

## **The cost of undertaking core assessments**

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A study (Cleaver et al., 2004) was carried out as part of the Costs and Effectiveness of Services for Children in Need research initiative in order to determine the cost of undertaking core assessments. A core assessment is an in-depth assessment to explore the child's needs and the capacity of his or her parents or carers to meet these needs appropriately within the context of the wider family and community.

The study involved asking all participating authorities for detailed information about the time taken by social workers in undertaking the various elements of the core assessment and about the time they spent in consultation with colleagues and other professionals about the child or young person concerned. The time sheet identified the age group of the child (0-2, 3-4, 5-9, 10-14 and 15 plus) and asked about the other professions or organisations most likely to be consulted by social workers.

Timesheets were received from 24 social workers from four responding councils of which 17 identified the time involved in consulting colleagues and other professionals. Although the number of authorities is small, they do cover a range of circumstances and conditions.

If we take only the 17 estimates, the average time taken to complete an assessment is 26.25 hours, with a median of 25 hours, and a minimum of just over 15 hours. Only four of these cases took under 20 hours and only four more than 30 hours. If we take into account traveling time, missed appointments, team meetings and other activities, each assessment involved almost a full working week for a social worker. The cheapest assessment cost a total of £407, of which £377 was the cost of the social worker's time. The most expensive assessment cost £1,642 in total, of which £1,137 represented the cost of the social worker's time. The average for the seventeen cases was a total of £854: £657 for the social worker's own time, £63 for the time other colleagues in the social services department spent in communicating with the social worker and £133 for the time colleagues in other agencies spent in communicating with the social worker.

If we include the assessments of all social workers who responded, the time taken to complete a core assessment was 21.75 hours. The median amount of time was 21.25. The longest time taken by a social worker involving a child protection case was 45 hours, the shortest time was 6 hours. If we assume that the time taken to consult and liaise with other professionals represents a similar proportion of the total in these assessments as it is in the

seventeen with full details, this would produce an average cost of a core assessment of £707 of which £544 is the social worker's own time.

The final estimate for a core assessment in a complex case is based on the average costs derived from the five longest assessments reported in the timesheets. Unlike the other estimates in table 1, these figures are not based on scaling up the averages from the whole sample, but reflect only these five cases. The five cases are drawn from three of the four councils. It is apparent that the amount of time involved for colleagues and other agencies is significantly greater for these cases than it is for the average case. The cost of the social worker's time is around a third higher than the base case at £900, but the cost of the time of supervisors and colleagues in the social services department is nearly doubled at £117. The cost of the time of other agencies is increased by two-thirds to £221.

Table 1 shows estimates for the cost of the time of these other professionals, but these estimates will be minima, since they are based only on the time spent interacting with the lead social worker, and do not include any time they might take in consulting records, writing reports, talking to each other or engaging directly with the family or young person. Social workers had other consultations in around a third of the cases. For example, in all cases where the children were of school age the social worker consulted the child's or young person's school. In many cases, there was consultation with both GP or with a health visitor and in 12 out of 17 cases there was a consultation with another health professional. In half the cases there was consultation with the police.

**Table 1 The costs of core assessments — 2000/2001 prices**

	Average cost	Comment
Social Worker's time: <i>Breakdown of SW's time :</i> <i>hours</i>	£657	Average cost based on 26.25 hours of a Social Worker's time taken to complete a core assessment by 17 social workers. An hourly rate of £25 for client related work is used. The median time is 25 hours and the minimum is just over 15 hours. If we take into account traveling time, missed appointments, team meetings and other activities, each assessment involves almost a full working week for a social worker. The average time taken to complete a core assessment by all the social workers who responded was 21.75 hours and the average cost was £707. Based on 5 most complex cases, the cost was £1,238. All costs are taken from the Unit Costs Report (2001).
Discussion with parent	5:58	
Completing assessment forms	4:26	
Undertaking assessment	3:50	
Discussion with child	2:05	
Consulting files	1:49	
Consulting school	1:26	
Discussion with supervisor	1:20	
Consulting other health profs	1:13	
Other	2:43	
Total	22.9	
Social Services Department colleagues' time in communicating with the social worker:	£63	Average cost based on a total of 26.25 hours. Consultations with other workers are generally lengthy lasting 2.5 to 5.5 hours. Based on hourly rates of £31 for a Social Worker's supervisor's time, £70 for a GP, £25 for a Health Visitor and £25 for 'other' professionals time (member of child psychology team). Hourly rates have been taken from the Unit Costs Report (2001). Also based on hourly rates of £19 for a Police Constable, taken from Stockdale, Whitehead and Graham (uprated from 1999 to 2001 prices), £15 for a Teacher, cost of supply teacher from PriceWaterhouse Coopers (2001) and £15 for a Housing Officer's time, (own estimate).
Cost of other agencies' time in communicating with the social worker:	£133	Based on a total time of 26.25 hours. This might include the local education authority, a nursery or childminder or a neighbour. It is based on an hourly cost of £18.
Total Cost	£854	

## Reference

Cleaver, H., Walker, S. & Meadows, P. (2004) *Assessing Children's Needs and Circumstances: The Impact of the Assessment Framework*, Published by Jessica Kingsley, London, ISBN 1 84310 159 9.