children in care had been maintained through the reorganization and the Me and My World approach to reviews received praise with inspectors highlighting:

The development of the Me and My World Plan and Review has brought the child to the centre of planning. The powerful and clear documents set out the plan in child friendly language, making complex issues easy to understand. This robust work is making a tangible difference to the care planning process.

[Evaluation Aims and Objectives](#)

This evaluation is intended to explore the impact on practice of key stakeholders since the implementation of the model. The key questions that the study wanted to address were:

- How do social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, foster carers and children and young people experience Me and My World and what changes has this led to in their practice?

- How does Me and My World support child-centered reports, ensure information recorded is holistic and support children and young people's life story and identity?
- How does Me and My World support relationship-based practice and enable practitioners to integrate direct work with children and young people?
- How does Me and My World promote children's participation and choice in their review meetings?

The research study was approved by Brighton and Hove's internal ethics committee in November 2018.

Methodology

In order to evaluate, a mixed methods approach was employed in three stages. The first stage comprised of a documentary analysis of 16 Me and My World review reports. Four reports were randomly selected from each age group 0-4; 5-8; 9-12 and 13+ and were anonymized and analysed thematically. Key themes that were considered included:

- the reason the child is in care written in an understandable way;
- the social worker's relationship with the child documented
- holistic information on the child, their strengths and achievements were included
- Information regarding child's ethnicity/culture/identity included
- Child has co-constructed their report
- Direct quotes from the child included
- Child's relationships with parents, siblings, foster carers recorded
- Child consulted on what they would like to do in their review meeting
- Example of direct work or activity within the review
- Child has been consulted on what they would like to do in their review meeting
- Example of direct work or activity within the review
- Child has participated in their review

The second stage of the evaluation comprised of focus groups. Two focus groups were with social workers with eight social workers in one group and nine in another. One focus group comprised of four Independent Reviewing Officers. A final focus group was undertaken with five foster carers. Participants in these focus groups were recruited voluntarily, with participant information sheets shared across Brighton and Hove's Children's Services and people invited to take part. All participants signed a consent form and were aware that they could withdraw at any time. The focus groups were facilitated by Professor Gillian Ruch who was independent

of the design and delivery of the model. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed for key themes, words, phrases and experiences which were significant to the model, its implementation and documentary analysis.

The final phase included 4 semi-structured interviews with children and young people in care. Foster carers were e-mailed to ask whether their children or young people would be interested to take part. Information sheets specific to the child were devised to explain the process and the children signed consent forms and were aware that they could withdraw at any time. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and key themes regarding the children and young people's experiences analysed.

Findings

Findings from the study are ordered under three overarching themes, 'Writing to the Child'; 'Promoting Participation' and 'Factors Influencing the Model' with these divided into subthemes according to topics which emerged to be most prevalent to respondents participating in the study.

Writing to the Child

Comparison with Previous Recording Mechanisms

The social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers who participated in the focus groups all emphasized the contrast between the Me and My World approach and the recording systems for children in care which existed prior to the introduction of the model and those that they continued to utilize for other statutory contexts. Words that social workers used to describe these processes included the "tick boxy" nature of previous reports, their "formality", "clinical" and "business-like" nature. Participants made the link between these structures and the consequent impact on their role and relationships with children. One social worker identified previous reports as promoting a sense of "detachment", another their sense of being placed in the position of an "omniscient narrator" and "sounding like some kind of documentary". For another social worker this aided a separation from the events that they might be describing with a focus on "professional language" and "language that accommodated difficult bits like trauma". One social worker articulated:

We're used to writing in a certain way, we compose our reports, I think, and I'm speaking for myself here, it can almost feel a little clinical. We use a certain type of language, and

it's become so natural to use a lot of professional language, to structure our sentences in a certain way and it kind of sometimes can rip the heart and soul out of it, you know? (SW, FG1).

Two social workers made the link between the structure of previous reports and what they eventually recorded, reducing their role and people's experiences as a "processed list of actions" that "focused on the risk". For one social worker, this seemed to be embodied in her physical experience of writing the report saying "quick, quick, quick, report, done". Social workers and IRO's recognized that together, this culminated in a reporting process that was designed for an "adult audience" and "the professional network". As a result, social workers and IRO's identified that children and their experiences were situated on the periphery of these models with one social worker identifying their sense that "children were a by-line" and another "not for the child".

Child-Focused and Connecting to Emotional Experience

Children being marginalized by the previous recording system was in direct contrast with social worker and IRO's experience of the Me and My World approach, where "child focused", "child centered" and "for the child" were the phrases most commonly voiced in the focus groups. Most often these comments were directly linked to the expectation that the report be written directly to the child which seemed to serve a clarifying purpose about who the report was for:

When I started as an IRO I often used to question who I'm writing to when I'm writing records, so I think that the Me and My World project has answered that question very clearly for me...it makes us think how they might have this shared with them and sort of powerfully ties us down to the child's experience (IRO, FG3).

Social workers talked about the reports creating a more meaningful consideration of the emotional and internal world of the child. One social worker commented:

I really had to train myself to write directly to the child and what I found myself doing is naturally gravitating to a more...it just felt more like a reality of what it's like for that child and I felt freer to write about what their experiences are emotionally, using everyday language that we would use. In a way, part of me wishes that we could do it more. (SW, FG2).

Other social workers spoke of the process supporting "empathy" with the child and providing a "powerful" connection with their experiences. One social worker made the link between the process of writing the report and that of mentalization:

It makes me more consciously connect with the mentalization process, so I think that's what's different and that's what other reports don't trigger in you, so you know, when you're starting that journey of writing the report, you have to sort of put all your focus into the child and their experiences and your perception of their experiences as well, and you're pulling together all these observations as well, so it's an opportunity to sort

of take stock of the previous four months and think, yes, what's going well and what have I noticed about you (SW, FG2).

For one worker, the combination of writing to the child and the flexibility of the report provided a space to sit with uncertainty and wonder about what the child might be experiencing without taking absolute or fixed positions. In turn, the process seemed to promote the “noticing” and “observing” aspects of their role with children rather than “doing”. One social worker said:

It kind of sits with the unknowns and wonderings you can talk to that in the report, because I think that can be quite powerful, so that the things that haven't been spoken about, but I might be aware they might be feeling, although it's hard for them to say out loud, being able to talk to that in the report has been powerful at times I think for young people. Yes, it allows for that. (SW, FG1).

One social worker gave an example of sharing their wonderings and what the meaning of a young person's behavior might be with the young person as an aid to emotional literacy. One social worker identified that this had been a helpful intervention to “emotionally develop their language” and “articulate what's underneath”. Another social worker explained:

Using the space of writing the report is a really powerful mechanism for that, because you can capture how they've spoken explicitly about something and then you can phrase it in a way that, like, for example, helping children to use different words or express like be able to...express their feelings in more helpful ways perhaps, or whatever it may be, and you can capture that when you write the report, like saying, oh you said this, but I think may be that means this or whatever, and try and capture that subtlety, and I think if that then is a mechanism where it's like captured on a bit of paper and you've read that to then and had their response to it, that is a bit of an intervention in itself isn't it? (SW, FG1).

There were a number of examples in the sample reports where social workers had noticed changes in the child or young person with regard to managing their feelings and used the reports to document this:

The award recognized so many things in you. Not only how well you can work with staff, listen to them and stick to rules and boundaries, but the work you have been doing on yourself. This has included the pieces you have been writing about your experiences in Brighton, as well as working to manage your emotions and this has been evident in how you are able to keep calm in situations that used to make you angry (SW, FG2).

Adaptability and Accessibility of the Report

Another key element of the Me and My World approach that was cited by both IRO's and social workers was the “adaptable”, “flexible” and “freeing” recording format which allowed “difference” and for practitioners to utilize their professional judgement and create bespoke reports that allowed specificity to the individual needs of children and young people. An IRO said:

You recognize all children are very, very different, they're different in age, abilities, situations, circumstances and therefore my approach to each review with each child. I think it's just very different and I like the fact that somehow or other I take from this the opportunity to be different with different children. (IRO, FG3).

This was echoed by a social worker who appreciated the flexibility to tailor the report to the context and needs of the individual child. She said, "You have the space to make of the review and the words that you use whatever you want" (SW, FG1). Linked to this was an emphasis on using language that was "accessible" and "jargon free" with social workers and IRO's avoiding acronyms and words that would be understood by the child or young person. One social worker said:

I think almost with the difficult bits I think it takes a bit more thought and skill, because what you can do with difficult bits in your day-to-day reports is there's a lot of language that accommodates difficult bits like trauma, that's a word we use a lot don't we, trauma? You know, dysregulated...what does that mean to a 16-year-old? We almost have to break down what does that actually look like? (SW, FG2).

Supporting Relationship-Based Practice

Social workers and IRO's identified a synergy between writing to the child and relationship-based practice and participants appreciated the value of a reporting mechanism that was not experienced as sitting at odds with, but directly supporting this. As one social worker put it, the approach enabled them to write "from you a person, to them a person". Another social worker said:

It's that correlation with the development of relationship-based practice as well as these two things work very well, hand—in-hand, you know. Having a relationship-based practice alongside a report which is absolutely based on the children is really nice. (SW, FG1).

This experience was echoed by an IRO who spoke of how the approach had motivated him to reappraise his role with children in care and the significance of this being seen to be valued as important by the wider system:

Now I'm actually given a proper license to have a relationship with that child and for that to be recognized as meaningful and valuable. I don't think that it was before. I think that this was all about do the reviews, have you quality assured this and what does the report look like in terms of stats. I think it is an immensely great thing. (IRO, FG3).

The most common phrases used by participants to describe writing to the child in reports were "personal", "personalizes", "humane", "caring" and "intimate" which led to social workers and IRO's assuming a more personalized voice which gave them permission to speak to their feelings and relationships with children and young people within the reports. One social worker said:

If there is a problem, I will happily go up to bat for you and I will defend you and I think that is our role, so actually, if it comes across as really personal when you're writing the report, shouldn't it? Because what you're saying to this child is actually I do love you, you know, not in the same way that you might love your own child, but actually you do, because if you're doing your job properly, you can't help but care for these children because you're that connecting piece. (SW, FG1).

Social workers and IRO's talked of how writing to the child invited them to put more of themselves in reports, their relationships with children and young people and their feelings towards them. A social worker said:

It really connects to the feeling, as it were, and I think, thinking about the rigidity of more formal reports that we write, it's almost like we put up a barrier between us and the feeling, whereas when we write it well. I know when I'm writing Me and My World its very much connecting to the feeling of that child and my feeling in relation to them (SW, FG2).

Foster carers writing six monthly letters to children and young people identified similar experiences, describing the process as "like a hug" and "personal", comparing this to the more formal daily recording they might complete. One carer said:

This much more personal, this is me talking to you and telling you, you know, how much I love you and all that kind of stuff and actually, it's real, you know, mother and baby kind of stuff. I know it's not my baby but actually we do adore you, we have really enjoyed looking after you. In the same way with my birth children, you know, always making sure they know that they're loved (FC, FG4).

Social workers and IRO's talked of including their feelings of pride, encouragement, care and concern and what their relationship with the child had meant to them. There was evidence of this in a significant proportion of the random sample of reports included in the study. One social worker opened her report with:

I firstly wanted to say how nice it was to spend time with you this afternoon. We said how it was the first time we've actually got to eat food together and talk about silly as well as serious things. The fact that we can do this shows how far things have moved along and a lot of that is down to you and the hard work that you've continued to put in.

In another report a social worker wrote "It is an absolute pleasure to be your social worker and see you grow into the lovely young person that you are". An IRO who was due to retire used the report to look back on her role with the young person, reflecting on how their relationship had developed, how they marked the ending and her best hopes for the young person's future:

As you know I am leaving my job as I am retiring. We had a really nice time this morning going to McDonalds before your review, so we could say goodbye. I will really miss working with you and my trips to W! I am really proud of how far you have come since we first met, you have really become more confident and mature and it is lovely to see the pictures of you with your mum and little sister. I hope things work out for you at P and that you continue to get on well at school and on your contact with your mum.

The opportunity to reflect on the relationship was also an important theme for foster carers taking part in the evaluation. Two foster carers referred to this process being “therapeutic” and an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with the child. One foster carer explained:

It’s quite nice, you can see how you’ve overcome some challenges, because when you’re in the midst of it you think it’s never-ending, but you can look back and go, it was two months but at the time, it felt like forever (FC, FG4).

Overall, for the majority of participants writing to the child and their relationships appeared to have resulted in a sense of purpose, value and fulfilment in their role. Several participants talked of writing Me and My World reports as a “joy”, “enjoyment”, “like”, “positive”, “love writing to the child” and one of “my favourite parts”.

Focus on Strengths

Participants also noted a shift in emphasis to a focus on strengths and achievement and more ordinary information “about what the child has been doing” within their reports. One IRO explained:

For any child, for any parent looking after a child, they are not going to forget the issues which have been challenging, because they’re real. But they are going to continue to focus on success and progress cause that’s how you motivate children and make them feel as though they’re valued and make them feel as though they’ve got positive direction...I think for me I’m quite happy with rolling with the idea of making this a very positive, powerful experience for children and recording for them a narrative which I think is reflective, honest and celebrates their success. (IRO, FG3).

The majority of reports in the evaluation all included reasons to celebrate and charted individual achievements in drama clubs, successes at school, attending music festivals, going to friend’s houses for tea, attending school discos and a variety of interests. One report noted “You love talking about cars, and are very interested in different countries and languages, you tell me your second favourite language is Polish, and that a boy you were friends with is Polish”.

The opportunity to reflect on the strengths of children and young people also helped focus on progress within their network too. Foster carers who took part in the study valued having a space to focus on strengths which enabled them to reflect on the progress they had made and validated their achievements as carers. One foster carer said:

It’s quite nice, you can see how you’re overcoming challenges, because when you’re in the midst of it, you think its never-ending, but you can look back and go, it was two months, but at the time it felt like forever. It’s that thing of seeing, my god, you’ve done really well here, and actually, this has been really positive. And also, you know we write, this was a challenge, but this is how we worked through it, so it’s actually like, we have dealt with that, so a lot of it is about looking back and thinking, you know what, it was okay, it did work (FC, FG4).

Overall, there was a sense that the flexibility and simplicity along with a focus on the child supported opportunities to capture a true sense of the child, who they are, their likes, interests and personalities that were not captured in other reports about them. This was also evident in the letters written from foster carers to children. One foster carer described how her letter had been shared with prospective adopters and the impression this had made on their understanding of him as a little boy:

It wasn't clinical and actually made them realise what it was like to live with him than all the formal reports that they get, about this is a medical or whatever. They said that actually from that he felt like a little boy rather than a form, an individual, and what he liked, you know, they could see him smiling and all of that. (FC, FG4).

Supporting Memory, Life Story and Explanations

The focus on strengths and experiences was also being utilized to create memories and life story based on their current lived experiences with their worker or carer. One social worker described going with a young person to her father's grave and remembered "we cleared the weeds and tidied the graves" and how she was going to secure funds for a headstone to mark the grave. Some social workers simply chose to recall and record conversations that they had had with the child to promote memory, enabled the child to feel attended to and heard and further consolidated their relationship with their worker. A social worker explained:

It enables you to be able to say, you know, this happened last month and we spoke about it and you told me this and it really recalls it and I think for young people they said, god, you really know my life, you've remembered every conversation, or you've remembered that you were sitting in this place when we had that conversation, and wow, you actually really listened, how do you have that memory (SW, FG2).

The possibilities of the use of ongoing recording to support life story was also seen in the six-monthly letters written by foster carers. One of the carers noted that the letter is "almost having the timeline". Another carer said that they used the letters to mark key events and dates in the child's life:

I think it's quite helpful, the last one I did I included when their brother moved away, so it records the dates, doesn't it and they can look back and know when he moved to live with the family, yes, it gives a record of dates (FC, FG4).

Social workers and IRO's involved in the study were all attempting to use the reports to provide explanations for the child about what is happening in their life and when and how decisions will be made, particularly in relation to why they are in foster care and the context of legal proceedings:

How do we explain to a child who might be 7 or 8 that a Court process is going on in the background for them so it's about finding the right words that answer some of their questions and may alleviate their anxiety or their uncertainty about what decisions are being made by whom...a lot of young people ask am I going back, when is this going to happen, so we have to find ways of describing people of importance in different sorts of roles in their lives, so we have to offer them some sort of reference to judges and professional networks (IRO, FG3).

The reports included in the sample contained examples of social workers successfully explaining decision-making in straightforward language:

I have been meeting up with your mum to see if she can make some big changes like stopping taking drugs and being more sensible about which people she lets in the home. Sadly, I think she is still quite stuck in doing the things that make problems for her and you. I don't think she has done enough to change the unsafe things she is doing. I would be really worried about you going back to live with your mum and I'm going to say to the Court that I don't think it would be a good idea.

For one social worker there was a direct link between these written explanations as a way of rehearsing conversations that they then had directly with the child:

I think it keeps that narrative going about bringing up why they're in care and having that conversation consistently, I guess, and keeping it in mind for them because as difficult as it is to talk about, it is something that needs to be said...with my 9 year old who came into care two years ago we've constantly talked about it and the words are being said all the time, so they bring some normality to it in some ways (FC, FG2).

However, the explanations that IRO's and social workers provided were not universally written in this straightforward way that successfully captured specific contexts for children. Some explanations were brief, vague and failed to give sufficient detail that would aid a child's understanding of what was happening in their life. Three of the 16 reports said "You are in care because your mum couldn't meet your needs". Another report said "Your mum couldn't keep you safe". This led to questions regarding the variation in the quality of these reports and what factors affect social workers to write in the ways that they do.

Similar inconsistency was noted in the reports written by IRO's completing the section entitled 'What are my needs and how might these be met?'. A minority of examples were written in vague, general terms and failed to capture the range of holistic needs specific to the child with reference to overarching care needs being prioritized instead ie "you require a safe, predictable care in a safe, nurturing environment". There were two examples which did address a greater range of needs particular to the circumstances of the child including "You need the adults who support you to know about your life experiences, understand how this might make you feel and know how best they can support you".

Conceptualizing the Child Now and for the Future

Writing the report directly to the child helped support social workers, IRO's and foster carers hold in mind that what they write will be read by the child at some point. One social worker commented "I don't expect them not to read it" (SW, FG1). Similar sentiments were shared by a foster carer responsible for writing the six-monthly letters who said "even in 5 years, 10 years, whatever, they will look back and see that personal record" (FC, FG4). There was variety in social worker's expectation regarding how and when children and young people may read the reports. A third of social workers were sharing reports on an ongoing basis with children and young people. For others, particularly those working with younger, pre-verbal children, the process involved a conceptual leap of imagining the child coming to the reports when they are older. For another social worker, despite their focus on the child, the process did not lead to a straightforward shedding of a professional audience but of holding both the child and the perceived priorities of the IRO in mind:

I don't know if it was the right thing to do or not, but I ended up writing at the start of the paragraph, you know, I said, little one....this is for you when you're older. I'm writing this to you now but I'm not going to read this to you now, and he may never read it, he might read it when he's older, and I said one of the things we need to do is help you understand where you really come from, and I thought I'm not writing this to you. I'm writing this to a mythical you and actually I'm writing to the IRO (SW, FG1).

However, participants conceptualized the child in their mind, the process of writing to the child had resulted in participant's heightened awareness of the longevity of the reports and their desire and sense of responsibility to be helpful to the child of the future within this:

I can see so much of the value of my contribution towards their life story, narrative and I only hope that when they're not say 11, even 18, but maybe 30 or 40 that when they're piecing together their memories of their childhood that they're going to pick something up which is going to go right, I've got something here, that was a nugget of information that was incredibly helpful (IRO, FG3).

The Process of Writing to the Child

The capacity to write to the child and hold them in mind now and in the future was reflected in participant's description of the process of how they wrote the reports with social workers taking some discernible concrete but also psychological steps to support the "shift of mindset" required by the Me and My World approach. Overall, there was an emphasis on the need to take time in writing these reports. One social worker recalled the need to "go slowly on the keyboard" and another made reference to the need to "draft and re-draft". Imagining "the child on my shoulder" was a strategy for another social worker. One social worker sought a different physical space to begin the process of writing, with the office and the formalized processes

associated with it judged to restrict the capacity of the worker to meaningfully connect with the child:

I don't write them in the office. It's too formal, it's too distracting in general and I walk away because it is such a shift of mindset and it's something that I feel quite passionate about but I want to be able to just sit down and think about John, Bob or whoever, and just think about them and funny things that have happened, things that they've done, these little snapshots and I'm very much writing to them at that age (SW, FG1).

Impact on Relationships with Parents

The impact of child-centered reports, focused on strengths, life story and written in simple, accessible language was cited as positively effecting on parent's engagement in the review process. One social worker attributed this to the shift in emphasis from "guilt, shame, blame, denial" to "tap into what's going on now" (SW, FG1). The social worker went on to say:

She's read Me and My World, she's getting them sent to her...and she'll just go to the children part, she said I'll only read about the kids and because it is so focused, it's not thrashing out the past and making clear judgements on the past, you know, big statements, and that person is insufficient and all these horrible words, but she's going to start coming to them because it's about being heard and not being judged (SW, FG1).

Another social worker said that for one parent, reading the report had helped her gain knowledge of his life, enabled her to feel more connected and helped her relationship with the child during contact:

She's feeling more connected, so she's able to make reference to, oh, so I saw that so and so was doing this, yes, so then there's something to bring them together, so that when they do see each other, she's following them, and I think that's really reassuring for them, it will be (SW, FG1).

The flexibility and openness of the reports was also identified as helpful in securing parental engagement where differences of opinion could be held within the same report:

You stop pretending that you know everything and bring somebody else's perspective, you incorporate the parent's disagreeing, I quite like that" (SW, FG2).

Reports as 'Live' Documents?

Despite the care and time with which social workers and IRO's were investing in writing the reports, participants spoke of the limitations in the documents themselves which prevented their active use in day-to-day relationships with children and young people. One social worker commented that the "actual document is awful" and another that the reports were "just

computer documents” that did not tend to have a life outside of the statutory process. One social worker said that they “don’t tend to revisit it” nor that children “particularly cherished it”. For those that did share reports with children and young people they did “not show them the actual document” or took steps like “change the font” or create a separate document altogether that might be more meaningful and accessible to children and young people.

This experience was in direct contrast with the letters written by foster carers where there was clear evidence that they were being integrated as live documents in the lives of the foster families. Foster carers and the children themselves referred to the letters being talked about and read regularly by the children and young people and having a tangible impact on their feelings about themselves and their relationships with their foster carers and their foster carers with them. One carer who attended the focus group said:

We’ve got SATS this week and this is her self-soothing way, when she can’t calm down to get to sleep she gets her memory box out and in it she’s got her letters and she will go over them and she will come into the bedroom to me and say, oh, I did that, oh, did I do that and I’m really seeing the benefit of them. And I think for us, it helps, it makes us think, oh, d’you know, we have achieved something (FC, FG3).

This was echoed by the children who were interviewed for the study. A six-year-old girl was asked how she felt on reading her letters and she responded “comfort”. Her nine-year-old brother said, “I like the remembering”. A sixteen-year-old boy described reading his letters as “it’s like I know that she cares”. An eleven-year-old girl described that she found them “a bit cringey” but said that she read them on her own in bed. She then added “I wish she would do it more, once a month”. Foster carers also referred to the creative approaches they were using in presenting the letters including photographs, pictures and including them in the children’s memory boxes along with memorabilia associated with the information within the letters. One foster carer said that she was planning to put all the letters into a book when the child was 18.

This contrast in experience between recording on the current ICS system alongside the realized potential of the letters led to questions regarding how the key principles of the Me and My World approach including being child-centered, flexible, promoting successes and life story might be integrated into the fabric of the ICS system itself. How could the sophisticated technology available to document people’s personal lives be extended to professional contexts too? Creative adjustment of fonts, inclusion of color, photographs, video and art work might better reflect the individual personalities and experiences of children and young people and play a part in supporting their relationships with social workers too.

What Remains Untold?

Despite the apparent shift in emphasis in reports to a greater connection with the child, their emotional world, strengths, successes and emphasis on providing simple explanations to promote understanding of life story and identity, it was also important to consider what remained untold in the self-reports of participants and was not documented in the reports included in the study. The thematic analysis and documentary analysis revealed that there were striking absences in what social workers and IRO's referred to in writing about the lives of the children and young people. In the majority, there was little reference to the children's identity or cultural needs, what this meant to them and how these were being supported in their lives.

It was also striking that there was little evidence of children's relationships with their parents, brothers and sisters. Me and My World reports written in the initial stages of care proceedings included substantial information about parents, but this tended to be in relation to the ongoing assessment work being undertaken and actions they needed to fulfil in the context of the legal process. There was a lack of information about how children's relationships with parents was being supported and the quality of their time together during contact. For those reports that were written following Final Care Orders being granted relationships with parents, siblings and extended family members were barely mentioned at all. If they were noted, children's relationships tended to be reduced to passing references to scheduled contact having happened, rather than the quality of this and what this may have meant to the child.

This absence of direct reference to these aspects of children's experience was in contrast to the children and young people who were interviewed as part of the research where their parents were very much in their minds as they spoke about their experiences of the review process. Their comments will be considered in the 'Participation' section of this report, but it was significant that they were the people consistently brought to mind in all four interviews. When asked what they do in reviews a child spontaneously recalled making a pancake and tying it to a balloon and flying it up to the sky to her father who had died. When a 16-year-old boy was asked if there was anyone not currently included in his review that he would like to be, he responded "My mum, because she's part of my life too". In an interview with an 11-year-old girl who began to imagine what she might do in her review meeting, ideas that included "circuit training" so that she did not have to sit still, it was her father that she first imagined participating in this. She said that her father did not currently attend her review meetings.

During the evaluation there was not the opportunity to explore the factors that may have led to this absence and how certain information is prioritized in the minds of social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers over others but potential factors that might contribute to this will be explored more fully in the discussion section of the report.

Participation

Promoting Participation

A second overarching theme to emerge during the evaluation was in relation to participation of the child and the impact of this on the meeting component of the Me and My World review process. Overall, the majority of participants identified that the process invited social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure that children's involvement in meetings was planned for, supported and delivered. One IRO said:

I think it is an opportunity and we're impelled by the model to think carefully about participation and these things about who's attending, what we're going to talk about, what we're going to do, most of these tasks we delivered we share with the social worker in a sort of pre-review stage, where they're probably the best person to do that but it is incumbent upon us to make sure that's delivered upon and if it requires us to go and check with the young person and say, is this okay, is that what you wanted, are we getting this right, how did that go, it allows us that room to relate to them (IRO, FG3).

Both social workers and IRO's described "involvement", "better participation", "fluid", "friendly" all emphasizing a focus on the review as "the child's meeting". Another IRO said:

I think that what I like is the focus, well the focus for me now is that the meeting is the meeting with the child, and I like the way that has changed now. It's not the meeting and then we saw the child, the meeting was with the child and therefore that can be as long and short as that needs to be and it's my job to kind of make sure that all the other bits of information I need to source all of that either to another meeting or elsewhere in order that that meeting with the child constitutes a full review. (IRO, FG3).

Participants within the study identified that the responsibility for involving the child within the meeting did not just sit with the IRO but was shared by social workers too. An IRO explained:

A big shift is the social workers previously they wouldn't always think about involving the child and what this model does is explicitly makes it about the child, so that has been a shift...and really understand that this is a child's meeting (IRO, FG3).

One of the factors participants identified that helped support the involvement of children was the introduction of the new Part 1 review form which comprises of the statutory performance data and actions in the ongoing care plan. For some participants, the completion of this form by the IRO and social worker a month before the meeting was due to take place allowed IRO's

to feel they would not have to repeat this in the context of the formal meeting which allowed for more freedom and creative involvement of the child. One social worker said:

You get to do all the boring stuff beforehand, the stuff that actually makes the meetings really uncomfortable for the young person and yes, I think it just...the actually meetings themselves are better most of the time. (SW, FG2).

Flexibility

Along with the aim to exclude formulaic, tick-box procedures from the child-focused meeting, there was also appreciation of the flexibility of what the child's involvement might comprise of which allowed practitioners to adapt each meeting to the specific needs of individual children:

Hearing everybody's experience is about are we focusing on the child, and if we're focusing on the child, we're not going to have a blanket role for all the children. So whether the IRO goes and meets with a child with a social worker way before because the child is not expected to sit in a difficult meeting or whether the IRO comes we bake cakes or the IRO comes and has a discussion with the young person a little bit before the meeting so she then gets her views before we sit down, and then she can say to professionals this is what the young person said, so from my point of view, I would like to leave it for the child a little bit, as we've got the child's voice more and more heard in this process and making it comfortable for them, we're going to have a wide variety of meetings happening and therefore everybody has to think outside the box (IRO, FG3).

Some participants credited reports and letters as also supporting a shift in focus in the meetings themselves. One foster carer said:

It was the first time he felt that it was about him. I mean obviously he knew they were before but there had never been anything directed to him. (FC, FG4).

This emphasis on participation and flexible approaches to the meetings led to reviews that IRO's and social workers described as "playful", "humorous", "fun" and "friendly" enabling more children and young people to be involved. An IRO said:

They're interested in what has been spoken about them, what their foster carers write in their six-month narrative, if they've done well in something, so I find it a lot more friendly for them to be in, more young people want to be in their reviews through this I've found (IRO, FG4).

Given the freedom and flexibility of the model, the evaluation highlighted a number of ways in which children and young people were being included in Me and My World review meetings. For social workers, talking to children before their review and spending time with the child to gather their views was key:

I tend to use the review as like a point of reflection with the child, so we'll talk about the upcoming review, have some one-on-one time with them, maybe pick up some things

that were brought up in the last review and explore these with the child, if it's appropriate. (SW, FG 1).

A number of social workers referred to talking to the child or young person about the content of the Me and My World Review Reports and asking the child what they would like to be written:

I just talk to them and say, what else would you like me to say...Is there anything else that you want to put in" (SW, FG1).

Another social worker said:

Because he can't cope with me writing something that he doesn't know is going to be in there, so we literally sit with a blank template, so we know what box is that, what's going in what box and that works for him, that's what he needs (SW, FG2).

For one social worker this process of preparation and involvement in report writing had a direct impact on relationships with children:

I will meet him and read through it, and just kind of read it out loud to him, and I ask that he chimes in with anything that he wants to...he's just been like, yes, like I really feel you've got that, and that feels fine to have written that. He kind of talks to it a bit, and it's kind of quite powerful, I think, in terms of that space to be kind of held in mind, and then I can leave him that bit of paper for him to have and think about (SW, FG2).

There was some evidence of these conversations within the reports included within the data analysis with social workers documenting children's wishes, feelings and what they wanted to be shared at their Me and My World meeting:

"You told me that you miss mummy and want to live at her house and at J's house".

In another report a social worker explicitly referred to information that a young person wanted to be shared in their review.

Participation through Choice and Control

Participants talked about a number of ways in which they attempted to promote choice with children and young people to support their involvement in the meeting. Social workers and IRO's referred to discussing with children and young people who they would like to be at the meeting. For others, choice of venue was important in securing their involvement:

When we've said to a young person, look, we're not doing things that way anymore, but you and I can sit and talk in a coffee shop, that's a review, and you can see the cogs turning and them saying, then I can probably do that, actually. (IRO, FG3).

Social workers and IRO's giving some control to children and young people about what they would like to happen in the meeting was also significant for some in building children and young people's self-efficacy and investment in the process:

I just am surprised at how much teenagers love it and are able to say, like, what can I get these grown-ups to do? What am I going to get my IRO to do? (SW, FG1).

There was concrete evidence of how this was achieved in practice with one young person taking up the role of Chair and directing the meeting:

Going into a Me and My World review where it was obviously the IRO and all the professionals, and the child was sitting there, it's quite overwhelming, but the child wasn't, the child led the meeting, so they weren't just involved, the child told the group about their experiences, so they led the meeting. And I was just so impressed by the fact that this child was so comfortable in this environment going through this process that they were in a position where they could take charge. It really was, I just thought that this child has been completely empowered by this process (SW, FG1).

Examples of involvement of this kind was referenced in review reports. One IRO wrote:

I was also impressed by the fact that at the start of your review meeting, you had a really clear idea about what you wanted to discuss at your review. I really didn't need to chair your review, you pretty much did this yourself. You really wanted to talk about plans for your future.

Participation through Direct Work

The evaluation provided evidence of the integration of play and direct work approaches either prior to or during the meeting itself to gather views and experiences. Examples ranged from trampolining, cake baking and Lego building. One foster carer recalled an IRO arriving with the ingredients to make slime. There was also reference to the inclusion of more structured direct work approaches like timelines, genograms and life rivers.

Sometimes for the little ones, it's just activities and I've got these 6 and 7 year olds and we asked them what they would like to do and they said can we bake a cake, so we ended up baking cakes about three times because they're so happy at baking and we had these conversations and then I said, okay, what about doing something else now? And when we did we drew a huge star in the middle of the page and we said, what do you think that you're a star for? And what are the good things...and they started completing it and then the reviewing officer took a picture of these stars with what they'd put into this drawing and I write about what has happened in between, but it's the whole review, it's not only about what we're writing, it's about their contribution (SW, FG2).

Another example given by a social worker included:

With one young person, I normally sit with her and she likes to draw herself in the middle and then do a bit of a timeline around herself of what's happened since the last review for her, so she would put things like changes of friendship and draw her friends or what's

happened in the foster home or things like that, and then I ask if she minds if I take that bit of paper away and type it up (SW, FG1).

During individual interviews a 6-year-old girl and 8-year-old boy were asked what they did in their reviews and they immediately recalled making pancakes with their IRO, tying some to a balloon and sending it up to their father in heaven, demonstrating the significance of these activities and how they remained in their minds long-after.

Some IRO's were utilizing the use of video to involve children and young people. One gave an example of a young person who had opted not to come to their meeting but had shared a video that raised specific points the people attending could respond to:

They send their video, or we've got them to send their video but then they come in, actually I've got two young people, then they come in at the end and then they play their video because they're quite proud cause they want to see the reaction on everyone's faces about how well they looked and everything. And they look fabulous and then they get responses to the specific points that they said so they say, what I want to ask you is this and that's all about preparing them and that's wonderful (IRO, FG3).

Despite the emphasis on play and direct work the approach also afforded the flexibility to continue with more familiar, formalized meetings if that was what the child or young person preferred:

I've got one particular lad, the whole idea of doing something really informal, doing something that's based about what he enjoys and really laid back and relaxed and...he really recoiled at that. He didn't like that idea, and I think he liked the idea of being very formalized, he wanted it to be the old structure where we're very much in a meeting format. He's quite confident in that setting and I think he feels very contained in that....(SW, FG2)

Increased Participation

Overall, participants believed that the emphasis on the child's participation had led to increased involvement of children and young people in their review meetings. One social worker said, "I don't know that there's any review of a child over five that doesn't come to their review in some shape or form" (SW, FG1). There were a number of examples cited by participants of children and young people who did not previously attend reviews but now were. One foster carer shared:

She never used to be in her meetings, like the IRO would turn up and she'd be there for 5 minutes and she'd bolt through the door, whereas now she sits, and she will actually tell you what she's done (FC, FG4).

Another social worker said:

Yes, because the one young person that I've had since a student didn't come before. He would literally pop in for 15 minutes and hear, literally 15 minutes with the IRO beforehand, have about 10 minutes in the actual session and then go back to school, and now he will sit through the whole lot (SW, FG1).

Supporting Relationships with the Child and Between Professionals

Overall, some participants believed that where the IRO was invested in promoting participation this supported a more meaningful relationship to be developed between the IRO and the child.

One social worker explained that an IRO had shared:

that the MMW process has changed the relationship a bit from how it had been previously, and she really welcomed that. That was really nice to see (SW, FG1).

Another social worker commented:

Whereas the IRO's they do only see them twice a year so I guess the opportunity for the young person to say actually, do you know what, if you're going to see me, this is what I want to do, and for the IRO's to go along with that as much as possible, it's quite nice because actually, it makes a meeting like that, slightly less awkward (SW, FG2).

In addition to strengthening IRO relationships with the child, the Me and My World approach had also supported relationships between social workers and IRO's. For some social workers there was a sense that the process had aided a reconceptualization of the IRO away from customary association of statutory returns and quality assurance to figures that were more human and fun. One social worker recognized:

But it's nice because you get to see a slightly more human side of the IRO's, like outside of Conferences and stuff like that, it's actually nice to see that interaction between them when you're not just sat across the table saying, tell me about the last time you had contact, tell me about this. It's less about the talking and more about just spending that time (SW, FG3).

Limits of Participation

Despite clear evidence of the intention to promote participation and evidence of increased involvement in direct work with children and young people, there were a minority who had experienced no tangible change in practice since the model had been introduced. One foster carer said:

I thought it was a nice idea letting them choose an activity, but we haven't had that at all (FC, FG4).

Another foster carer said:

We didn't get anything out of him because he's in an environment where he's sitting around with the 6 of us. He's 12, he's not going to (FC, FG4).

Another carer had only recently noticed a small shift in practice.

I haven't had that yet, I think we've had 3 with these children that we've got now, the one we had on Wednesday was the first where they've been to the meeting, and they came in for ten minutes where they sat around the table and I thought we were doing activities or things that they chose to, but that's the first time they've been (FC, FG4).

This limited change in practice was also observed by some social workers. One described an attempt by the IRO to gather the child's views, but when the child was not forthcoming, no further attempt was made:

They'd managed to pull out a couple of sentences from him and he said, I'm so sorry, I've been in bed all day and I can't possibly speak to you, but instead of thinking oh no, perhaps I'll go back when he's not feeling so dramatically ill, or write him a letter, that was kind of left as it was and he did give some views which was good, but that's it. There wasn't even consideration for him to be included in their Me and My World or anything like that, and they never have been either, so it feels very disconnected (SW, FG1).

Limitations to involvement and participation for some children and young people was also evident in reports included in the data analysis. In response to the question 'How was I supported to take part in my review?' or 'What did I see in my review about how things are going for me?' there were some reports where these questions had not been answered. Two referred to children being too young to take part in their review there was no acknowledgement of the factors that had been considered in making this judgement nor if the child had been involved in the decision. Both these children were verbal and attending school. In the majority of reports there was an absence of action plans regarding how the participation and involvement of the child or young person might be planned for and achieved in subsequent reviews.

For 12-year-old B who took part in the evaluation, her reviews were continuing to take place during school hours which prevented her from attending. Comments by her and her carer indicated that as yet, there had not been any consideration to altering this arrangement. 16-year-old M was also not currently attending his meeting and he said:

I don't find them very useful. I think if they weren't there, it would be more difficult for my foster carers. I do find that when I was younger they would say we're going to take your views into account, but they didn't.

When M and B were asked what might make a difference in increasing participation, both made reference to the core principles of the model. M offered the advice:

It being in an environment that I would like it to be... Just like, being at home, comfortable environment, because this is the place where you relax and you're not going into a situation where the people are there, they're coming to you. Which I think would help.

For 12-year-old B it was important "not sitting still" and she spontaneously suggested the idea of people doing circuit training whilst wearing sweat bands and exercising as they talked. Following the research B was able to share her ideas with her IRO and include this activity in her review.

Continued Emphasis of Statutory Process

A small number of social workers and foster carers identified a continued expectation from IRO's to use review meetings to report progress against statutory returns which maintained a formality of approach which further served to limit the involvement of children and young people. One social worker observed:

I feel the review is still driven very much by what the IRO needs, so despite the attempt at a shift in making it about the child and making the meetings accessible for children to participate in I still feel that they orientate back to being an IRO process of tick-box. So you might have a Part One one-on-one with the IRO who do the checking about the plan and stuff which I think is really positive part of the process, and its meant to avoid going over stuff with the child present but it still ends up being that way most of the time (SW, FG2).

Another social worker made the link between the continued dominance of statutory monitoring resulting in feelings of awkwardness and discomfort for the child and network:

I've found the IRO's sit there and the first half of the meeting is going through step-by-step each action and it's so difficult because it makes you feel awkward as the social worker, it makes the foster carer feel on the spot, it makes the child feel on the spot and its difficult because I understand you need to monitor these things happening for the child but it feels that you take the emotion out of it and all the emphasis on has this happened, not necessarily is it still alright for the child for this thing to have happened and exploring emotions or giving the child a space to speak about it, it still feels there's still that element of tick box (SW, FG1).

This emphasis on continued formality was also highlighted by a foster carer who said "because there are so many formal people, it becomes formal. Even if they don't mean it to be, it becomes formal" (FC, FG4).

Disconnect Between Participation and Decision-Making

For some children who were present and undertook a direct work activity within their review, there was a disconnect between the activities and the eventual decisions that were agreed during the meeting. In some cases, this separation was mirrored in the very structure of the review with four social workers and IRO's explaining that they often held two meetings, one with the child and another with carers and professionals. Participants did not spontaneously

offer any details of the circumstances in which two meetings would occur nor how what the child had said influenced discussions in the second meeting. There was a sense that conducting the review in this way was inevitable given the complexity of some children's lives.

Further evidence of this was apparent in some reports that was read as part of the study which included very few examples of direct links between what the child had said and the actions that were agreed as outcomes of the meeting. In some there was reference to the IRO playing, or undertaking an activity, but again, no child's wishes were listed as part of the key decisions. In one report a child is referred to as being reluctant for their younger sibling to start at the same school, but no reference is made to how these feelings were considered and planned for within the network.

[Factors Influencing Impact of Me and My World](#)

Quality of Relationship

What was evident from participants in the study and the documentary analysis was that despite excellent examples of best practice there was a significant minority where the principles of the approach were not yet fully realized which restricted the impact on children and young people. From responses in focus groups and individual interviews a number of factors which provide explanations for this inconsistency. One theme that was cited most often was the quality of relationship that existed between the social worker or Independent Reviewing Officer and the child. A foster carer said "You're probably dependent on who the social worker is, who the IRO is, how child friendly they are". This was echoed by another foster carer who explained:

That's the realism of it, social workers are very, very different. Some will get on the floor and play with the children, some have never touched the child. So its dependent on who you've got (FC, FG4).

The qualities that the foster carers considered promoted child-friendly practice included continuity of worker, the capacity to play and commitment to getting to know the child. A foster carer identified:

Relationships are built over time and frequency, especially for younger children. We are really lucky, but she's been with us nearly four years and she's had the same social worker all the way through. I don't know many people that can say that she has built up a relationship and she will go on the trampoline with her (FC, FG4).

Frequency of visiting was also important for another foster carer who said:

I think the last one we had is the most brilliant social worker ever and he would come in and this child was under one and she would recognize him. That showed how often he'd been, but also got on the floor, He knew him, he was just brilliant (FC, FG4).

Continuity of relationship was also valued by one social worker in the role of the IRO:

She's been through all the lumps and bumps if you like, and the children have had four social workers, me being the fourth one in that period, which statistically over ten years isn't too bad in terms of changes of social workers, but also that continuity, having that IRO for the whole ten years is pretty amazing (SW, FG2).

The importance of this relationship was echoed by 6-year-old A who drew her social worker with a yellow pen during her interview for the study, smiled and said, "she's like sunshine".

When a meaningful relationship between IRO or social worker and child was not felt to exist the foster carers recognized that the aims of the model would be difficult to achieve:

I mean if they come and do an activity, if they haven't got that relationship they're not suddenly going to have it. (FC FG4).

The word that was most frequently cited that negatively impacted on relationship-building and a more friendly, playful and inclusive approach to the review process was "formal" and "formality". A foster carer explained:

We've got someone now who is much more formal, so although it has changed to Me and My World, because of the change of the IRO, this one is much more formal (FC, FG4).

The difference in approach to relationships was also noticed by 16-year-old M who, during the interview, remembered feeling more comfortable with a previous IRO who played football with him. He described his current IRO as "more formal" which appeared to have resulted in greater distance in their relationship. M commented "I don't have much involvement with my IRO. I just kind of get told what she does". During his time in foster care M also noticed differences in approach of social workers. M remembered one who met with him in a café and had the capacity to ask 'around' questions that enabled him to feel more comfortable, included and able to contribute:

D used to take me out to a diner or something and get me something to eat, and then he would fill the form out there, so I would get something to eat and then he just kind of spoke about things, and then he would write things down as we would go along, instead of asking me the questions that were on there, he would ask me around the questions.

Now that M's social worker and IRO had changed and resulted in a shift in approach, the most significant relationship that he valued in promoting his involvement was his Independent Visitor where the qualities of friendliness and not having to write everything down was most valued by him:

When X, my IV came, that was quite useful. I mean, he's like, essentially like a friend, you feel like you can talk to him. When he came to the meeting it just seemed like a more comfortable environment. He knew me quite well, it was like having another voice to back me up...Not formal at all. He literally just seems like he's a mate, having a chat with me. Instead of having to write down everything that I've said, follow-up questions that go too in depth.

Time and Timing of Involvement

The pressure of time was identified by one social worker as negatively impacting on the implementation of the model, but it was striking that this was not an overriding theme to emerge from the study. This social worker linked her experience to Brighton and Hove's model of practice where a mixed caseload of children in need, child protection, and legal proceedings and children in care meant that those families where there were concerns of immediate risk commanded more of her time, diverting attention from children in stable, long-term foster placements:

I think it's time. I think that a lot of...like in my team, a lot of people feel guilty about the lack of time they can give to their looked after children because there's an emergency on a CP case or something else, and I think that it becomes another report, and you have the reasons behind it changing and why it is the way that it is (SW, FG1).

The study also identified a link for a minority between the time that social workers felt able to spend with children in care and the stage the child was at in the care planning process. 12-year-old B noticed that her social worker visited less often now and her foster carer attributed this to F now being permanently placed in her long-term care. B said:

She used to take me out. I know she doesn't have to. I was just saying it was quite fun. She doesn't do it, but I don't mind. I just think it's easier. She could take me to McDonalds and it would be easier to talk...She used to prefer me then. And I found out she sees another person. She's cheating on me. No, I'm just joking.

Child Factors

The development of meaningful relationships and successful implementation of the Me and My World model was also influenced by the previous experiences and current feelings of the children. Comments made by 16-year-old M demonstrated that he was not a passive, open recipient of a relationship had it been offered, but that his experiences of previous workers and current feelings meant that he did not necessarily make it easy for the IRO or social worker to involve him. He said:

Most of the time I basically refused to do the reports, but the odd occasions I've done it, I do make it quite difficult.

Similarly, in relation to his IRO he said:

I don't know if it's because I'm reluctant to see her. She does offer to go out for a meal...so it's probably my fault.

For M, he associated his current lack of engagement with his previous experience of not being allowed to see his brother.

I remember I was asking to see my brother D pretty much when I moved in with L and B but I had to wait 3 years for that to happen.

This experience appeared to have contributed to a feeling of anger and despondency. For M, choosing to remain outside the process appeared an active rebuttal and a refusal to cooperate with a process he believed had let him down:

I mean, it's about me, but I'm not really supposed to engage with it, they want me to engage, I don't think I really would. Ever since I realized that they don't take my views into account, I just don't see the point in doing it.

This example highlighted the extent and longevity of feeling that children inevitably bring to their relationships with professionals and how previous experiences are enacted in current contexts. M's experiences raised questions regarding how social workers, IRO's and children can be supported to explore what might be going on in these relationships by connecting to the experiences of children and young people and the potential for them to be worked through and repaired.

A further factor felt by individual children and affecting their engagement in the Me and My World process was in relation to being 'in care' and desire not to be seen as different. One social worker questioned the extent of their self-determination through the process and the freedom to withdraw altogether as important for some children:

Even though I feel 'Me and My World' is a really, really supportive, reflective, relationship-based document it is also a challenge for some young people...Can we just end this? Can we not have these meetings? Do we give them that right as well?" (SW, FG1).

Parent Factors

There was also a sense of social workers and IRO's having to navigate difficult, painful feelings in parents which would help explain variability in their participation in the Me and My World review process. Central to this was the struggle to facilitate parent's participation when they

may not agree with the reasons that their child is in foster care and the potential impact this may have on the child:

I just find it quite hard to balance, because you're saying to the young person you know, as long as it's not going to be detrimental in that meeting, your parent can be there and we want to encourage their input, but then you've got that big discrepancy about the fundamental issue (IRO, FG3).

Comments by social workers, IRO's and foster carer's all conveyed a sense of wanting to protect parents from unbearable realities of their child not being in their care and potential conflict that might result in the meeting. Social workers recognized:

If things are going well in placement they've then got to say that...They're admitting to, oh, yes, he's doing so well, I'm really happy that he's there, she'd never write down that she's happy that he's in care with a safe family for him (SW, FG1).

Actually, when you write in a child focused way the reasons why a child is no longer with their family the parents can find that really difficult (SW, FG1).

Concern for the parent's feelings was also an issue for foster carer's experience of writing letters and their anxiety of threatening their relationship with the child's parents:

Parents reading it as well is tricky because part of what we do, even if we don't read it out, parents reading it as well is tricky because we try and keep that relationship with the parents as positive as we can, because we're not the social worker who took the kids away...so it can get a bit awkward (FC, FG4).

When 16-year-old M said that he would like his mum at the meeting he seemed very aware of the potential impact on the network of having her there:

I would say my mum, but I don't think that would work for any other people. I think that my mum should have some sort of right to know what's going on, well, I mean actually in the meeting...Yes, I think that it would just be good, because you would have another person on your side.

Comments made by one IRO suggested that the involvement of parents was managed better in the previous model within the contained 'professional' space. In their view this formal setting focused on case management decisions offered safety for practitioners to secure and contain parent's responses without fear that the child may witness this. One IRO said:

The value of the old system, how we were reviewing, was that you had the parents and all these professionals around the table then what you could do if you could have this sort of multi-agency, family involved, review of the case and be able to make case management-type decisions across the board (IRO, FG4).

Overall, the increased emphasis on informal, child-centered approach could lead to further uncertainty and anxiety about how to facilitate the involvement of parents who, in the IRO and social worker's view, could be unpredictable in their responses. It raised questions regarding

how to establish discussions and processes of the meeting where the perspectives of the parents could be considered and worked with to ensure their involvement.

Social Worker Factors

Participants in the study also identified the feelings triggered in social workers in their role with children in care which potentially affected their capacity to form relationships and the implementation of the approach. For two social workers the model had led to discussions in their teams about boundaries, what the parameters of these boundaries should be with some experiencing discomfort about writing to the child and including statements about their own feelings towards the child within this. One social worker said “it blurs those boundaries and what some people are comfortable with, other people aren’t comfortable with” (SW, FG1). This was echoed by a foster carer who acknowledged that she knew of some carers who “felt uncomfortable with it” (FC, FG4). Another social worker explained:

Children in care should be treated by their social workers and IRO’s as if they are their own children and they should be thought about and loved as if they were their own children, and they used the words loved and thought about and I thought that’s really interesting because there’s such a worry you’re this professional, they’re not your children, that distance and boundaries is needed, but the Me and My World process fits with that idea of bringing that personality together more, but yet people are really worried about what these boundaries look like (SW, FG1).

These comments led to speculation that for some, the discomfort and dilemmas about boundaries may lead to embodying more of a professional distance in relationships which may result in putting less of themselves in reports and make efforts to achieve participation through informal, friendly relationships more difficult.

Other social worker factors that were identified during the focus groups were the feelings provoked by the circumstances of some children and young people’s experiences and accompanying feelings of “guilt” and “betrayal”. For one social worker this could lead to a self-protective distance and shut down on the part of workers:

I’m a social worker, I’m here to protect you, but actually I’m going to say goodbye now and see you in a week, and some of our placements aren’t as good as we would want them to be...I think it’s very difficult and I think you shut down, you know, its self-protective so you do shut down a bit (SW, FG1).

For another worker the focus on relationships and expectations of the model had resulted in a sense of responsibility in report writing but this could lead to a sense of stuckness and paralysis for some which could serve to further distance themselves from the child and the process:

I got told to look at the guidance on-line, so I did that, and I read through it and I'm like, oh my god, this is brilliant, and I went in and I said to one of my colleagues, gosh, I am really looking forward to writing that, and they said, its a lot of pressure isn't it? Because when I was reading through it, it very much feels like the social worker is that voice, that person for that child, and I felt really excited, but I can see how a lot of people would just feel so responsible and they can feel really stuck (SW, FG1).

IRO Factors

A further theme influencing the impact of the model were factors related to the Independent Reviewing Officer and variability in how they chose to understand and take up their role within the process. Central to the IRO experience was their grappling with how to navigate the dual function of child-centered practice and statutory reporting and how to occupy a space 'in between' that would enable them to perform both. What was clear was that the introduction of the model had not led to an unequivocal break between old 'statutory' and new child focused approaches but a gradual process of getting to grips with encapsulating different tasks and functions. This was named by one IRO along with the belief that they were moving in the right direction:

We've identified, didn't we, from the beginning, and I think that we recognized it's a bit of a 3 legged race sometimes and we've adjusted our preparation and tracking documents to fulfil what we feel like we need to do, which is record us doing our own tasks but also keep the child's record of the meeting really child-centered so I think we're getting there, I don't feel like we're failing, I think we're moving in the right direction, actually, where it's something that we're addressing (IRO, FG4).

This sense of being caught in between different functions appeared to be played out for IRO's in a number of ways. One IRO wondered if the meeting was now expected to do too much:

There is a tendency when something is working well or good that you turn it into a swiss army knife, yeah...so just because something's working well and what you do is pull open...oh well, we can open this with that, we can do this with that and we can use this, and we can use this to make this, no (IRO, FG4).

For two IRO's it led to potential confusion regarding the core task and purpose of the meeting and mobilized a need for more definitive clarity:

I come back to statutory function being a challenge and my view again is that we need to clarify further what essential outcomes we want from the Me and My World Review process (IRO, FG4).

It comes back to a greater clarity about the statutory function, what is my role because I think everybody thinks that someone else is doing it (IRO, FG4).

This theme was also evident for one social worker who questioned whether the expectation of direct work and involvement of the child should be part of the IRO role:

I think that speaks to what is the purpose of the process and I think what we're culturally getting better at is the direct work stuff, the child's voice stuff you know, the writing to the child, I think we're shifting a lot with that and I think we're getting so focused on that maybe we, as social workers aren't paying as much attention to maybe what the IRO's see as the purpose as which is their statutory role, their function of scrutinizing the social work plan, and it shouldn't be duplicating the work with the child because they need to be looking at it from their perspective and actually looking at the plan that there is and making sure that we're doing our jobs properly and challenging that, and maybe that's a bit hard to marry up with the child led, child focused other purpose of the meeting and I would be really interested to hear what the IRO's said about that because I think they very much see themselves as having different roles from us which is correct, because if you have that too much and everyone's just playing with playdoh on the floor, you know, how's that different to a CP visit or a LAC visit (SW, FG2).

It was interesting that for these participants there was a core tension between the statutory function and the needs of the child. There was little sense for these respondents of how the child's involvement in decision-making should and could be a core, statutory function, equally demonstrable alongside other statutory returns.

For a minority of IRO's the irreconcilable tension between both functions appears to have resulted in a maintenance of customary positions where formal information sharing and oversight of the plan took priority within meetings, as highlighted elsewhere in this report. A further factor which arguably compounded the continued emphasis on statutory functions for some, was anxiety for IRO's about being accountable to senior managers and regulatory bodies external to the organization which may not necessarily understand or share the principles of the approach which may also contribute to a further 'pull' factor back to a more formal, statutory process. One IRO expressed doubt that auditors would necessarily know where to look to find information if it was not explicitly referenced:

Cause its written to the child so it may not cover all the strategy and function, it may not be evident in the report if that's all you look at so we get back to the...it's a process so when you've been audited, does the auditor understand there is a process so there's more than one place where information is recorded so that's the bit for me as well (IRO, FG4).

This concern was shared by others:

My worry though, sometimes, my niggling worry...somebody's audited the cases and has realized that you haven't addressed this issue or this issue, that's because I've been too busy thinking about the ketchup on the boy's shirt and not enough on whether or not you've fulfilled this (IRO, FG3).

A further impact of this prioritizing statutory processes within a meeting context was the creation of a hierarchy of relationship where the approach taken by the IRO took precedence with little opportunity for the social worker and foster carer to respectfully challenge. This contributed to an atmosphere which stifled creative approaches that might harness participation and inclusivity for the child. A social worker recognized:

I think that there's a big cultural shift for us to take a child-centered and child-led approach, which, you know we're all relishing that and seeing the benefits of that, but the IRO's seem to be like the last bastille of authority don't they? It makes everyone quake and they're unpredictable as well because you think you can read them you think you've got through and then they'll always go a bit left base in the actual meeting and you think where did that come from? (SW, FG2).

Another social worker said:

It's like having the critical parent there that just wants to...you think I've completed a report before, so if there's any issue with it let me know beforehand, it doesn't need to be done in the meeting, or do it constructively (SW, FG1).

Discussion

The Me and My World model was introduced by Brighton and Hove City Council in June 2016 as a key component of its relationship-based Model of Practice for children's social work. Me and My World attempted to offer a concrete and direct means of addressing the previously-researched limitations of direct work and recording for children in care (Leeson 2009, Holland 2008, Hoyle, 2019). The principal component of the model was, in essence, very simple, a change in template and perspective for recording reviews for children in care where practitioners write directly to the child and flexibility to adapt what they write specific to the child's needs and experiences. Alongside this was a renewed emphasis on continuity of relationship and an expectation that children and young people should participate and exercise choice over what happens in their reviews. The intention was for these changes to be an integral part of customary statutory processes and not something that would be done in addition to, or separate from, customary procedures. Following the implementation of the model this evaluation has demonstrated impact on practice in a number of different ways.

How have key stakeholders experienced the implementation of Me and My World and what changes has this led to in their practice?

Practitioner's Feelings About Approach and Finding Meaning in Role

The social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and foster carers who participated in the evaluation experienced the introduction of Me and My World positively. Most credited the process of writing to the child either in statutory reports by social workers, IRO's or in six monthly letters by foster carers as creating a more humane, personal, intimate and empathic recording system which marked a significant shift from the formal, clinical and detached systems of the past.

Participants also shared that the model had contributed to a greater sense of meaning and purpose with children in care. Social workers and IRO's talked in positive ways about the intentions of the model and their role within it. It is significant that no doubts were expressed about whether it should continue. Perhaps most importantly were the feelings expressed about the task with participants expressing enjoyment in the process that allowed for more freedom, creativity and surprisingly, fun.

Holding the Child in Mind

One of the most significant impacts of writing reports to the child was that it achieved immediate clarity in the writer's mind about who the report was for. Participants spoke of being able to bring to mind the living, breathing child as opposed to statutory returns on a computer screen. The process succeeded in instilling the belief that reports were likely to be read by the child and could be returned to for many years to come. This realization served to support social worker and IRO's commitment and responsibility to try their best to get the report right for the child. Overall, there was the sense that Me and My World had interrupted the bureaucratic monotony of 'just another report' to a more meaningful process which was congruent with the values of why they had become social workers.

The evaluation has evidenced that reports and review meetings have become more 'child-focused'. Alongside this, there is evidence that directly addressing the child has enabled practitioners to more readily connect to the child's emotional experience, attend to and empathize with their perspective.

Change in Language and Process of Writing

Writing to the child also resulted in changes to the language that IRO's and social workers were using in their reports. They identified a need to slow down and think carefully about the words they were using to describe complex processes and experiences. Practitioners identified that they could no longer hide behind language but now needed to provide explanations that could be understood by the child. As a result, there was a tangible decrease in the use of jargon and acronyms and the adoption of a simple, direct writing style within reports for review.

Collaborative Relationships Between Professionals

This renewed emphasis on relationships and participation also resulted in change in how they perceived each other's roles. Where it was working, longstanding hierarchies with the IRO traditionally positioned as the custodian of statutory function, quality assurance and formality was shifted to allow social workers to observe them undertake activities that could be playful,

funny and committed to the child, which for some helped promote an atmosphere of friendliness and collaboration.

Opportunities to Involve Family

Social workers and foster carers also recognized the potential of the model to involve children's parents and family more. For some, the child-centered nature of reports which did not necessarily focus on blame and events of the past but who the child is now, was recognized as offering opportunities for parents to stay in touch and updated about their child's lived experience, this knowledge supporting conversations with their child during their time together and parents and family becoming more involved in the review process itself.

How does Me and My World support child centered reports and ensure information recorded is holistic and make an active contribution to children and young people's life story and identity?

Flexibility, Specificity and Strengths

Participant's responses and reports that were included in the documentary analysis demonstrated that Me and My World had gone some way to support child-centered information specific to individual children. The broad, open questions that practitioners were asked within reports were cited as allowing for more flexibility in what they write and how they conducted reviews. Participants recognized that they could now record details specific to the experience of the child. This influenced what social workers and IRO's wrote, with a greater focus on strengths, achievements and details of events which would not have necessarily been prioritized in the previous recording system. Social workers and IRO's appreciated the freedom to adapt what they wrote to the specific circumstances of the child.

There were exceptional examples of particular events in children's lives significant for life story including experiences of bereavement, going to music festivals and participating in drama shows. There were encouraging examples of social workers utilizing reports to provide child-centred explanations of why they were in care including stages within legal proceedings, the role of the Judge, the impact of substance misuse or domestic abuse on children which some social workers identified were helpful to 'practice' explanations that they could integrate into day-to-day conversations with children.

Bringing the Child Alive in Letters

Letters written by foster carers were recognized as a particularly meaningful addition, a means of 'bringing the child alive' which had been helpfully shared in different contexts including Court and with prospective adopters. Letters were also particularly strong in relation to life story with foster carers reflecting on the child's journey since coming to live with them, incorporating photographs and the contributions of different family members. There was evidence that foster carers and children were actively revisiting these and prompting conversations and memories in the life of foster families. Children and young people were unequivocal in their support of the letters, enjoying receiving them, keen to find out what had been written and helping them feel valued and cared for.

Review Meetings Promoting Life Story

Alongside reports and letters there were encouraging examples of the way that review meetings could be utilized to promote life story with examples of the use of star charts, timelines, video, and sharing photographs which had the potential to make an active contribution to the child's understanding of themselves and their identity. Interviews with 6-year-old L and 8-year-old C demonstrated how the activities remained live in their minds.

Individualistic Lens to what is Noticed and Recorded

Despite these examples there was evidence that the final reports fell some way short of conveying the holistic child and the impact in promoting life story and identity more limited. There were notable absences in what social workers and IRO's documented about the child with little information on race, identity, culture and relationships with birth and foster family and siblings. There were also examples of explanations of why children are in care as vague, generalized comments such as 'couldn't meet your needs' or 'couldn't keep you safe' which would have meant little to children. This led to questions regarding how professionals understand and construct what is important in the lives of children in their minds and how do they give priority to what they record. Was it the information that was most readily available that they themselves had observed and witnessed? Were relationships with family potentially seen as a source of conflict and distress that were best avoided? Did social workers and IRO's feel equipped to approach issues of race, identity and culture? Did they know the child's history and feel able to construct an explanation of why they were in care? Whatever the reason, it seemed to have resulted in a largely individualistic lens to what was noticed and recorded, with external achievements and events, internal reflection on feelings at the expense of locating the child at the heart of history, relationships, community and wider culture. Without further consideration to how some social workers can attend to these areas of the child's life, along with direct work and conversations that extend beyond what they've been doing to who

they are and their place in the world, Me and My World's capacity to make ongoing, active contributions to children's life story is likely to be impaired.

Lack of Child's Voice

Linked to this was the absence of the child's voice within reports. While there were some examples of social workers directly involving children and young people in report writing and sharing what they had written with them, on the whole there was an absence of what the child had explicitly said, their thoughts, wishes and feelings. Often when reading some reports it was hard to discern whether what was recorded was what the child had actually said, or the social worker or IRO's perception of what they had said. This raised the possibility that the model's biggest strength could also be its biggest weakness with the very notion of the report being 'for' the child leading to a one-directional interaction where the adult practitioner's perspective, however empathic and kind, is 'given' to the child.

Impact Limited by the Integrated Children's System

Additionally, Me and My World review reports were recognized as not yet having a life beyond the computer screen and the review meeting which was in direct contrast with the letters written by foster carers. This was largely attributed to the IT system, the mundane formatting and presentation of reports that continued to be uninspiring and formulaic. The lack of ongoing co-construction and sharing of reports with children themselves could also play a contributory factor. Much has been made in the research literature of the theme of care experienced children and young people 'returning' to their files or 'going back' to request them as if their childhood selves are separate from their adult identities. Further development of the model to allow for a more interactional, dyadic relationship between social worker and child to achieve meaningful co-construction and sharing of reports on an ongoing basis, knowing what has been written and their part within this, may support children to achieve a greater sense of who they are and understanding of their story on an ongoing basis. This may also help social workers and IRO's capture their holistic identity as the children themselves may share their wider experiences of culture, family and relationships which may help shift the lens from the social worker's immediate perspective and ensure these aspects are adequately attended to in reports.

How does Me and My World support relationship-based practice with children in care and enable practitioners to integrate direct work with them?

Promoting Relationships with Children in Care

Overall, there was a view that the model was congruent with promoting relationship-based practice and encouraged practitioners to frame their work in the context of relationships for children in care. Practitioners appreciated the encouragement to put themselves, their thoughts and feelings in relation to the child into reports, something that they had never done within the previous system. Social workers and IRO's valued the opportunity to name their feelings of care, pride and concern for the child, which also helped increase the meaning of their role with children in care.

This was a particularly significant shift for IRO's where most believed that the model had given them permission to develop individual relationships with children in care and validated this as an important part of their task and function. For some, this had led to a distinct reconfiguring of their role where they could engage with children alongside their more customary task of overseeing the child's care plan and ensuring statutory functions were being adhered to.

Attending to the Child's Experience

For social workers, the question 'Summary of my Social Worker's Relationship with Me' prompted them to 'Think Relationship'. There was evidence of how social workers attended to the child's experience, activities they had undertaken with them, what they noticed and observed about children and remembered conversations. Social workers also utilized the approach to name and wonder about the child's feelings and their own feelings in relation to the child. Sharing recollections of this kind served to support relationships with children who were amazed that social workers remembered this detail and the potential for this to be a way that children and young people could be attended to and understood. There was also evidence of the integration of direct work with children in care in the context of reviews. Some examples of conversations, playing, shared activities and more structured direct work approaches such as star charts and timelines had also successfully implemented. There was evidence that these efforts remained in children's minds, with three of the children taking part in the study remembering and talking about activities they had undertaken with their IRO demonstrating the potential impact of the model. Overall, the approach had enabled conversations about relationship-based practice, the role of different professionals within this, to remain at the forefront of people's minds.

Reflecting on History of Relationships

Foster carers found the six-monthly letter particularly helpful in reflecting on the history of their relationship with the children they care for. For some, this served a cathartic function and enabled them to step-back from day-to-day challenges or feelings aroused in the moment to promote a more reflective, introspective space which enabled them to acknowledge just how far the child or young person had come. The foster carer letter was recognized as having achieved a valuable addition to the lives of children in care in Brighton and Hove with foster carers enjoying the process of writing them and children receiving them.

Continued Distance, Formality and Boundaries

However, the commitment to relationship-based practice and implementation of direct work was not wholesale and there were examples where practitioners had noticed very little change in practice. Interestingly, the lack of impact in this area was not attributed to the model but other factors including the approach and personal qualities of individual workers and the feelings and experiences of the child. There was recognition that some social workers and IRO's would always feel more comfortable with formality and professional boundaries. Feelings aroused in workers by individual children's circumstances also made distance more likely. Timing of intervention with children in care was also a factor identified by 12 year old B who, now that she was placed with her carer permanently, she recognized that she was seeing her social worker less.

IRO Anxiety About Statutory Function

Whilst most of the IRO's who participated in the study talked of their attempts to build relationships and integrate direct work in their reviews, this was at odds with the observations of some foster carers who had noticed little difference in the approach of some IRO's with a lack of engagement with the child through the process. Not every IRO in B&H participated in the study and it may be that those who did not are less comfortable with the process. Those that did participate gave some clue of an additional factor that may prevent this specific to their role, anxiety about whether they had adequately fulfilled their statutory function and doubt as to whether senior managers were fully committed to the model. Most IRO's appeared to be commendably some way to straddling both functions, occupying a space that delivered more meaningful relationships and child-centered practice within the context of their statutory function, but for other IRO's, one way of reconciling this may be to maintain customary, clearly demarcated roles.

Too Many Relationships?

A further observation of the impact of the model with regard to relationship-based practice was that it may lead to an indiscriminate approach to relationships with children, with a zealous, 'more the merrier' approach with children overwhelmed with professional's efforts to engage with them, all attempting to achieve the same end. The danger is that this is a further example of the potential for the child to be perceived as passive in this process, expected to accept the approach of the many, with very little say in who they would like to talk to or whether the professional has the qualities that are most likely to appeal to them to enable them to feel included and heard.

This raised questions regarding how teams around children in care might be more flexibly configured and allow for more explicit discussion and recognition for professionals of who the child relates to best and planning for that key person to support them within the review process. This might be a further way to empower children in the process but also help mitigate against the impact of those professionals who may be more distant in their relationships with children, for this to be explicitly named along with exploration of how this might be compensated for by others in the child's network.

Does Me and My World promote children's participation and choice within their review meetings?

The Child's Meeting

Given the renewed emphasis on relationships and direct work, the study was interested to explore the extent to which these were put to meaningful use to achieve children's participation and choice within the review process. Overall, there was evidence that the model required practitioners to consider children's participation more fully and some had shifted their perspective to consider the review to be 'the child's meeting'. There were examples of the impact of this with participants talking of a range of ways that they had worked to facilitate the child's presence and involvement in their reviews and exercise more choice in what happened within these meetings. Children now decided who they wanted to be there, where they wanted the meeting to be held, what activity that they might like to do and some now chaired their own meetings. There were examples of children and young people actively contributing to their reports and sharing their opinions with regard to their care plan. Participants agreed that the approach had led to a substantial increase in the involvement of children and young people with the majority now attending.

Inconsistent Approach to Participation

There were a significant minority of examples within the documentary analysis where there was no evidence of children's involvement in their reviews and no explanation offered as to why this was. In some reports the question 'How was I supported to take part in my review?' was not answered and there was no evidence of how their involvement had been considered and then ruled out. There was a marked contrast in practice with some IRO's evidencing involvement whereas for others this was not thought possible.

Hierarchy of Role Influencing Implementation

Some foster carers also cited examples of children not being involved and this was also a theme for two young people involved in the study who remained on the periphery of their review process. Factors to explain this were similar to those in respect to relationships and direct work. They included the approach of individual workers, some IRO's who placed emphasis on the formalized action planning and statutory function. This was perceived to limit the extent to which children and young people could be involved. It was also evident that it was the IRO who set the tone and format of the review with other professionals and foster carers following this. For those IRO's who were perceived to be proactive pioneers of involvement this served a helpful purpose of encouraging themselves and the professional system to think about the child. For those IRO's who preferred a more formal approach and emphasis on statutory processes there was a perceived hierarchy embodied in this role that felt difficult to challenge and disempowered other professionals to raise how the child's participation in the review might be configured differently.

Participation as a Journey

The evaluation also identified that ensuring children's participation was not a straightforward, linear break between 'before' Me and My World and 'after', but an iterative journey between people that ebbed, flowed and took time to develop and build. There were some examples of children who were slowly becoming more involved in their review process. What the research also identified was the importance of persevering and 'staying with' the possibility of involvement even if first attempts were rejected by children and young people. This suggested that children and young people's involvement might be more meaningfully sustained in the longer term if a child-centered meeting happens, if the child is there or not. Options to be 'around' meetings and activities, staying for a while and withdrawing might all encourage children's choice and gradual engagement in the process.

Children Peripheral to Decision-Making

For social workers and IRO's who were able to actively promote children's involvement, there was also evidence that for some, this fell short of full participation in the process. Some children and young people's involvement was constructed as a distinct direct work activity which resulted in two separate meetings. It was not possible to decipher the basis on which the network made the decision about what could be discussed with the child and what could not. The result of this was that the child's involvement felt separate from the task, function and decision-making of the review meeting. This was also evidenced in the documentary analysis with little explicit reference to what the child had said and plans agreed. Overall, whilst in the majority of examples IRO's and social workers were committed to building and sustaining relationships and achieving the involvement of children and young people there was a need to further develop practice to enable this to mean more, supporting them to actively influence and recording the part they played in decisions reached.

Conclusion

The Me and My World model was implemented to achieve change in how practitioners build relationships, integrate direct work, ensure participation and record the experiences of children in care. The evaluation has evidenced considerable impact in a number of areas, largely attributed to writing review reports directly to the child. This process has achieved positive shifts in practitioner's understanding reports and meetings as 'for children'. It enables them to hold in mind children and young people, achieve a more immediate emotional connection with them and broaden what they write away from statutory returns to a range of experiences specific to the child. Letters written by foster carers to children are a particularly valuable intervention, promoting conversations about life story and identity within families. The model has refocused the IRO and social worker's role in building relationships and placed an emphasis on considering children's participation within the process.

Inevitably, there are instances where practice is less fully realized and progress more tentative, with variation between practitioners regarding their approach to relationships and participation, resulting in some children remaining peripheral to the review process. Overall, there is a lack of explicit reference to children and young people's voices and limited opportunities for them to co-construct their reports resulting in adult professional perspectives in children's lives remaining dominant. What is clear, however, is that the principles of the model were not disputed, and no doubts were raised regarding whether it should continue. The experience of implementation has highlighted that there is not a clear demarcation in

practice between experiences before and after Me and My World, but a much more organic and gradual one, implementation and impact depending on a complex interplay between individual practitioners, the child and approaches to practice. Its success in developing emotional connection and focusing on relationships can form the basis on which to build and further consolidate in other areas. In the next phase of the journey it is imperative that these connections and relationships develop to mean more, with professionals questioning, challenging and wondering together about their experiences.

Recommendations

- To continue to embed the model, writing to the child and promoting relationship-based direct work to promote emotional connection and enable children to understand their experiences.
- To further develop relationships between social workers, IRO's and children and young people; to enable them to explore and write about children's voices; support co-production of reports; children's creation of their own stories and evidence how what children have said contributed to decision-making in review meetings. Where children and young people continue to be marginal in the process for this to be acknowledged, the reasons why explored and where appropriate potential strategies to be included as a recommendation within reviews. For those that have been pioneers of the approach to share their experiences with other practitioners who are at an earlier point in engagement with the approach.
- To offer further ongoing workshops and integration of discussions in group supervision to support social workers in their direct work with children in care with particular emphasis on children's histories, why they are in care to ensure these explanations are created with children and are meaningful and specific to the child in review reports.
- To consider minor tweaks to the Me and My World review reports to prompt social workers and IRO's to give more consideration to culture, identity and wider relationships and community for children in care.
- For IRO's to explore together differences in approach, reasons for this, what this means for children and young people and what steps might help address it.
- Work in collaboration with ICS providers to make Me and My World Reports more inviting, with use of color, pictures and photographs and shared with children on an ongoing basis, rather than something that is returned to later in life.
- For the wider organization to declare their commitment to child-centered practice and for practitioners to embody the values of children's voice and evidencing participation

to help mediate the risk of professional dissonance between child-centered practice and statutory function.

- For social workers and IRO's to: (i) find collaborative, reflective spaces to talk together, give feedback and 'review the review'; (ii) consider each other's experiences of one another; (iii) challenge traditional hierarchies and consider what might be going on within and between workers, children and young people and their families; (iv) ensure children's voices are more consistently integrated into their review.
- Further research to be undertaken regarding the issues that professionals feel unable to talk about with children present, the reasons why and steps to address this.
- Also, additional research regarding the role of parents in Me and My World reviews, exploring best practice in this area and the direct experience of parents, in order to contribute to further development of the model and to secure their engagement and participation in the future.

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