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Improving intelligence for the family justice system – A Nuffield Family Justice Observatory Data Partnership

Summary document, January 2019

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory for England & Wales

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. It is being established by the Nuffield Foundation to meet the needs of practitioners who make pivotal decisions in the lives of children and families by:

- Working with them to identify priority issues where research evidence may help guide practice.
- Providing reliable summaries of what is, and is not, known from research or administrative data.
- Combining knowledge from research with insights from policy, practice and user experience.
- Working with practitioners, policy makers and organisations representing families and children to develop, update and test guidance and other tools based on that knowledge.

The Nuffield Foundation has appointed a development team to complete the set-up of the Observatory. The development team has a collaborative ethos and is working with stakeholders to finalise the Observatory's initial priorities and to inform its work plan. Its members are:

- Professor Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University
- Dr Claire Mason, Lancaster University
- Carey Oppenheim, Nuffield Foundation
- Dr Lisa Holmes, Rees Centre
- Dr Ellie Ott, Rees Centre
- Dr Susannah Bowyer, Research in Practice
- Mary Ryan, Research in Practice

Overview of Nuffield Family Justice Observatory Data Parnership (NFJO DP)

A key message from stakeholders in the family justice system is that there is insufficient intelligence about how the family justice system is working including knowledge about outcomes for children and families involved with the family courts. Limited knowledge reflects limited capacity among the family justice research and analytic community but also that access to sensitive data produced routinely by agencies is difficult.

As part of the work to scope the new Observatory, the following practical obstacles were identified as standing in the way of better and more responsive intelligence at a national level (England and Wales):

- Limited capacity and capability in the research and analytic community in the use of large-scale administrative datasets and teams holding interdisciplinary knowledge and skills in family law, social work, statistics and computing are few in number.

- Limited capacity among data owners to provide secure access to data in analysis friendly formats for the research community, and to resource the necessary technical guidance to support analysis.

- Specific challenges to data linkage which include the technical issues arising from the different case, child or family identifier information collected by different data producers, as well as ethical issues and the time taken to negotiate linkage across different data owners given legal constraints.

To address these obstacles a programme of work is planned, which will draw on the combined expertise of the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University and the infrastructure and expertise of the SAIL Databank at Swansea University. Co-Directors are Professors Karen Broadhurst at Lancaster University and David Ford at the SAIL Databank, Swansea University.

In addition, the team will work in partnership with Cafcass England and Cafcass Cymru, given the value of the family justice data produced by these agencies and their frontline knowledge. In keeping with the collaborative ethos of the new Observatory the team will also work closely with the Observatory's Stakeholder Advisory Council to ensure the work's real-world relevance and accessibility.

The over-arching aim of the project is to effect step-change in both the analysis and use of core family justice administrative datasets, ensuring the new Nuffield Observatory is supplied with timely, accessible outputs for its range of audiences. A comprehensive programme of work is organised around the four objectives set out below.

Programme Objectives

A: To increase the capacity and capability of researchers and data analysts to use core family justice and other relevant administrative datasets by:

•   Providing access to curated data sets, guidance materials as well as streamlined safe access arrangements

•   Providing varying levels of technical, training and analytic support, to include assessments of outputs against disclosure criteria

•   Liaising with other data owners to exemplify the value of using the platform, with a view to drawing new datasets to the platform

•   Supporting researchers/data analysts in presenting data in meaningful and engaging ways for policy and practice audiences through a user group

•   Securing concurrent funding for doctoral students

B: To make a measurable difference to the supply of intelligence about how the family justice systems is working through routine and specific issue analyses using Cafcass England and Cymru data by:

•   Identifying system level trends and issues nationally and regionally in public and private law, with a particular focus on demand and recurrent demand

•   Interrogating datasets in detail in relation to specific issues in public and private law on a planned and responsive basis, e.g. long-running [complex] cases; emergency/short notice applications

•   Mobilising findings through standardised, branded and accessible formats (briefing reports and short videos) and through direct engagement with key national and regional policy and practice networks supported by the NFJO

C: To demonstrate the value of data harmonisation and linkage and provide a better evidence base through exemplar projects by:

•   Harmonising Cafcass England and Cafcass Cymru data to enable this data to be linked together and analysed for the first time

•   Linking Cafcass Cymru data with other Welsh data sources

•   Working with data providers to improve the scope of core datasets and ability for datasets to be harmonised and linked, to include Cafcass England and other relevant English datasets

•   Conducting demonstration projects to reflect stakeholder priority topics

D: To increase the capacity of policy and practice stakeholders to understand, interpret and apply data by:

• Publishing accessible briefings through the FJO website, newsletter and broader networks

• Producing briefings in meaningful ways and variety of formats to aid interpretation

• Working intensively in selected regions to promote the use of FJO briefings and explore possibility for further local area data analytics with those undertaking similar work

• Support conversations regarding strategic priorities through a national children's data liaison group

• Offer opportunities for improving data literacy in the frontline, for example, through the Judicial College.

NFJO DP will run a public benefit test in relation to all the proposed projects. All outputs will be subject to ethical approval and disclosure scrutiny, as well as independent peer review, which will provide feedback on both scientific quality but also policy and practice relevance and accessibility. Qualitative case review and other forms of qualitative enquiry will complement the statistical outputs produced by NFJO DP. Considerable emphasis will be placed on building the next generation of researchers and analysts through support for doctoral and post-doctoral research.

The NFJO DP team will work closely with the knowledge mobilisation arm of the new Observatory to enhance uptake of NFJO DP outputs. Opportunities for co-production will be sought to ensure effective knowledge exchange.

DPAS will also support liaison between data providers with the aim of maximising opportunities for creating linked datasets over time. Understanding and seeking to complement the work of related initiatives such as the Administrative Data Research Partnership UK will be important to the work of the NFJO DP team and the new Observatory.

NFJO DP team

Lancaster University

Professor Karen Broadhurst (Co-Director of DPAS)

Dr Linda Cusworth (Research Fellow/Co-Investigator)

Dr Bachar Alrouh (Senior Research Associate)

Dr Stuart Bedston (Senior Research Associate)

Swansea University

Professor David Ford (Co-Director of DPAS)

Dr Lucy Griffiths (Senior Research Officer)

Ashley Akbari (Senior Research Manager)

Simon Thompson (Chief Technical Officer)

Jon Smart (Programme Manager)

Dr Kerina Jones (Associate Professor of Health Informatics)

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