



### Background

As a result of inquiries into non-accidental child deaths, children's social care services in the UK have been widely blamed for deficiencies in their policies, procedures and practices.

Over the past decade, children's services departments have been subject to a range of measures designed to manage risks and reduce costs, including systems of regulation, proceduralization and metrics, configured in information and communication technologies, which have radically changed the working practices of social workers. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the mandatory ICT systems and increased formalization that have been introduced.

But is the real world as formalizable as the model suggests and does greater formality reduce risks?

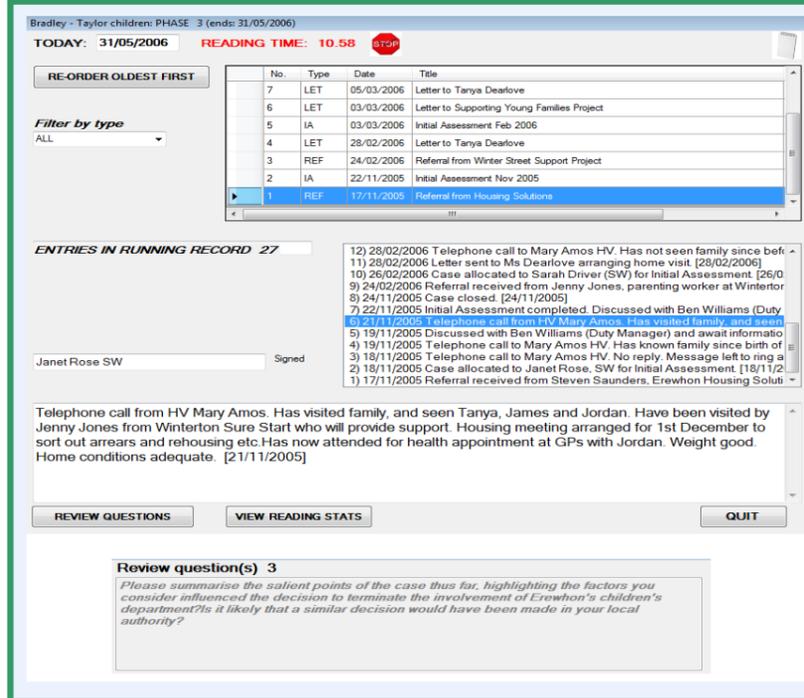
### Aims

In this study we examined the relationship between performance management and everyday practices in the high risk, high blame environment of child protection. We aimed:

- ❖ to classify the ways in which the social work regime sought to control different categories of errors and the consequences of this for the relationships between front-line staff and managers or supervisors;
- ❖ to describe the ways in which the treatment of errors impacted on risk management and decision-making; and
- ❖ to analyse decision-making (moral reasoning, causal attributions) in relatively controlled, simulated experiments, enabling a range of relevant factors to be manipulated.

### What We Did

- ❖ We carried out ethnographies in 5 local authorities in England and Wales, involving participant and non-participant observation of management and practice, analysis of documents and 60+ interviews and 12+ focus groups.
- ❖ Based on the findings from the ethnography, we developed a 'flight-simulator' of the social work ICT interface (BRIGIT), through which we can study social workers' and managers' reasoning as they work through hypothetical cases. Figure 1 shows the main screen of BRIGIT.

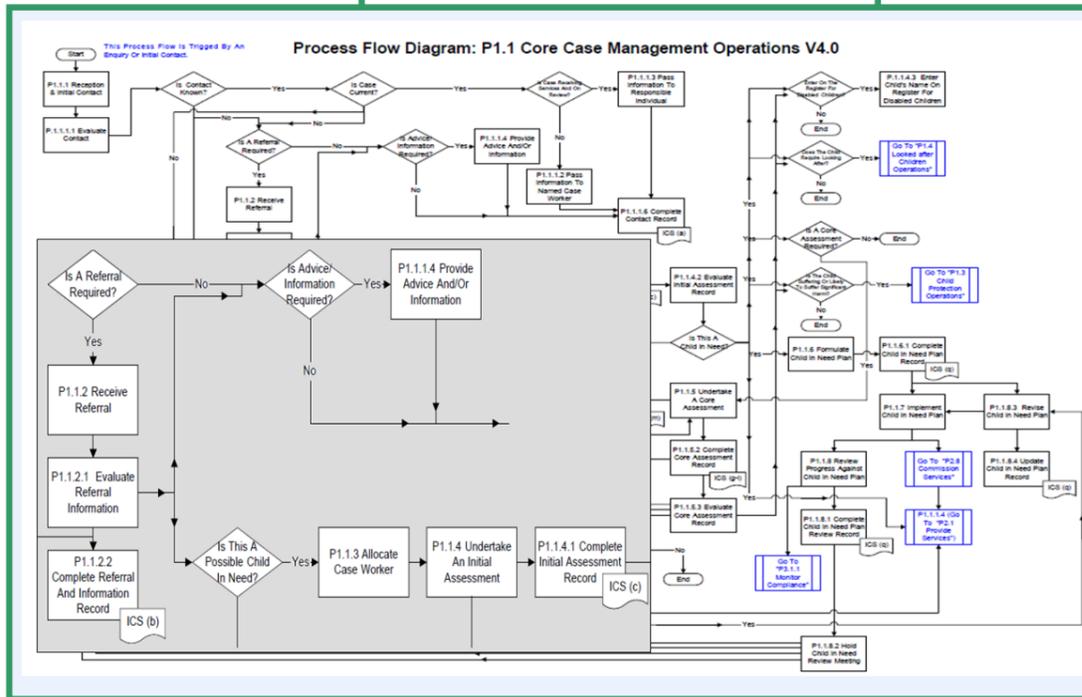


**Figure 1. BRIGIT main screen.** BRIGIT mimics the ICT interface used by social workers, allowing us to assess real-time decision-making processes in controlled case studies. BRIGIT also allows us to pose review questions to assess participants' understanding of the case and the possible impact of performance targets.

### Findings

- ❖ The increasingly formal social work regime was designed to increase children's safety by helping practitioners to manage risk in a standardized way. However, it may have failed in this aim for various reasons. Social workers find themselves spending up to 80% of their time following the formal procedures and entering data. Increased audit leads to anxiety about blame and sanction that may in turn lead to increased error. There is little evidence that harm to children is decreasing: the number of serious case reviews (held when a child is harmed or dies from abuse or neglect) in 2003-5 was similar to comparable figures from the 1990s.

Our findings that these systems are poorly designed have been widely reported in the media and, as a result, the Principal Investigator served on the Government's Social Work Task Force. Among the Task Force's initial recommendations are major improvements to the ICT data management systems used in child protection.



**Figure 2 'Flow Chart' for a single case from initial contact to a 'Child in Need' meeting. Just how far has the zeal for formalization gone?**

Find out more...

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