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GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT: DEVELOPING A COST EVALUATION TOOL FOR 'TEAM AROUND THE FAMILY' APPROACHES IN WALES

Neo-liberal modernisation policies place growing pressure on Governments to evidence cost effective services. The First Minister's address for Wales in May 2011 reminded civil servants of the importance of "measuring the difference made on the ground" and called for a stronger "delivery for Wales". This delivery is located in the trying context of increasing levels of social inequality; unemployment and child poverty in Wales (The Child Poverty Strategy for Wales, 2011). A central question to be considered in this paper is: what is the overriding catalyst for the distribution of resources: Human need or 'value for money' and moreover does this matter? I will argue that an effective cost evaluation must delicately balance both the financial and social costs, endeavouring not to lose sight of the service user.

Using research undertaken from a PhD candidate's internship at the Social Research Division in the Welsh Government, the paper will explore the epistemological and methodological challenges of 'costing' families with complex need. The project set out to develop and pilot a cost evaluation tool for 'Team around the Family' projects in Wales, this was driven by the need to support public service organisations evaluate the financial costs and benefits of this multi-agency approach to supporting families with complex need. The task of quantifying the costs of vulnerable families proved to be a complex process; a review of the available cost evaluation studies yielded a paucity of full scale evaluations, with estimates for human and emotional costs often ignored (Walby, 2004). A major challenge in the development of the tool was the tendency to measure a projects' success in terms of its 'value for money'. Despite there being a clear need to evidence cost effectiveness this naturally raised fundamental questions pertaining to social justice. A pre-occupation of measuring success in monetary terms increased the risk of positioning the cost-evaluation tool as a panacea and conversely impeded the likelihood of social inequality. These challenges meant that the development of the tool proved to be more than a simple costing exercise. As a qualified social worker placing the £ rather than the individual at the centre of the inquiry, required a moral and professional re-balance.

References:

Carwyn Jones "First Minister's address", Cathays Park, 16 May 2011

Walby, S. 2004: *The cost of domestic violence*, Women and Equality Unit: National Statistics

The Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2011, Welsh Government