

<b>Institution:</b> University of Huddersfield		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 20		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming child protection policy and practice: from individual risk to social issue		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Nigel Parton	Professor of Social Work	1994-2020
Brid Featherstone	Professor of Social Work	1999–2005 and 2015–present
Paul Bywaters	Professor of Social Work	2017–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2016-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>Children who become involved with child protection, care and adoption systems are among the poorest in society. Research conducted at the University of Huddersfield (UoH) has been ground breaking in placing poverty and inequality on policy and practice agendas across the UK in order to reduce the financial and human costs of children living apart from their birth families. The costs to local authorities in England are around £9bn per year, and there are significant ethical and human rights concerns about the rising numbers of children being removed from their birth families. In Scotland the research has led to a reduction of children in care by 33%, and a 70% reduction in placement moves for looked after children. As a result of this work, The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) changed the assessment criteria for performance of local authorities in relation to child protection. The research has also been used to inform campaigning and training by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). The work conducted at UoH has led to a new understanding of child protection - the social model.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>Ensuring that children are protected from abuse and neglect is a significant social concern, costing local authorities in England around £9bn per year (House of Commons 2019). The number of children in care has risen by 28% in the last decade and the Local Government Association warned in January 2020 that the system had reached "breaking point" as a result of increased pressures on families and a decrease in support and prevention.</p> <p>Historically, child protection policies and practices have been casework orientated, focusing on the risk to a specific child within its family and on engaging parents to change their parenting practices. Research and scholarship from UoH has challenged this by highlighting the broader social and economic determinants of risk; the inequalities in children's chances of being able to live with their birth families and the human rights concern around the promotion of a closed model of adoption (not allowing direct contact with birth families). This research has argued the need for a paradigm shift towards a social model of protecting children. Key contributions to this new understanding have been conducted at UoH by Professor Nigel Parton, (1994 onwards) and Professors Brid Featherstone (2015 onwards) and Paul Bywaters (2017 onwards).</p> <p>This case study builds on the extensive research on child welfare, child protection and social work by Parton [3.1]. This earlier body of work provided the theoretical underpinning for the practical application described below in two seminal research projects - the Child Welfare</p>		

Inequalities Project (CWIP), involving a collaboration with seven universities across the UK, and The Adoption Enquiry, which was a collaboration with Professor Anna Gupta of Royal Holloway, University of London. In these projects, Featherstone and Bywaters investigated the relationship between deprivation and children's chances of becoming involved with child protection and care systems in the UK (3.2), prompting similar projects in New Zealand and Norway [3.3]. Featherstone then drew from this research to investigate ethical and human rights concerns around the use of adoption in the UK. The findings of these research projects argued for changes in policy and practice towards a social model of child protection [3.4].

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) ran from 2014 to 2019 and aimed to investigate inequalities relating to deprivation in children's chances of being subject to interventions from Children's Social Care. Key elements were: i). Datasets on 24,000 children who were being looked after (in care) and 12,000 children on child protection plans or registers (from 55 local authorities or trusts in the four UK countries) were collected and analysed by a multi-site research team; ii). Qualitative research with conceptual and data gathering input from Bywaters and Featherstone with social work teams and departments in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Eight sites were chosen to carry out intensive data gathering on demography, social work decision making and understandings of poverty to appreciate how the systems, processes and practice affected the subsequent outcomes for the children and their parents [3.2-4]; and, iii). Featherstone led the impact strand of the whole project - activities included convening a high-level advisory group, organising over 100 briefings across the UK, and presenting to Parliament, Directors of Children's Services and frontline workers.

The data analysis found that children in the most deprived 10% of small neighbourhoods in England are more than 10 times more likely to be in care (or on child protection plans) than those in the least deprived 10%. This association with deprivation was found to be consistent across the UK, operating along a social gradient. The qualitative research found that social workers and managers did not consider poverty as their 'core business' when assessing or devising responses to families' difficulties.

Building on these findings, UoH was commissioned by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to conduct The Adoption Enquiry (2016–2018) (*The role of the social worker in adoption: ethics and human rights*), led by Featherstone. The Enquiry was a response to the promotion of adoption by the Coalition government post-2010 in the context of widespread cuts to family incomes and support services. Linked to the issues highlighted in the CWIP research, increasing poverty rates among birth families had raised concerns about the prioritization of adoption in contexts where birth families were not receiving what was needed to care for their children safely [3.4; 3.5].

For this commission, interviews, workshops and focus groups were used to gather evidence across the UK, engaging 300 respondents in all. A particular feature was bringing together adopted people, birth parents, adoptive parents and professionals in small group dialogues (n=7). This approach was innovative; due to the contentious and emotive aspect of adoption, this methodology has rarely been used. The Enquiry found that adoption needs to be located within an understanding of the socioeconomic circumstances of birth families, and that the closed model of adoption causes considerable distress to adopted people particularly. A more open model of adoption, in which direct contact between birth families and adoptive parents occurs, was recommended, alongside the need to tackle poverty and inequality among birth families [3.6].

The groundbreaking work conducted at UoH has led to a new understanding of child protection - the social model [3.4]. This demonstrates the need for locating the protection of children within a social framework that provides all families with the means and opportunities to care safely. It highlights the importance of anti-poverty policies and practices, and a shift away from individual casework towards community-based approaches.

### 3. References to the research

This research has attracted significant funding from prominent national and international sources, including government bodies, research councils, and charities. Findings have been disseminated in a variety of publications, and recognised internationally for their significance and academic rigour.

**3.1 Parton N** (2014) *The Politics of Child Protection: Contemporary Developments and Future Directions*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., ISBN (Electronic) 9871137269300, ISBN (Print) 9781137269294 [can be supplied on request]

**3.2 Morris, K., Mason, W., Bywaters, P., Featherstone, B., Daniel, B., Brady, G., Scourfield, J. & Webb, C.** (2018). 'Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions', *Child and Family Social Work*, 23(3), 364-372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12423>

**3.3 Bywaters, P.** and the Child Welfare Inequalities Team (2020). The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report. University of Huddersfield. [https://pure.hud.ac.uk/files/21398145/CWIP\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://pure.hud.ac.uk/files/21398145/CWIP_Final_Report.pdf)

**3.4 Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. & White, S.**, 18 Sep 2018, *Protecting Children: A Social Model* Bristol: Policy Press. 192 p. ISBN 978-1447332756 [can be supplied on request]

**3.5 Webb C. J. R., and Bywaters, P.**, (2018) 'Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015', *Local Government Studies*, 44:3, 391-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2018.1430028>

**3.6 Gupta, A. and Featherstone, B** (2020) 'On hope, loss, anger and the spaces in between: Reflections on living with/in adoption and the role of the social worker'. *Child and Family Social Work*, 25, 1, p. 165-172 8 p. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12674>

### 4. Details of the impact

The research has influenced policy and practices for child protection and adoption in the UK in the following ways:

1. Influencing policy to alleviate the impacts of poverty on families involved in child protection
2. Changing social work practice in relation to poverty
3. Influencing social work practice around adoption

#### Influencing policy to alleviate the impacts of poverty on families involved in child protection

In 2016, Glasgow City Council used the research findings [3.2, 3.3] to inform a programme of work to tackle "*long-standing and complex challenges*" in social care. Following seminars delivered jointly by UoH and the University of Sheffield, the Assistant Chief Officer declared: "*Re-focussing on child poverty and structural inequality has enabled the city to address and concentrate our intervention much more effectively on prevention and earlier help and support. The work of the Professors and the Nuffield study has been inspirational and transformational for the children and young people of Glasgow*". Highlighting the subsequent impacts on the lives of young people, he added, "*Children looked after from home and in formal care have reduced by 33% from 1,404 in April 2016 to 936 today (minus 468). This has also resulted in a significant reduction in rates per 10,000 from 188 in April 2016 to 82 per 10,000 today. Furthermore, as a consequence of our approach, placement moves for children and young people looked after have reduced from 355 in the year 2016/17 to 108 for this year; a reduction of 247 and 70%*" [5.1].

In Northern Ireland, the findings of CWIP were used to inform the funding of an expansion of coverage of Family Support Hubs. The Chief Social Worker described two specific initiatives: "*Firstly it inspired a project between the Department of Health and the Department of Communities to focus an initiative to maximise uptake of eligible benefits on families who had recently had a child placed on the child protection register. Secondly it led to the publication by the Department of Health NI of the Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Workers in Northern Ireland in July 2018*" [5.2].

Following invited consultations by the National Audit Office with Bywaters, the research [3.3] was also directly quoted in their 2016 report *Children in Need of Help or Protection* [5.3]. Further meetings between Bywaters and the OFSTED senior management team resulted in the agency changing its assessment criteria for performance of local authorities in relation to child protection, moving from this statement in the 2016 report: *"Inadequacy is not a function of size, deprivation or funding, but of the quality of leadership"*, to this in 2017: *"It is clear that highly deprived LAs that have high demand and that are facing further reductions to funding will have the greatest challenges to either achieve or maintain good services"* [5.4].

Further evidence of change to national policy is seen in The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) Safeguarding Pressures Reports 5 and 6, with both directly quoting the research [3.2]. As a result, the ADCS Presidents' inaugural speeches for 2016–19 inclusive have all featured poverty as a major issue. The President of ADCS from 2019–2020 confirms this influence: *"I (as ADCS presidents had done before me) drew on the evidence of the research led by Bywaters and Featherstone. This important work has informed the policy work of ADCS and was a key foundation of the paper 'A country that works for all children' published in 2017"* [5.5].

### **Changing social work practice in relation to poverty**

Following a number of sessions presenting the research findings [3.2] to 50 managers and frontline practitioners of Barnsley Local Authority in 2019 (which ranks 38<sup>th</sup> out of 317 in terms of the Index of Multiple Deprivation), their neglect strategy has been reviewed. Barnsley are now "poverty-proofing" their assessments to ensure they are focused on the hardships and inequalities families face when living in poverty. *"The sessions presented to our social work forum, and to groups of frontline social worker and managers, [have] led social workers and their managers to reflect and really think about the impact of families living in work and out of work poverty"* [5.6].

Featherstone and Morris (University of Sheffield), have also worked with 70 children's social care senior managers in a series of workshops organised by Research in Practice (2018/2019), a charity specialising in research dissemination. The CEO stated: *"By focusing specifically on the interface between poverty, inequality and neglect, Featherstone and Morris were able to design learning workshops that spoke directly to the priorities of children's social care."* [5.7]. As a result of this work, Research in Practice have commissioned Featherstone and Morris to lead a Change Project (2019–2021) on domestic abuse. This project builds upon the findings of the CWIP research in highlighting the role played by poverty in both the causation of and the consequences of domestic abuse [3.4]. Working with 30 local authority partners, they are examining how they can change practice in the area of domestic abuse and child protection [5.7]. Local authorities have been extremely keen to be involved in projects to develop a social model incorporating strategies for their particular needs and circumstances. Since 2019, Featherstone has been advising the Assistant Chief Officer, Public Protection and Complex Needs on transforming approaches to domestic abuse policy and practice in Glasgow. He wrote that she had been *"very influential in deciding what is needed for our planning and programme of work"* [5.8].

### **Influencing social work practice around adoption**

BASW accepted all of the recommendations of the commissioned Adoption Enquiry (2018), and has been working with the research team on how to embed the findings [3.6] with its 20,000 members. The CEO of BASW stated: *"The Enquiry's findings in relation to the need to address wider social policies relating to poverty and inequality has influenced BASW's national campaign on anti-poverty and anti-austerity, which included developing an Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work launched in September 2019. The Enquiry's findings in relation to ethics and human rights have also been incorporated into the work of BASW, including the development of Social Work and Human Rights: A Practice Guide ...and has facilitated critical debates in the profession about ethics and human rights in relation to adoption, and influenced a changing narrative about... the current primarily 'closed' model of adoption"* [5.9].

The current President of the Family Division of the High Court, Lord Justice Macfarlane, described the final report of The Adoption Enquiry as a “*an important and interesting document*” [5.10a]. Lord Macfarlane extensively quoted its conclusions calling for greater openness and involvement of birth families in adoption in a speech at the NAGALRO (Professional Association for Children’s Guardians) annual conference in 2018. The Adoption Enquiry has also been quoted in a Court of Appeal judgment on considerations for post-adoption contact [5.10b].

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- 5.1 Testimonial from Assistant Chief Officer for Children Services in the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership
- 5.2 Testimonial from Chief Social Worker for Northern Ireland and Deputy Secretary in the Department of Health NI.
- 5.3.DfE (2016) Children in need of help or protection, London
- 5.4. The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2016/17 HC 618 - see p, 70
- 5.5. Testimonial from President of ADCS (2019-2020)
- 5.6. Testimonial from Head of Service, *Children and Family Social Care* Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
- 5.7 Testimonial from CEO, Research in Practice
- 5.8. Testimonial from Assistant Chief Officer, Public Protection and Complex Needs, Glasgow City Council
- 5.9 Testimonial from CEO, BASW
- 5.10a&b\_Neutral Citation Number: [2019] EWCA Civ 29Case Number B4/2018/2341 <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2019/29.html> (see paragraph, 29); Speech by the President of the Family Court to NAGALRO Annual Conference, 2018 (p, 3)