

Using new technology in social work assessment and planning - harmonising practice or harming professional decision-making?

This open lecture considers the ways in which the Government has introduced a range of measures in England and Wales to manage risk and regulate practice in child care social work. Social work has increasingly been structured into specific processes, with indicators to monitor performance. These indicators, embedded in new technologies, create new arenas for scrutiny, criticism and blame, and there are obvious concerns about the likely erosion of professional discretion resulting from such changes. Using Lipsky's concept of the Street Level Bureaucrat, this paper reports on the findings of a study examining how social workers and their managers organise their everyday professional practice in an atmosphere of performance management. Although professional discretion is still evidenced (workarounds, creative manipulation of rules etc.) there are indications that the deployment of new ITC systems reflect more a shift to a managerial model of control. The implication of these developments in children's social work services are discussed.