



Professional article

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An information strategy for youth care in the Netherlands

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Abstract: The coming overhaul of the Dutch youth care system including the increased interdependence with the rest of the social domain is a unique occasion to revise the information management in this field. Using a case we demonstrate how five solutions with nationwide scope would make a world of difference in the practice of youth care. These facilities are in order of importance: (1) A Parental Authority Registry, (2) A National Register for Social Services Rendered, (3) A Signalling System for Unsafety, (4) A Social Services Directory and (5) An information provision for families. At the end we pay attention to privacy as an aspect that should be directly integrated in the design phase of the overhaul and blueprint for information systems.

Key words: youth care, overhaul, information, strategy, privacy, support, system, revision

1 Introduction

To address the shortcomings within the current youth care system, the Dutch Government is currently working towards a new system of organisations and responsibilities. With the draft law proposal 'Care for Youth' and the broader public debate the outline of that new system gradually comes into view. In this paper we map out the major challenges at the level of information management and offer a strategy for a sustainable approach. This strategy is aimed primarily to meet the information needs of professionals whose task is to ensure the security and development of the Dutch youth. Our strategy is based on the ideas of chain computerisation, a specialisation within computer science which focuses on sustainable solutions in the complex dynamics of large-scale multi-party information systems. We have avoided jargon as much as possible and aim to address the needs of the social workers. The subject calls for common ground for various stakeholders from practice, policy, management and IT. The intent of this document is to feed that discussion.

2 Professionals within youth care: a case

Lise is a professional counselor at a Youth Care Agency, where she receives a message from a school. Jan, a teacher, supervises group 1 in which Yara, a girl of five years old, is becoming a problem. She does not accept authority, she lies and she threatens other children in her class. Several other parents have complained about Yara. Jan has regularly noticed bruises on Yara, but Yara's mother is very

evasive. Jan is worried about Yara and has contacted the regional Youth Care Agency, Lise's employer. Lise approaches Yara's mother, Danielle. Danielle is prepared to meet at school once Jan has written her a letter explaining to her that Yara might be sent from school. A week later Danielle agrees to accept social services for that same reason. In a later conversation with Danielle, Lise finds out that Danielle's husband Jules is not Yara's father, but rather her stepfather. Yara's father has been out of the picture for years. Lise asks Danielle if she has the sole authority over Yara, but Danielle does not know that for sure. She thinks so. She and Yara's father were not married at the time, but 'the administrative things had been taken care of'. Danielle does not receive alimony from Yara's father. He has no money anyway. During a home visit Lise discovers that Yara has two half-brothers of two and three year old respectively. Weeks later she discovers that there is also an older brother who no longer lives at home. Apparently one of Lise's own colleagues is providing social services for Yara's brother during his probation. Lise proceeds with her questions. Irritated comments from Jules strengthen her suspicion about Jules's own past with the judiciary system, and shortly thereafter her suspicions are confirmed concerning Danielle's drug addiction. In the meantime Lise has verified that the biological father of Yara has no parental authority. Over time it has become clear for Lise how Yara's behavior at school is a symptom of Danielle and Jules's problems. Danielle does not recognise or acknowledge these problems however and takes care to inform Lise very selectively. Jules seems to have been the stable factor holding off the housing corporation and debt collectors. He is no longer succeeding at this, which places a further strain on the family.

3 The current role of IT within youth care services

The case shows the current practice of youth care services in the Netherlands where the social worker is on the one hand establishing a relationship with the people concerned and on the other hand trying to find out what exactly is and has been going on. In order to take appropriate and timely decisions Lise needs information. The current information systems are not designed to deliver Lise the required information. They are primarily designed to control the progress of her documentation. For example: the systems will check whether Lise has created a plan of action within a certain amount of days after the first report. The systems will also check whether Lise's colleague has developed a completely separate plan of action (with its own deadline) for the juvenile probation of Yara's brother. Both plans serve the interests of two different children but there is no integral part concerning the underlying problems of the family as a whole. It is also up to Lise to figure out how the parental authority has been formally arranged. The desired information often is not available at the time when the plan has to be written down. Neither is Lise informed about the involvement of other organisations and social workers with this particular family. The current social services system has compartmentalised the services per person and per type of social service rendered. Lise is not even automatically notified of her own colleagues' involvement with Yara's brother. And if Yara had not been there, no one would have noticed how the situation was getting out of control for Yara's two younger brothers. Being two and three years old they are still too young to go to school. Were Lise supported with appropriate information systems she would be in a much better position to take the right decisions and would have far more time to focus on the actual social work. Current information systems are often designed with a focus on turnaround time and compliance with diagnostic methods. Instead of supporting Lise she feels hampered by these systems.

4 Youth Care System overhaul

With the new law 'Care for Youth', the organisational system is to be adapted so that the child, the family and the community around them are enabled to solve their problems, if necessary with temporary outside help. Not an unimportant other objective is the reduction of the cost of the social services. To accomplish this, the Dutch municipalities are made responsible for all the social services, from the lighter preventive services to the heavier and more costly ones. Their task is to provide all services to families in conjunction with each other and to bring an end to the scenarios in which social workers in the same family are working in ignorance of each other or even against each other. Part of these new responsibilities are prevention and early detection of problems concerning children's safety. This complex of responsibilities is a task of major proportions and also brings with it an information problem that has been ignored so far.

5 An information strategy: solutions

Our hope is that information will be managed primarily to support the professionals in the field and not to force them into a reporting process. And it is a decentralisation: there will be more responsible government bodies and more social services organisations. Diversity and freedom in approach are needed, but some things can not be solved without shared frameworks. Even the definition of the term 'family' turns out to be quite debatable. In one context definition is based on the home address and in another it is based on parental authority. For Dutch society and its youth it would be very painful if the needs for a shared framework would not be identified beforehand. Otherwise nothing much will have changed after the transition, apart from the allocation of budgets. Finding common ground and joint frameworks after decentralising is likely to cost a lot more energy and funds.

The aim of this article is to identify where cooperation is needed for structural improvement of the information systems, whilst avoiding the pitfall to become too directive. In the past these issues have often proven to be quite resistant to local solutions and also tend to survive the major system overhauls. Some of these issues have plagued the field of youth care services for so long and have survived so many solution attempts that they have become fully accepted as part of the job by social workers themselves. With the right cooperation these issues can actually be solved. We believe that the following five solutions are required:

5.1 A Parental Authority Registry

In youth care services broken families are the norm rather than the exception. Parents are not always aware of what that means for the formal parental authority. They are frequently unaware of the formal responsibilities. It is only when the practical situation gets out of their control that these formal responsibilities become important. Attempts to help children are not always made with the full cooperation of the parents. It will occur that one parent does not want the other to be involved in solving the problems, or even wants for the other person to be aware of them. Or the other parent does not have formal parental authority but does not want the social worker to know this. Social workers in youth care usually work with assumptions about the parental authority. They are of course familiar with these scenarios and need to find out about the authority situation as soon as possible. Authority in the Netherlands is determined by the marital status of the parents at birth, arrangements after the birth and possible judicial rulings afterwards. The

regulations and court decisions concerning authority are determined by the 19 district courts of the Netherlands and registered in their own separate authority databases. This diverged situation makes it hard for social workers to determine how the authority has been arranged. Figuring out the situation can take weeks. If the social worker's assumptions prove to be incorrect all agreements, consent declarations and decisions need to be revised. The relationship between social worker and the parent(s) will have suffered a blow. So especially when there is a lack of cooperation from one of the parents the social worker is seriously hindered by a lack of information.

We feel a national Parental Authority Registry is needed. Such a registry would indicate the parental authority for every Dutch child (and vice versa the minors for whom each person has parental authority). The Ministry of Security and Justice is working to organise a registry by that name. It is to contain the relevant decisions of all Dutch Courts. However, even though this registry digitises and centralises formal court decisions, it does not contain information on the parental authority of all Dutch children. It will only contain information on those children whose parental authority has been settled in court. In all other cases social workers still need to find out the marital status of the parents at the time of the birth of the child. In our view, this development can be seen as a significant step in the right direction but as an incomplete solution. We advocate a complete Authority Registry for all Dutch minors capable of answering the question with whom formal parental authority lies.

5.2 A National Register for Social Services Rendered

The challenge to the municipalities is to create an environment in which all social services to a family are provided in a unified way. In order to do so the different funding streams are brought together. Where and when a family constellation begins and ends is not always obvious and unambiguous to determine. The parents are not always residing or recorded as residing in the same municipality. We therefore propose a national register containing the social services rendered to individuals (not families), with a start date, an end date and contact information of the organisation supplying the services. The organisation orchestrating the whole of social services should of course have access to this data. The scope of this register requires elaboration but it should not be tied to the existing or the new funding arrangements. The information needs for the orchestration of these services should be the leading factor in determining the right scope. The system should also contain which organisation and employee is orchestrating which services.

The existing VIR registers (Verwijsindex Risicjongeren) are the closest current systems for addressing this problem, but in our view it is time for the next step. The VIR contains signals of minors at risk from different individual organisations. It is intended to enable organisations to align their services to individual children, not families. It does not however contain all organisations involved, but only those who have identified a risk to the minor.

5.3 A Signaling System for Unsafety

Unsafety of children in the Netherlands is often not detected in time. A couple of years ago this problem became painfully obvious with several events for which a standard news article could be written: a child was killed and even though many social workers were involved none of them had sufficient overview to see how serious the situation had become. They were all focussed on a small part of the puzzle. The VIR was created some years ago to prevent organisations from working

independently from each other after identifying safety risks to children. What we propose is a system to identify threats before social services are involved. An early warning system that combines available information about the child and its family context to identify and signal that a security situation might be derailing. Convictions, drug addictions and serious debts of parents or guardians are examples of relevant indicators. Parents and caretakers can be detected through the aforementioned Parental Authority Register and through the GBA (Municipal Address Register). Since all this information is very sensitive and measuring safety is difficult to quantify, we propose a system that does not store this information but only uses it to detect potentially unsafe situations. The system can therefore not be questioned on this information, but can only send signals to the municipality. The municipal authority would evaluate the situation and would also respond to the system with feedback on the validity of the signal. This would allow for the improvement of the system. We realise that these signals will never be based on more than an approximation of the actual situation. But for an early warning system there is no other basis than the gradually changing information base of existing registers. The municipal social services director can use his own own data access rights (on the basis of a legally anchored legitimacy) to initiate an investigation to examine the situation of the involved child and family.

The legality of the proposed solution obviously requires attention. We are explicitly proposing a solution on the basis of data that is not intended for this kind of processing and use. However in our opinion discussion on this subject is very much needed: 'What information may be used for early detection of unsafety of children in the Netherlands'.

5.4 A Social Services Directory

Children and their parents as well as the municipalities as orchestrators (and funders) of social services have a need for and the right to this information: a sufficiently current and complete overview of the available social services. In the current system the lack of such an overview is unpleasant, but not insurmountable. The provincial organisation of the current system has facilitated the formation of large, provincial youth care organisations. The intention and the explicit expectation is that the coming decentralisation will stir up this field. There will be room for new and smaller providers of care. More competition can be very healthy but both the families themselves and the municipalities will need an overview of the available services.

Many directories have been set up, but they have all been shut down sooner or later because they could not offer sufficient, complete and up to date information. This is not a problem that can be solved with structured, electronic data exchanges. Although existing registers can be used, a directory of this kind requires manual management and clear agreements on regular delivery of these data by the providers. And those providers are not waiting on separate agreements with each of the municipalities they will be serving.

5.5 A information provision for families

Besides professionals youth and their parents or guardians also have a need for information. A new system should be set up to give them as much self sufficiency as possible. Our hope is that a national facility will be created to give them better overview of the services, that better involves them and that gives them more control and possibilities. The aforementioned solutions are partially conditional to

be able to realise such a system. If only to determine who has the parental authority and thus according access to the system.

In health care, the first attempt at an Electronic Patient Record (EPD) has failed despite large investments, in our view because of ignoring some basic principles of chain computerisation. Any required piece of data in such a system puts a strain on many organisations in the field. And because the field of youth care services has less funds, the level of information management within these organisations on average is not as high as in regular healthcare. We are therefore explicitly against an approach that tries to do too much at once. Such an approach will soon lead to a costly failure. A gradual path is feasible in our view: a system that gradually unlocks more possibilities to youth, parents and possibly other third parties. Unlocking a Social Services Directory is an example of such functionality. Our advice is not to end up in a situation where media and political pressure enforce the wrong architectural choices. It is up to the municipalities if they want to develop such a service. The provision would obviously be accessed via the ways of communication that youth and adults at this time are accustomed to using.

5.6 Back to the case

Suppose that the solutions proposed above would exist. What difference would they have made to the assistance of Yara's family? There might have been an early warning signal to go and check out the situation in this family. Maybe Lise would have contacted Jan, the teacher of Yara, instead of the other way around. If Yara had not existed the signal would nonetheless have been given for the two younger half brothers. Lise's information system would simply tell her the parental authority situation for the children from the start. That would have saved Lise a lot of time and investigation. She would have been able to immediately focus entirely on Danielle. Based on the information from the Social Services Register Lise would also have contacted her colleague and any other social workers around Danielle and Jules. She would no longer be dependent on Danielle's selective disclosure of information. Lise could have organised a meeting with all social workers and professionals around the family to arrange for some orchestration. With the prospect that the children might not be taken away Danielle might have been willing to cooperate. And Jules might have been willing to accept professional help with solving the debts. The housing corporation might then have refrained from evicting the family. Lise, Danielle and Jules would use the Social Services Directory to find an appropriate, temporary shelter for Yara and her two brothers. Danielle and Jules would then not feel entirely at Lise's mercy. Both of them could also explore the available services and thus have a say based on that information. Moreover, there is a provision that helps them make sense of their possibilities, their rights and their duties. Instead of a frustrating multitude of so-called social organisations pulling them in different directions, they might experience a collaborative field that forces them to make choices but also offers them real solutions. Lise and the other professionals might have the satisfaction of not fighting a losing battle, and really mean something for this family in trouble.

6 Conclusion

IT suppliers can not be expected to fix the shortcomings of the social services system as a whole. This is a long-term responsibility that rests with the government as the representative of society. It is our hope for this coming transition that the Dutch municipalities will not only take on the initial challenge of this new responsibility, but will collectively deal with the structural information

issues behind it. And we hope that in this endeavour the primary goal remains to support to provide the professionals, youth and parents with the information they need.

Biography:

Pieterjan Vermeer works as an IT architect within the Dutch youth care services domain, dividing his time between a youth care services organisation in Rotterdam and the Dutch IT Committee for these organisations. The main motivation in his work is always to provide optimal support for people to work together. Up to 2008 this primarily concerned the collaboration within organisations. Since then the emphasis has shifted towards the cooperation beyond the organisational boundaries. In 1996 he completed his study of information science at the University of Utrecht. After a few years as a consultant for collaboration software he chose to work within the social domain directly.

Gerrit van de Ven has his roots at the Dutch Military Police and the Civil Police. Gerrit completed the study Information Science in 1994 and then joined In-Pact a year later. In-pact was founded in 1991 as a Police Consultancy Organisation. Gerrit was involved in the development of a methodology for re-analysis of so called 'cold-cases'. He has also developed and executed a number of national audits and monitors commissioned by the Board of Police Commissioners and the Ministry of Public Affairs, e.g. the Monitor of Prostitution and Human Trafficking. He is also one of the designers of the EBV-method for analysing and designing collaboration systems using chain computerisation. Gerrit designed a business language for use within the criminal justice and youth care services domain to enhance internal/external semantic interoperability. His interests in philosophy and cognitive science currently serve him well as an (inter)national intelligence trainer.