

# Rethinking Children's Services

Fit for the Future?

Edited by Enver Solomon

**catch**  
**22**



Working with children,  
for children



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## ABOUT THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) is a leading charity that for more than 50 years has been improving the lives of children and young people, especially the most vulnerable. We work with children and for children, to influence government policy, be a strong voice for young people and practitioners, and provide creative solutions on a range of social issues. For more information visit [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk).

## ABOUT CATCH22

Catch22 is a social business; a non profit business driven by a social mission. It works all over the UK to deliver better outcomes for young people and their families, wherever they face disadvantage. In 2014/15 Catch22 directly worked with 33,177 people, through 1,650 staff and volunteers in over 100 locations. It has a strong heritage in charitable delivery, and has worked with young people for over 200 years.

Catch22's services for young people and families include vulnerable families and children in need, looked after children and care leavers, missing from home and child sexual exploitation, substance misuse (alcohol and drugs), emotional wellbeing and youth Justice. Catch22 also runs the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF), the largest membership forum

specialising in leaving care in the UK, with an active membership of over 80 local authorities in England and Northern Ireland. Alongside these services, Catch22 works at every stage of the wider social welfare cycle for young people and their families. It delivers award winning alternative education (through our schools and academies), apprenticeships and employability programmes and rehabilitation services (working in partnership in 17 prisons). For more information, please visit [www.catch-22.org.uk](http://www.catch-22.org.uk).

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# FOREWORD

This new book of essays seeks to stimulate new thinking about services for children, in particular for those who need our protection and support the most. The State is shrinking but even before it was, its glaring weaknesses – locally and centrally – have been there for all to see.

The roll call of institutional failure, abuse, neglect and sometimes downright cruelty has grown with monotonous regularity. As a country we seem to struggle to make children a political and investment priority. Too many of our children are left inadequately supported in troubled families, low-income households and just plain loose in society. Even when in the State's care they are still not always protected or nurtured, left ill-equipped to face and survive in a tough world. When their plight is revealed there is much wringing of hands but too often too little changes as the merry-go-round of neglect continues.

The optimism of an era that passed the 1989 Children Act and put the interests of the child centre stage seems a long time ago. We still have a statutory framework for protecting children, but the investment in that framework continues to shrink with no end in sight. As money gets tighter organisations seek to protect themselves, tightening their eligibility criteria and looking nervously at co-operative ventures. Better to survive until better financial weather comes, they think; but what if it doesn't? The children in need and at risk are still there – and probably increasing in number.

There are thankfully still a lot of talented and committed people around – both professionals and others – who want to help and work with children and young people. They work hard, often struggling to make sense of the systems that they have to work within. These people need to be rescued with some new creative

*Today it is worth remembering the wartime advice of the eminent physicist Ernest Rutherford; “we haven’t got the money, so we’ve got to think.”*

thinking and action. As the traditional public expenditure pots continue decreasing new approaches must be tried if vulnerable children aren’t to get an even worse deal.

Today it is worth remembering the wartime advice of the eminent physicist Ernest Rutherford; “we haven’t got the money, so we’ve got to think.” This set of essays attempts to deliver some of that new thinking for an era of public expenditure austerity.

For meaningful change that helps children at risk and in need the action must shift locally. Hanging around for the men and women in Whitehall and Westminster to act could mean a very long wait. We just have to hope they don’t get in the way! The watchwords for the new normal of shrinking public budgets must be innovation,

technology, partnership, localism and outcomes, not processes. There are plenty of ideas along these lines in these essays for people to get their teeth into. For the sake of the children who need our help, let’s hope people do.

**Lord Norman Warner**

March 2016

**Lord Norman Warner is a crossbench peer, and was until 2016 the Commissioner for children’s social care in Birmingham.**



# INTRODUCTION

Enver Solomon, Director of Evidence and Impact at the National Children's Bureau

When a child is not being sufficiently cared for it is the duty of the state to step in and make sure that he or she is helped, protected and supported to flourish. The law is clear that the welfare of the child is paramount, and this principle should be at the heart of how the state intervenes in children's lives. Determining how this most important function of government is best executed and how the state should act to prevent harm and promote children's welfare is complex and open to considerable debate. How proactive should professionals be, should there be clear central prescription or greater discretion, how should the child be put at the centre of decision making so they can articulate their needs? Should greater effort be put into abuse and neglect prevention rather than just responding, and how can community resources be most effectively harnessed? This book of essays seeks to stand back from the day to day challenges of policy making

and practice to consider the challenges faced by children's services. It considers how they and central government should respond. It brings together prominent government advisers as well as some leading thinkers and local service leaders to present their thoughts on the future of children's services and to provide examples of approaches being taken by local authorities.

This is, of course, a key moment in the development of children's services. Demand has increased exponentially; since 2002 the number of children on child protection plans has increased by 88 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The number of children in care is at the highest level it has been for three decades.

There is no doubt that this high level of demand places considerable pressure on children's services. The complexity of need is also changing. It raises serious

questions about whether or not a system, which as Martin Pratt points out in chapter three was designed primarily to deal with familial abuse, is able to respond effectively to complex issues of sexual exploitation, radicalisation, female genital mutilation and gang culture.

At the same time there is no dispute that local authority budgets are shrinking. Lisa Harker (chapter one) notes that so far it seems that spending on frontline social care has been protected relative to other services. But analysis by NCB and other children's charities shows that spending has been reduced on many areas including youth support and children's centres that could help services intervene early and prevent children entering the social care system.<sup>2</sup> As further budget cuts are made local authorities will surely struggle to continue to protect children's social care spending.

All the contributors to this book accept that the status quo is not viable and that in the next five years children's services will be radically altered. The Prime Minister has made clear that he

wants to see "landmark reforms" over this parliament that are "as transformative as we did in education over the last."<sup>3</sup> A child protection taskforce has been set up, and some local authority children's services deemed as failing have already been moved to newly established children's services trusts. The government has said that in the future those services which persistently fail will be taken over by high performing authorities or other providers. Some areas have already developed new approaches such as the community interest company that is running children's services in Richmond and Kingston. In recognition of the changing landscape the Association of Directors of Children's Services has recently published a more provocative report on 'next practice in children's services'.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Donald Forrester, adviser to the government on the creation of the Frontline graduate social work training scheme reflects in chapter two that there now seems to be a broad consensus that children's services are not "delivering the high quality service, mixing authority and compassion

in helping families and children, that is to be expected.” He argues that what is needed is a new narrative - an inspiring vision for what “children’s services should be striving to achieve” that provides “a shared understanding of what the service is actually for” rather than simply focusing on effective management, which in his view has failed to deliver consistent good quality care for children and families.

Chapters three and four provide examples of how two local areas are attempting to set out a vision based around resilience. Camden’s Director of Children, Schools and Families Martin Pratt, explains how it focuses on supporting families to “build capacity rather than create dependence, which in turn promotes individual resilience in children as they grow up.” He gives the example of a newly configured mental health and well being service that was designed based on collaboration with children and young people. In Wigan services are being redesigned taking an asset based approach premised on ‘a substantial shift from intervening and ‘doing to’ to working with and building individual, family and community resilience’.

For Lisa Harker (chapter one), until recently the Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence at NSPCC, the approaches taken in Wigan and Camden are the only means of managing demand and reducing the need for statutory intervention. She starkly warns that “more resources won’t make a difference if they are poured into a system which is ineffective at tackling the root causes of the problem.” But she also argues for a shift in the relationship between the state and its citizens “unleashing the hidden resources of the community” to take action when they are first concerned about a child rather than waiting for the situation to escalate and then simply referring on to children’s social care. Chris Wright, Chief Executive of Catch22 makes the same point in chapter five, arguing that “unlocking capacity in communities must be central to a new approach to delivering’ services.”

The importance of those professionals working with children and families to achieve a shift in social care is equally important. In chapter six Sir Martin Narey, the former CEO of Barnardo’s, focuses on the skills and competencies

of children's social workers and the findings from his review for the government of social work training. He argues that with the quality of social work education in the ascendancy the capabilities of the profession will only improve. For Louise Casey (chapter seven) who led the government's Troubled Families programme, how frontline professionals use their skills to engage with families is key. She highlights the importance of a change in mind-set, "a collective will and willingness to put vulnerable people first in everything we do." She also warns that safeguarding children from harm should be the "core responsibility of everyone in public service, from the licensing of taxis to the houses that children live in, to the schools they do or don't turn up to."

A more radical approach is set out in chapter eight by Michael Little, Co-Director at the Social Research Unit at Dartington. He proposes a shift from the focus on better outcomes which he says has in reality has been about better outputs, to focusing on "connection – making sure people have the access they need to people who can help them." This would require

a change in how public services are conceptualised so that they are not being resourced to achieve their own ends but work alongside the community "engaging with civil society to figure out how to achieve mutually agreed ends." For Little, the relational approach is not a silver bullet but needs to be tried and tested more openly under a "broad set of initiatives that live under a tent called relational social policy."

A new vision of children's services raises a controversial question: to what extent should provision be opened up to a wider diversity of providers? In chapter five Chris Wright calls for national and local government to encourage a range of providers of children's services. He pointedly states that this should not be first generation outsourcing which has been "too limiting" with cost saving as the primary driver and argues for a more radical approach, "drawing in the range of resources available with the goal of delivering the best possible outcomes." Adopting an even more critical stance, Kathy Evans, CEO of Children England, is scathing in her critique of outsourced commissioning in

chapter nine. She argues that it is a costly and wasteful use of limited resources with contracts “weighted to the cheapest bidder rather than giving equal weight to quality and social value.” She calls on the sector to “collectively agree to suspend competition as the primary means of decision making and knuckle down to sharing power, money and ideas.” Children England is exploring the potential for new forms of delivery that are rooted in the community and give children and young people an unprecedented level of control.

It is clear from the contributions in this book that there are no straightforward solutions to the challenges facing children’s services, and to the desire to improve the quality of provision.

It is a complex issue, and this collection of essays is not designed to offer up a list of neat proposals or carefully crafted policy recommendations. Instead it is intended to urge all those who are working to improve the quality of children’s services to pause and take stock.

Having the space to collectively think and reflect is crucial if the multiple challenges currently facing the sector are to result in intelligent solutions, borne out of healthy debate about what has gone before and what is happening now. Drawing on the themes set out by all of the contributors the final chapter puts forward key points for reflection which must be considered if children’s services are to be fit for the future.

#### NOTES

- 1 *How Safe Are Our Children*, 2015, NSPCC.
- 2 *Losing in the long run*, 2016, NCB, Action for Children, Children’s Society.
- 3 David Cameron speech 14th December 2015
- 4 Selwyn (2016) *Pillars and Foundations: Next Practice in children’s services*, ADCS



# I. DEMAND MANAGEMENT AS THE DRIVER FOR REFORMING CHILD PROTECTION RESPONSES

Lisa Harker explains why and how local authorities should focus on reducing the demand for child protection responses

In the next five years children's services in England will change beyond recognition.

Some imagine that children's services departments will become half the size they were a decade earlier.<sup>5</sup> This transformation will be driven by a reduction in public funding; local authorities' spending per person has already been cut by 23 per cent in real terms since 2010<sup>6</sup> and in the next five years a further £9.5 billion of savings is required.<sup>7</sup> So far, spending on the frontline of children's social care has been protected relative to other services,<sup>8</sup> but it will not be possible to meet savings targets without deeper cuts in future.

In truth however, changes to children's services would have been necessary even if public spending was rising, such is the need to reassess how best to

protect children from abuse and neglect in our society.

Demand has risen exponentially. Since 2002 the number of children on child protection plans has increased by 88 per cent.<sup>9</sup> Child protection services are under considerable pressure. Even where spending has been protected, services are in danger of breaching their statutory requirement to protect children who are at risk of significant harm.<sup>10</sup>

There is no indication that the demand is likely to abate in the near future, given evidence of unmet need. For every child on a child protection plan it is estimated that another eight have been maltreated.<sup>11</sup> Agencies frequently report difficulties accessing help from children's social care for children they are concerned about.<sup>12</sup> Wider

evidence of need, such as the number of children living with domestic violence or with a mental health problem, suggests that children's services are only reaching a small minority of those who would benefit from support.<sup>13</sup> A rising birth rate means that local authorities expect pressures on services to increase.<sup>14</sup> In short, it is clear that this situation will not right itself.

Even at the peak of spending on children's services in 2009/10 it was clear that they were dominated by the demands of child protection. Despite the ambitions of the 1989 Children Act, with its broad definition of a child 'in need', the focus of children's services has long been centred on the crisis end of the spectrum. Consequently, the need to 're-engineer' children's services so that they are better at tackling to root causes of abuse has been observed in the UK, as well as other countries.<sup>15</sup> There remains a strong case for investing more resources than we currently spend on children's services, given the long-term impact that early childhood trauma has individuals and wider society. But greater resources will not transform the

picture if they are simply poured into a system which is ineffective at tackling the root causes of the problem.

The most inspiring leaders in our field have already recognised that in future children's services will need to be driven by a new goal: to reduce the circumstances which lead to children requiring a child protection response in the first place. It is this form of so-called 'demand management' that will lead to sustainable change, not one that rations services ever more tightly as budgets shrink.

Leeds is one local authority which is already seeking to adopt this approach. It has set itself the task of becoming a 'child-friendly' city, re-orientating its children's services so that they explicitly set out to reduce the need for statutory intervention by building on the capacity of those around a child to support them. By placing a stronger value on the importance of consistent relationships in children's lives and adopting a restorative approach which does not assume that the state knows best, the local authority is seeking to move away from a position where

*“Moreover, the local authority is putting itself in the role of catalyst rather than problem-solver, setting out a common set of outcomes for all children in Leeds and then drawing in a wide range of partners”*

professionals have all the control and decision-making powers over families and instead put more of the decision-making with families themselves. Moreover, the local authority is putting itself in the role of catalyst rather than problem-solver, setting out a common set of outcomes for all children in Leeds and then drawing in a wide range of partners, from private, statutory and voluntary sectors, to figure out how to realise this vision together.

Other local authorities, such as Stockport, Essex and Cheshire West, are taking a similar path. If adopted across the board, this approach would transform children’s services as we currently know them. But it would require change on many fronts. It would mean redefining services so that their chief aim is to build resilience to avoid intervention rather than to meet a set of statutory responsibilities. It would need a shift from a limiting focus on assessing risk and deploying services towards harnessing

wider resources in the community. It would require changes to the way that services are financed and assessed. It would place local authorities in the role of catalysing responses to complex problems rather than providing or commissioning a set of pre-determined services. It would entail working across professional boundaries and adopting counter-cultural professional behaviours. It would mark a shift in the relationship between the state and the citizen, similar to The Deal that Wigan council has struck with its citizens<sup>16</sup> as set out by Donna Hall in chapter four.

This level of change seems daunting, even if the prize is significant. Some have noted that we are reaching a crossroads where local authorities need to decide whether they will take this route or opt for alternatives, such as simply becoming a smaller version of the current model.<sup>17</sup> Those local authorities minded to make the leap will be distinguishable by

three characteristics: their thirst for better data and insight into the root causes of the problems that children's services they tackle, the desire to work with a wide range of professionals in new ways and a willingness to work with the community in the process of finding solutions.

Of these, better data collection and analysis appears the most surmountable, notwithstanding the fact that current measurement of the known root causes and factors associated with child abuse is woeful<sup>18</sup> and existing data is often not shared on grounds of data protection. Nevertheless, in the age of big data and increasingly sophisticated analytics we are surely on the cusp of making significant advances in the way we understand what is happening in local communities.

The second challenge, for children's services to work closely with other professionals, has long been recognised. Multi-agency arrangements are hardly new. Yet many agencies, including government, give the impression that protecting children from abuse is a role that can only be

undertaken by 89,000 social workers rather than the 2.8 million who work in the wider children's workforce in England. This has inadvertently been reinforced by the message from regulations and guidance that it is a professional's duty to report abuse to children's social care, rather than act on it.

Social work cannot shoulder the burden of preventing abuse as well as taking swift action when a child is at risk of harm. Too often a professional, working in isolation, refers their concern to children's social care,<sup>19</sup> only to be told that things are not yet bad enough to meet the child protection threshold. Through a lack of knowledge or confidence about how to respond to a child's immediate needs, professionals signpost families to other services, or watch and wait until things deteriorate to the point when a social care threshold is met.

Changing this dynamic to one in which professionals are able to take swift and effective action when they are first concerned about a child, is essential. The biggest gains are likely to be seen in the way that schools respond, by virtue of the fact that they

*“We seemed to have reached a point in the individualisation of our society where other people’s adversity, especially when it comes to how they behave towards their children, is not our concern”*

see children on a regular basis and are usually able to build a trusted relationship with them and their family. In many ways teachers are the frontline of child protection. Some schools – such as Manchester Communications Academy in North East Manchester and the Reach Academy in South West London – are already embracing this role and witnessing the benefits to pupils’ learning as well as their overall wellbeing. But this role for schools needs to be encouraged by central government and Ofsted – particularly with local authorities having declining control over schools – and children’s services will need to change the way they interact with schools, by moving away from being the agency accepting or declining referrals, to becoming a supportive consultant, convener and catalyst for change.

Beyond schools, it will be important to harness the actions of many others, including GPs, health visitors, shopkeepers, bus drivers, hairdressers, neighbours, extended

family and friends. Communities hold significant influence over human behaviour, as well as the capacity to take action. Yet relatively little attention has been given to harnessing the power of citizens to shape how those around them are supported through adversity. This will be a particular challenge for children’s social care which, with the exception of commissioning some volunteer-led peer-to-peer support initiatives, has had little day-to-day interaction with the local community beyond those who are already known to services. Levels of trust between citizens and children’s social care are low and there has long been a perceived (and real) power imbalance between state and citizen.

We seemed to have reached a point in the individualisation of our society where other people’s adversity, especially when it comes to how they behave towards their children, is not our concern. It is well known that social capital

has declined over the past four decades. So challenging this will mean shifting our expectations of communities, as well as the norms of behaviour. Children's services will have to work to increase confidence, lower inhibitions and challenge assumptions that are held within communities.<sup>20</sup> Change will be gradual; it will involve actions on many levels. But by unleashing the hidden resources of the community, children's services could have a much more powerful impact on the lives of children than could ever be achieved through the deployment of statutory services.

Who will drive these changes? The Prime Minister has talked of the need for a "smarter state", of the imperative to do things differently, particularly in relation to children's services. But there is no evidence of a vision for the future of children's services emanating from Whitehall. Rather, central government is minded to devolve responsibility (and greater power in some respects) to local authorities to fashion its own future. It seems likely that central government will continue to champion innovation (through

such initiatives as the social care innovation programme), promote improvements to social work training and threaten recalcitrant local authorities with forced takeover of their children's services by not for profit trusts or "other partnerships." Central government may even force Ofsted to change its approach. But these do not amount to reform of children's services – their destiny will lie in the hands of local authorities.

The context is certainly challenging. Demand for cashable returns within two years is unrealistic and risks local authorities making ill-judged short-term decisions about spending. A longer term view will be required and all government agencies involved will need to share the risks of more substantive reforms. It will be important to start with an honest assessment of the difficulties that local authorities currently have meeting their statutory responsibilities under the 1989 Children Act, with a spirit of shared endeavour rather than a culture of blame.

It will be hard, but what is the alternative? A smaller state that simply leaves more children to their fate is not one that, in developed nation such as ours, many will countenance. And the prize – more children avoiding the kind of trauma that derails their

childhood – is one from which a whole nation would reap rewards.

**Lisa Harker was Director of Strategy, Policy and Evidence at NSPCC until April 2016 and is now Director of the Art Room charity based in Oxford.**

#### NOTES

- 5 *Pillar and Foundations: next practice in children's services*, Richard Selwyn, [http://www.adcs.org.uk/download/committees/Pillars\\_and\\_Foundations\\_Draft\\_June\\_2015\\_v5.pdf](http://www.adcs.org.uk/download/committees/Pillars_and_Foundations_Draft_June_2015_v5.pdf)
- 6 *Central cuts, local decision-making: changes in local government spending and revenues in England, 2009–10 to 2014–15*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, March 2015
- 7 *Future Funding Outlook for Councils 2019/2020*, Local Government Association, June 2015.
- 8 Not all children's services spending has been protected – see *Cuts that cost: Trends in funding for early intervention services*, National Children's Bureau
- 9 *How Safe Are Our Children 2015*, NSPCC.
- 10 Several cases are outlined in *Enough is Enough: a report on child protection and mental health services for children and young people*, Centre for Social Justice, 2014.
- 11 *How Safe Are Our Children 2015*, NSPCC.
- 12 An NSPCC/TES poll of 1,200 head teachers, teachers and support staff found that 66 per cent had reported a safeguarding concern in the last year, TES 26 September 2014.
- 13 For overview of children at risk of abuse and neglect see *How Safe Are Our Children 2014*, NSPCC, pp 10–14.
- 14 Brooks C and Brocklehurst P (2014) ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Phase 4 Report.
- 15 See for example Scott D (2006) *Towards a public health model of child protection in Australia*, Communities, Families and Children Australia, Volume 1.
- 16 <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/The-Deal>
- 17 *The Inflection Point*, Liam Booth-Smith and Jon Ainger, iMPower, 2015.
- 18 See *How Safe Are Our Children 2014*, NSPCC, p14.
- 19 Research conducted by NSPCC found 75% of midwives, 47% of school nurses, 35% of GPs, 32% of health visitors and 29% of teachers said they would refer an early concern about neglect to children's social services.
- 20 See for example Buchanan E et al *Child neglect is everyone's business – Achieving a greater sense of shared responsibility for tackling neglect*, National Foundation for Educational Research, 2015.

## 2. WHAT, WHEN, WHY AND HOW: ZOMBIE SOCIAL WORK AND THE NEED FOR A NEW NARRATIVE

Donald Forrester calls for a new inspiring vision for the reform of children's services

For decades now, children's services have been the focus of sustained government attempts at reform and improvement. These have included multiple re-structuring, creation of new policies and procedures, a proliferation of guidance, centrally imposed forms and computer systems, attempts to influence timescales or thresholds, initiatives to improve or change social work education and many other attempts to "do something". Yet, by and large, most of these initiatives seem to have achieved little. Many have actually been counter-productive.

Today, after decades of well intentioned reform, there seems to be broad consensus that children's services are not delivering the high quality service that is expected. They do not mix authority and compassion in helping families and children. There are great social workers

doing great work – but too much of the service is not of the quality required that we can reasonably demand "so, what is to be done?"

It was a privilege to be asked to write this essay, and it would have been easy to pick almost any area for reform and write a convincing case for making changes. Yet I now have a deep-rooted suspicion of attempts to create solely rational reforms of Children's services. The many well intentioned rational reforms carried out do not appear to have generated genuine positive changes. For me this is because the reforms focus on the *what* and *when* of activity, without sufficient attention to *why* and almost none on *how* practice should be carried out. This creates a paradoxical system that is very busy, but where it is often unclear why various activities are being done. This is the zombie social work referred to in the

title and discussed further below: it moves, but is it genuinely, truly alive?

So instead of offering technical attempts at reform, we need to look more deeply both at the nature of the problem and possible solutions. Maybe it is time we try to approach things in a different way. Let me illustrate this with a story.

*Years ago and far away there was a land, blessed with beautiful countryside and wonderful natural wealth. The King of this country was a happy man. His land was prospering, and he had little to worry about. Yet there was one village that did concern him, the village of Childrenservices. Childrenservices was by the sea, the only settlement on a broad coast which had plentiful fish. Yet the people of the village did not go out to sea. The only fish they pulled in were from the lines they threw into the ocean. As a result, teeming schools of fish swam by almost untouched by the people of Childrenservices.*

*The King knew that each King or Queen before him had tried to get the people of the village to take*

*to the sea and fish, but that each had failed. So he decided to do something about this. He offered a prize of 10,000 gold pieces to the person who could get the people of Childrenservices fishing.*

*On hearing of this prize, the King's Head of Delivery immediately volunteered. He headed hot foot to Childrenservices, and set to work immediately. The production of fish was rationalised with each person being given their role, and guidance on inter-role coordination. Performance indicators were set to ensure production of fish. Yet, despite all this activity, the impact on fishing was minimal, and once the Head of Delivery returned to the palace the paltry increases ceased as the people returned to their old ways.*

*Hearing of the failure of the Head of Delivery, the Chief Engineer (Social) volunteered. He made his way to the village, and showed them his plans and blueprints for ships that could brave the fiercest sea and nets that would maximize the return, while ensuring that only the right fish were caught. He explained how they could be built with locally available resources. There was*

quite a lot of interest in the ideas of the Chief Engineer, and yet nothing really changed. Like the Head of Delivery he slowly trudged back to the palace, disconsolate and despairing.

Others followed. Lord Very Important recommended that clear policies and procedures for fishing would improve the catch. The Chief Inspector suggested that more thorough, frequent and in-depth inspections might enforce better fishing. The Head of Computing (for this was a most advanced mythical land) suggested that new IT systems to allow monitoring of the throughput of fish could be the answer. Yet, while each of these had some successes, none managed to change the overall picture. The people of Childrenservices just did not go fishing.

The King was at his wits' end. "Who will get the people of Childrenservices fishing?" he asked of his court. Having seen the failure of the great and the good, nobody seemed willing to take on the challenge. There was an awkward silence, until, at the very back of the court, a lone hand went up. "I'll have a go," said a voice. To everybody's

surprise – and amusement – the volunteer turned out to be the court jester. "Why not, nobody else seems to have made any difference" said a clearly unhappy King, and with that the court jester set off down the road to Children services.

When she got to Childrenservices the Jester set herself down in the main square. She started to sing songs – songs of the sea, shanties and fishing songs, songs of love and songs of adventure. Slowly a crowd gathered around to listen. And then the Jester started to tell stories. These were not any old stories – they were amazing stories, stories of adventures and strange lands, of love lost and won, of fortunes made and disasters averted. These were stories that entranced and entertained her audience. And each story featured one subject – the sea - and one set of heroes – the fisher people who braved the sea.

As the Jester told her tales each evening more and more of the people of Childrenservices gathered around to listen. Soon those who came were telling others the stories they had heard. And soon after that, the people of Childrenservices decided that they

*wanted to go to sea to see these wonders themselves. From that point there was no stopping them. They started to build boats and nets – digging out and using the plans they had been given. They started to agree who would do what and when. They fashioned boats and waterproof clothes and all the equipment they needed – and they took to the sea. And with every voyage they took they came back with more stories, and with the rich harvest of fish. And each week they became better at fishing and more productive.*

*The Jester went back to court, claimed her prize and, of course, all lived happily ever after.*

It is hard to imagine a Director of Children's Services gathering staff around to listen to a story, or Ofsted Inspectors meeting with workers for a sing-a-long. This is perhaps a shame, but the moral of this tale is not that stories or songs should be put at the heart of service development. Rather the idea is that an inspiring vision for practice may be what is missing in current attempts to reform services.

For me, reform of children's services requires two parts. First, it requires a vision for what children's service should be striving to achieve. This needs to include the core values of the organization, the ultimate aims we might strive for and how we should work with families and children to achieve such goals. It is the *why* and *how* of the service.

The second element is a plan to achieve this vision. The plan would include recruitment of the right staff, effective supervision and decision-making, training and support for skills development, a career structure that supported individuals to achieve the vision, adapted systems, policies and procedures and many, many other elements, all aimed at helping everyone achieve the vision. This element is more about the *what* and the *when*.

What we usually see in children's services is the second part without the first. There is lots of attention paid to management of the service, with very little sense of a shared understanding of what the service is actually for. Without this, the attempts to manage the system become weirdly empty. Much time

and effort is devoted to activities that do not seem to have a clear purpose or likely impact. Let me give a few examples from my recent experiences.

- In research we frequently observe social workers doing a visit because they are meant to do one within a certain timescale (the “stat visit”). Their computer is literally flashing at them, they do the visit, fill in the form and the computer stops flashing. But the visit itself is often characterised by a purposelessness that leaves worker and family confused about what is happening.
- We have observed supervision sessions in many authorities. They predominantly involve workers telling managers what they have done and then what they are going to do, with a focus on pragmatic tasks and a lot of typing by supervisors. The focus is the *what* and the *when*, with little consideration of the *why* or *how* – either the analysis of risk or support for the way workers should work with children and families.
- We currently have a social work education regulation process that does not test the quality of teaching or the quality of social workers who qualify from a course. Instead it focuses on policies and procedures (*what* and *when*, not *why* or *how*).
- We have observed practice in several local authorities when Ofsted have visited. There seems to be very little relationship between the Ofsted ratings achieved and the actual quality of practice families are experiencing. The Ofsted decision on authorities seems to be based on quality of computer records, policies and procedures and management efficiency rather than quality of practice or outcomes for children. Again, the *what* and *when* rather than the *why* or *how* work is done.

To me this is symptomatic of a system which has developed an obsession with effective management, without sufficient attention to the wider values and aims of the service. It is like a zombie social work – moving and busy (very, very busy!) without any sense of being truly alive.

*“But management should be the servant of vision, not a replacement: when we have management without vision we see zombie social work”*

There are exceptions to this. In evaluating Reclaiming Social Work – a move to small units delivering systemic practice – I was deeply impressed by the fact that the organisation clearly had a coherent vision, including underlying values and overarching aims for the work. The management of the organisation was then created to deliver on these. There are other hopeful developments: for instance, Signs of Safety offers the promise of a coherent vision for practice; Restorative Approaches are exciting new ways of re-discovering core social work values; and integrating ways of working such as Motivational Interviewing offers promise for more effective and ethical practice.

Yet there are profound challenges in moving organisations toward such ways of working. The biggest single challenge is that the leaders of the profession need to believe whole-heartedly in the model or models that they espouse. These are not products, like a new IT system, that can be purchased off the shelf. They are fundamental ways of thinking about the aims

of the service, of understanding and discussing what great social work is. They need to shape the whole system. The leaders need to be the people telling the stories, and they need to involve everyone in collectively developing our narrative of excellent practice.

I spent much of this essay telling a story because for me the story had a crucial moral: we need to find and articulate inspiring ways of working if we are to revolutionise children's services. This is not to say effective management is unimportant: it is absolutely crucial. But management should be the servant of vision, not a replacement: when we have management without vision we see zombie social work. That, for me, is the moral of the tale. And it is a lesson we must learn to put at the heart of reforming social work for children and their families.

**Donald Forrester is Professor in Children and Family Social Work and Director of CASCADE: Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre at Cardiff University.**



### 3. CHILDREN'S SERVICES RE-IMAGINED

Martin Pratt sets out how Camden is reforming its services around a collective vision of resilience

I was pleased to be asked to contribute some thoughts about the future of children's services to this series of essays. To talk about the future is always a challenge, because it suggests that there is a future, fully formed, to be predicted and then discovered. This of course is not the case.

The fact is that whatever shape services to educate, support, develop and protect our children take in the future is the product of a number of system conditions; national policy, legislative change, financial circumstances and events (dear boy). Crucially, services are also the product of local determination, insight, energy and imagination. In circumstances where the available resource is dramatically reduced along with the size of the state, nationally and particularly locally, I would like to argue that an approach based on simply directly providing fewer services in the hope that opportunities to

expand them again will arise in due course, is to misunderstand the magnitude of the change that is taking place. We are not required to simply reduce or reconfigure services, but to fundamentally re-imagine them.

This exercise of imagination cannot be a solitary activity. Although the contribution of individuals is necessary, it is not sufficient. There must be an act of collective imagination in a community, locality or area, an act which has the experiences of local children and young people at the heart of it.

The key question to be grappled with is not *what are things like for children around here?* But, *how might they be?* We must ask, what are the possibilities, and how do we create the conditions where that future becomes more likely? This approach is only feasible if it is informed by insights provided by children, young people and families themselves.

*“We are not required to simply reduce or reconfigure services, but to fundamentally re-imagine them”*

In Camden we have begun the process of re-imagining children’s services in response to our ambition that every child has the best start in life and no one is left behind. To achieve this we have placed those experiences and insights at the centre, and started to build our collective vision based on shared investment in the outcomes we wish to see, rather than the services we have traditionally provided. The key concept for us is resilience. We are aiming to create the conditions, and invest our energy and scarce resources, in those things which will increase the likelihood that children and young people grow up in families which are resilient and able to weather life’s storms. The objective is to support families in ways which builds capacity rather than creates dependence, and which in turn promotes individual resilience in children as they grow up.

Although this is an approach which is place-based, it is not the sole preserve of the Council but one

imagined with our key partners (the Clinical Commissioning Group, Borough Police, schools, colleges, early years providers, Job Centre Plus, and, crucially, local and national voluntary sector organisations). It relies not just on collective ambition and good will, but also on an understanding of the economic imperatives of prevention and early intervention. We use the term ‘investment’ quite deliberately, because this approach is intended to remove duplication, avoid waste and promote ownership of the community and individual outcomes we all wish to see.

An example of our approach at work can be seen in a young people’s mental health and wellbeing programme called Minding the Gap. There is a relatively high prevalence of poor mental health among Camden’s young people. There are also a wide range of highly regarded, in some cases world class, clinical services. It had however become clear that a significant number of young people who needed help were unwilling to

seek it in a clinical setting until they were in crisis. In systems terms this mismatch was preventing access to an intervention at the optimum point, creating failure demand, and therefore waste. In human terms young people's lives were being blighted unnecessarily when effective help was available. The key to change was an understanding of the system from the young people's perspective, as well as their active engagement in co-designing an alternative. To realise the new programme has required both fundamentally re-thinking the commissioning and procurement process, and developing an alternative provider model. It has also meant careful work with young people to retain their involvement throughout the bidding and selection process and in the running of the new service.

The result is surprising; a service delivered through a consortium including local VCS organisations, a national VCS organisation, two NHS foundation Trusts, two clinics and a social enterprise which is funded by Camden Clinical Commissioning Group but commissioned and supported by Camden Council. The model is informed by a deeper

understanding of how help is accessed and includes a physical hub offering universal support, information and guidance, as one route to specialist support at the right time. All parties have had to re-think how they understand and respond to need, as well as how they collaborate and interact with each other.

The service opened in spring 2015, so there is only a preliminary evaluation of its effectiveness, but in the two years from the initial concept, through the insight, co-design and commissioning phases, there have been positive changes for many of the participating young people. For the organisations involved (those forming consortia to bid, the consortium selected to take the project forward, and the commissioners) the challenge has been to really hear and engage with the young people. Responding to the insights they brought and re-imagining a response which required organisational collaboration at a deeper level has also demonstrated how one model of public service reform might be realised.

*“If there is to be a future where an act of collective imagination brings improved resilience for our children, then schools must be central to it”*

A crucial aspect of Camden’s collective vision is the partnership with schools. Although the relationship between local authorities and schools is, at best, contested in the current policy discourse, when considering the future of children’s services the role of the school must be addressed. If there is to be a future where an act of collective imagination brings improved resilience for our children, then schools must be central to it. I certainly wouldn’t advocate a model which reduced schools’ autonomy, but unleashing the full potential of the education system is dependent on creating a collaborative network of learning institutions within, rather than isolated from, a wider support ecology. It is essential that any re-imagined model for children’s services places learning, school life and its importance for their life chances at its centre. It must promote access to, secure and ensure the quality of the education journey from early years to employment. It must also recognise that, especially for children who are vulnerable to poor outcomes,

schools of every type must actively engage in an integrated wider system of support which is locally determined, efficiently structured and unambiguous.

When responding to the *How might they be?* question I referred to early, it is the outcomes for children at risk of harm which is the litmus test. Any system will be judged most acutely and publicly by the way it not just protects children from harm, but actively promotes the welfare of children who are likely to suffer harm. This is the area which requires the greatest act of re-imagination in a world where the state is smaller and must, necessarily, do less.

The stakes are high. The current approach to safeguarding children and care is destined to require resources far beyond those available if the preventive capacity of local partnerships is significantly diminished. To combat this, we must form the broadest local base for investment in prevention and early intervention; mobilise community capacity and social

capital, alongside charitable, business and state resources. Nationally we will also have to determine what the child protection system is for and, where necessary, recalibrate it. It must be able to respond decisively to those who are actually at risk of significant harm, but cannot become the repository for every social ill. Crucially, that part of the system has to have high quality social work capacity which requires a well-trained, well led profession and a proportionate inspection regime.

The current policy and legislative framework, rooted in the Children Act (1989), has in many senses served us well. In spite of some high profile failings we have one of the safest systems in the world, but it was designed primarily to address the protection of children from familial neglect and abuse. Its subsequent application to the very real risks and dangers faced by young people in a community context (gangs, sexual exploitation, radicalisation, serious youth violence included) risks a loss of focus on the core child protection duties and a failure to adequately address those risks, while giving the illusion that “something is being done”.

This, along with the current review of the youth justice system, provides an opportunity to fundamentally rethink how the needs of our most vulnerable young people could be met. A possible future model which is designed to deliver support, protection and an appropriate youth justice response through integrated, multi-disciplinary engagement might reduce complexity and cost and prove more effective. This would of course require changes to the legislative and regulatory framework but, at a time of re-imagining, the possibility should not be dismissed.

So, the future of children’s services at a time when the state is smaller, more devolved, and does less is likely to be more diverse in its mode of delivery and broader in the base it draws on for capacity. However, if we can mobilise new types of local partnerships with determination energy and imagination, informed by the experiences of children, young people and families, we can still aspire to give every child the best start in life.

**Martin Pratt is Director of Children, Schools and Families in the London Borough of Camden.**



## 4. A NEW DEAL FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Donna Hall describes the new model of integration in Wigan that is based on a re-visioning of the relationship between the council and the local community

In Wigan, we want our children and young people to get the best start in life. We want to prepare them to be confident and resilient individuals who are connected to their community and make an effective contribution as responsible citizens. We want to ensure they feel safe and care about their health, education and employment, and their community. At a time when demand for children's services is high and with significant constraints on resources we know we have to develop a new model of delivery both as an Authority as a whole, within children's services and with our partners if we are to meet this vision.

As a Council we are embarking on an ambitious programme of growth and reform, making the Borough a place where people want to live, work, invest and visit. A key element of this is our

emerging Start Well integrated delivery model. This three year programme is underpinned by innovation and creativity, placing greater emphasis on early intervention and prevention with the community and a whole family approach at the heart of activity. We call this our Deal for Children and Young People. If we are to improve outcomes for our young people; now and for generations to come, protecting the most vulnerable whilst meeting increased efficiency savings, we will have to adopt a new way of working. We must integrate our processes and information sharing rules, improve our technology and developing a workforce equipped to meet the ever increasing demand on children's services in a creative and innovative way. This approach will be achieved collectively across agencies and the community.

With a population of 320,000, Wigan is the ninth largest metropolitan authority in England and the second largest in Greater Manchester. Our vision for the Borough can be described through two key ambitions; Confident Place and Confident People. As a Council we are committed to a whole life approach; with an ethos of Start Well, Live Well and Age Well, particularly for those most dependent on public services.

Children and young people under the age of 20 make up 23 per cent of the population and in some areas these children are still not prepared for school life, resulting in a potential lifetime of disadvantage. 89 per cent of our primary schools and 88 per cent of secondary schools are rated as good or outstanding so we know we can improve outcomes if we intervene at the earliest possible opportunity; acknowledging that if we are to improve chances for children through the life course we need to ensure they make the best start in life. In response we are building our Start Well integrated model of delivery with our partners in Health, Education and most importantly the community through

our Deal for Children and Young People programme.

The Deal for Children and Young People is the reform programme for all services for children, young people and families in the borough which sets out Wigan Council's plans to redesign services with our partners. Crucially, alongside the recognition for fundamental redesign of services for children and young people, it commits to an asset based approach and the required workforce reform, new relationship with communities and a substantial shift from intervening and doing to working with and building individual, family and community resilience. It covers every aspect of services for children, including statutory services, and is designed to ensure we achieve the fastest possible improvement to the life chances of our children and young people. It delivers targeted early intervention, new community based services and increasing recognition of the opportunity of deeper, more meaningful conversations (not assessments) with individuals and communities that draw on their strengths and their needs (an asset based approach) – all to reduce

*“In a time of reducing budgets and increased demand we know there is also benefit to be gained from increased collaboration across Authorities”*

demand (and costs) on specialist services and improve outcomes.

At the heart of delivery is the development of our community based Family Hub approach which places emphasis on the community and its assets in meeting the needs of the whole family. We recognize that we need to lift organisational and structural barriers to accessing services and that families should be able to access services within their neighbourhood in a place suitable to them. To this end we aim to co-locate services and utilise the wider community offer. Within this is recognition that with constrained budgets, some services traditionally delivered by the Council may be best placed to be delivered elsewhere.

It is here that we are working to strengthen the role of the third sector; through initiatives such as the Community Investment fund which seeks bids to support our Start Well agenda. We also acknowledge that our relationship with children, young people and

families must change and that we need to embrace genuine shared decision making and co production in integrated service delivery; giving children, young people and their families a greater role in their own interventions; empowering them to take greater responsibility for their own health and wellbeing to achieve a reduction in demand whilst improving outcomes.

We acknowledge that we cannot do this alone and that we need a whole life holistic approach, moving away from dated and fragmented modes of working which have traditionally created silos in delivery across agencies and within the Council. In a time of reducing budgets and increased demand we know there is also benefit to be gained from increased collaboration across Authorities as highlighted in our eight Stage Early Intervention model. This has been adopted by Greater Manchester Authorities and focuses on achieving a step-change improvement in outcomes for children as measured through school readiness. Our Adoption

*“If we are to protect those most at risk, we know we have to be innovative in our response”*

service is now a partnership across three Greater Manchester Authorities, and our Child Sexual Exploitation Innovation project is delivered in partnership.

If we are to protect those most at risk, we know we have to be innovative in our response. One such example is our focus on solving the complex relationship between social care, mental health care and crisis services for adolescents. Services are currently just coping at best and, unless new approaches are developed, this combination has the potential to lead to a rapid downward spiral of confidence, resulting in the worsening of existing poor outcomes for these children, young people and their families. With funding through the Department for Education’s Innovation Fund we are working with Health colleagues to find new and more effective ways of supporting children with complex mental health needs who are at risk of becoming a Child Looked After.

Our vision for Integrated Children’s Services is built on the principles

of public service reform; looking at data and intelligence to target specific cohorts and families; reducing the number of times families have to tell their stories and importantly understanding whole system demand and service use so that we can respond appropriately in a joined up way. Through our programme we want to achieve a significant shift in the balance of investment in services for children and young people from dealing with issues when they have “gone wrong” to effective prevention in communities. There is currently an imbalance in expenditure in this area and to meet the challenges ahead we need to readdress this.

Through our recent Perfect Week (a management tool where we suspended the rules) we tested a new way of working placing the community and the school at the heart of delivery; co locating officers across agencies within the school, sharing data and intelligence and building school capacity. As a universal access point for all children, young people and families they see them every

day and are best placed to meet their needs. Learning during the week indicated a new way of working for the schools, which used their buildings in a different way, out of hours and during school holidays. We identified that universal and targeted services could be provided through the schools which in turn could reduce duplication; increase service uptake, improve targeted action and potentially reducing demand for expensive specialist services. Equipping teachers and schools with the knowledge and wrap around services such as the School Nurse and Health Visitor could assist in more timely interventions and increased Early Help; functions which could be delivered by the schools.

With our partners we know we have to think differently about how we deliver services if we are to meet the needs of all our children and young people whilst protecting the most vulnerable. If we are to meet the challenges of the future we know we have to target our activity on areas of most need; working collaboratively. Partners who sit around the Wigan Safeguarding Children Board

understand that safeguarding the children and young people of the borough is wider than the work of individual agencies. There is a strong commitment to working in partnership to ensure a joined up approach to the serious issues of child sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and neglect and injuries. Alongside that, there is a clear recognition that only by embedding safeguarding practice in both our universal and early intervention and prevention services will begin to stop the flow of acute and complex issues in our children and families.

There is also a strong emphasis on the important role of our communities and our residents in keeping our children and young people safe. Safeguarding is truly everyone's business, and our aim is to equip professionals, third sector, private sector, communities and residents to be able to respond appropriately to signs of risk and vulnerability; principles underpinning our new model of Integrated Delivery.

**Donna Hall is Chief Executive of Wigan Council.**

## 5. REALISING CAPACITY – A FUTURE FOR CHILDREN’S SOCIAL CARE

Chris Wright argues for a rethinking of accountability, governance and who keeps children safe

A couple of years ago on the Today programme, I heard the then leader of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services discussing an early report on the impact of the Troubled Families agenda. She welcomed the report’s suggestion that the programme was having an impact but went on to ask, “What happens when the money runs out?”

I thought at the time, as I do now, she was missing the point. She should have been asking how we can use this emerging evidence to re-imagine the way that wider children’s services are organised and delivered. Now more than ever, there is a need to think boldly, to challenge the status quo, to learn from other sectors, to access wider capacity and to think differently about accountability and governance. In my view, this can be captured by understanding and acting on

three key principles: being more human; unlocking capacity; and accountability through different governance structures.

It is widely understood that continuing cuts to local authority budgets are affecting both the quality and capacity of frontline children’s social care services. At the same time, demand for such services is steadily increasing. There are currently over 69,000 children in care,<sup>21</sup> nearly 400,000 children in need,<sup>22</sup> and 657,000 referrals were made to children’s social care services last year.<sup>23</sup> We hear regularly that local authorities are struggling to cope with growing demand and recent research shows that 80 per cent of social workers are considering leaving the profession altogether because of stress and unmanageable caseloads.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, with limited resource and capacity, social

care services are focused on immediate risks and acute needs. For those who do not quite meet the thresholds for engagement, there appears to be little left to invest in preventative interventions. Failure to address risks and needs with earlier intervention will only increase the likelihood of escalation in both need and cost. All the evidence tells us that wherever possible children and families should be deflected from acute interventions such as care orders to avoid the poor outcomes that we know affect children with experience of the system.

With this in mind, the objectives of any large scale reforms must be to ensure better outcomes are experienced by those children and families who use these services, to reduce demand for costly acute intervention. Crucially, this must be done in a way that is responsive to the changes in national finances.

The term 'austerity' suggests that the reductions in spending on public services we have seen over

the last five years is temporary; it assumes that once the books have been balanced, we will return to more 'normal' levels of government spending. This is a dangerous misconception that has the potential to obscure any vision for meaningful reform. Rather, if we can move away from thinking about austerity, towards understanding the 'new economics', we will have more success developing sustainable solutions that respond to fiscal realities while improving outcomes. While recognising that the new economic environment has brought challenges for the people we support and work with, it is also a catalyst to adapt and do better. Doing more of the same with less is simply not viable. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, we must embrace this opportunity to develop different, less bureaucratic, more efficient and more relational ways to deliver services and provide support. That means challenging the prevailing orthodoxies around how things must be done.

*“we must embrace this opportunity to develop different, less bureaucratic, more efficient and more relational ways to deliver”*

It is nearly five years since Eileen Munro undertook her wide-reaching review of child protection, concluding that a new system must be more “child-centered”. To get there, she argued, “reform of the social work profession should significantly improve outcomes for children and young people by making best use of available evidence about what helps to resolve the problems in children’s lives”<sup>25</sup>.

Five years on, it is worrying how little has changed. The evidence of what works has not been listened to and the result is an over-bureaucratic system that is not fit for the purpose she describes. Services remain too transactional; children are too often passed from professional to professional, with boxes being ticked and paperwork filed. As Munro argues, the current set of arrangements have “come together to create a defensive system that puts so much emphasis on procedures and recording that insufficient attention is given to developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children, young people and families.”<sup>26</sup>

Now is an important opportunity to take stock, revise the approach and refocus priorities on what really makes a difference to children’s lives: relationships. Experience teaches us time and time again that strong and meaningful relationships – built around trust, empathy and intimacy which are honest and provide boundaries where necessary – are the most important factor in transforming children’s lives. “Helping children is a human process. When the bureaucratic aspects of work become too dominant, the heart of the work is lost”<sup>27</sup>, Munro concludes.

To take this point about humanity a step further, it can be argued that social workers are not the only people who can develop and manage these transformative relationships. Focusing on the relational rather than the bureaucratic raises important questions about what makes ‘good’ social work. Of course training, experience, understanding and mitigating risk are all important but so too is being able to relate to a child and their family on a human level, being curious about their experience, showing interest

and care about what happens to them. These skills and qualities are not unique to social workers. If managed properly, a range of different types of practitioners including volunteers can be trained to provide this kind of support.

Catch22's Project Crewe is piloting a new approach; working with children on the cusp of the system, to prevent escalating needs, risks and costs. Its innovative staffing and delivery model combines the expertise of the social work profession with the experience and flexibility of differently qualified frontline staff. Children in Need teams are split into pods managed by social work consultants with non-social work qualified family practitioners and volunteers, matched with children and families. The consultants hold the case, but the day to day work is undertaken by the family practitioners and volunteers.

The model is ultimately designed to free up social workers to manage their high risk caseloads and focuses new and different resources on lower risk children in need who would not otherwise

receive adequate support, preventing their potential escalation into the child protection system. This approach will not only enable Catch22 to deliver statutory services at a lower basic operating cost but will reduce escalations to Child Protection status (where the cost in interventions increases significantly), and it will reduce repeat referrals to Children In Need teams and beyond. We need to see more progressive initiatives like the Department for Education's Innovation Programme, which funds this pilot, to push the boundaries around how services like this can be delivered. The public sector has monopolised children's service delivery for too long, so it is encouraging to see the voluntary sector enabled to take on a greater role in its design, delivery and accountability.

Unlocking capacity in communities must be central to a new approach to delivering children's social care services. In a similar way to how social work practitioners are used in Project Crewe, there is scope to broaden out this approach. Social work has become too professionalised in recent years, and now is a crucial moment

to challenge the entrenched assumptions that these are the only people who can manage risk.

In other public service sectors such as the judiciary, policing and probation, individuals, including volunteers with a range of experience and qualifications are able to play leading roles. The Lay Magistracy is one obvious example. Foster carers, perhaps a more directly relatable example in this context, are entrusted with the full time care of some of the State's most vulnerable children. In his review of the education and qualification of social workers, Sir Martin Narey found, "there are many extremely effective social work practitioners whose work, while being vital, does not require validation through university study, certainly not through the obtaining of a Bachelors or Masters degree. Many such workers are able and effective and hugely valued by their employers. I believe their contribution deserves greater professional recognition."<sup>28</sup>

He goes on to cite the Probation Service as a good example of how differently qualified practitioners can add both value and capacity to the workforce. He says, "the Probation Service has made important progress recently in acknowledging and recognising the skills and professionalism of many of its non-graduate workforce: those able to demonstrate professional competence but who do not possess a degree. [...]" Crucially, while under managerial supervision from senior probation officers, probation service officers are allowed to manage their own cases."<sup>29</sup>

If we recognise that there is less resource available to fund these types of services, then the approach taken by the Probation Service demonstrates how resource can be managed more effectively to build or maintain capacity while responding to financial imperatives. In our own, ultimately unsuccessful, bid to deliver probation services we made a radical argument to deploy volunteers as caseworkers. This wasn't taken lightly; it was informed by experience from other jurisdictions across the world.

If applied to children's social care, Narey advocates, "if those [non-graduate social work assistants] were allowed to manage less complex cases it might help considerably with the pressures of case management and lift some of the burden, in terms of caseload, from graduate social workers."<sup>30</sup>

While new initiatives such as Frontline are endeavouring to change the way graduates are recruited into social work, broadening the pool of potential social workers and combining academic qualification with practice, it does not question the requirement that children's social workers must be social work graduates in order to competently manage cases. Challenging this assumption is crucial if we are to unlock the capacity of a much wider pool of people with the skills and experience to effectively improve children's lives. It is vital to ensure that the children's social care workforce is populated by the highest quality, most experienced practitioners. However, University-backed training such as Frontline, does not guarantee the practical experience and awareness of local context that is necessary to

effectively manage risk. Rather, a combination of differently qualified practitioners including graduates, non-graduates and volunteers would enable children's services team to operate more flexibly, using different resources to manage different levels of risk.

Children's social care is properly concerned with reducing risk and ensuring the safety and well-being of children. Governance structures are (rightly) in place to drive the quality and effectiveness of the help provided and to ensure there is appropriate accountability for the individuals and organisations entrusted with their care. However as Munro observes, "the undue importance given to performance indicators and targets", has resulted in a system in which professionals are too focused on "doing things right" (i.e. following procedure) that they often lack the autonomy to "do the right thing" (i.e. using their experience and judgement to help children).<sup>31</sup> To counter this shift towards transactional social work, we need to reduce central prescription and refocus practitioners on the principles that underpin good practice, affording them the freedom to use their

*“we need both national and local government to create the conditions by which a wider range of providers are enabled to deliver”*

expertise and experience to “do the right thing” for the child they are helping.

When the last government started talking about the Big Society in 2010, it set out an agenda for opening up public services. While this theme will continue to permeate the thinking behind the public service reform agenda, it is important that the voluntary sector and wider civil society are not confined to tokenistic roles, as we have seen in the recent past with reforms to probation for example. Essentially, we need both national and local government to create the conditions by which a wider range of providers are enabled to deliver. That means exploring different, more locally-rooted governance models and different accountability structures that draw on the strengths of all sectors and engage communities but which are also rigorous in holding providers to account for the effectiveness of the outcomes they deliver.

If we are to think more creatively about unlocking capacity and making the most of the resources within communities, this should not be limited to the frontline. It should be extended to all levels of governance and accountability. The emergence of Free Schools, Academies and NHS Foundation Trusts over the last few years and more recently the emergence of Children’s Trusts in Doncaster and Slough demonstrates how more flexible governance has enabled greater innovation in the design and delivery of education, health and social care services while still maintaining high standards and accountability. These types of governance structures could be more widely used, informing new ways of organising and delivering children’s services. In the United States, ‘collective impact’ programmes are gaining traction: developing strong evidence of how such programmes are transforming not just individual children’s lives but whole communities. The Collective Impact Forum (CIF)<sup>32</sup> defines collective impact as:

*“Collective impact brings people together, in a structured way to achieve social change. It starts with a common agenda. [...] It establishes shared measurement. That means agreeing to track progress in the same way, which allows for continuous improvement. It fosters mutually reinforcing activities, [...] coordinating collective efforts to maximize the end result. It encourages continuous communication. That means building trust and relationships among all participants. And it has a strong backbone. That means having a team dedicated to orchestrating the work of the group. All of these conditions together can produce extraordinary results.”<sup>33</sup>*

The ‘backbone’ organisation is key, in that it draws in wide ranging expertise including from professionals, practitioners and members of the community and because participants are united behind a shared vision, the drive towards improved outcomes is paramount. In the UK, some progressive local authorities are also testing out this method. The West London Zone (WLZ) “is a partnership of organizations and

individuals working together to support children and young people across three square miles of south Brent, north Hammersmith, north Kensington and north Westminster.” This collective impact programme describes its vision as “a community where every child, from any background, lands in adulthood safe, happy and healthy”<sup>34</sup>. While it is too early to assess the success of WLZ, we should watch closely as there will be important lessons to be learned about how we could apply collective impact approaches to children’s services. That is not to say collective impact is the singular solution to all the challenges facing children’s social care delivery, but it does illuminate the value of innovation and pushing boundaries.

For too long, the statutory framework and other historic systems have obstructed innovation and in doing so have slowed any improvements in outcomes. Those local authorities that have been able to innovate are already seeing improvements. Hackney Council’s Reclaiming Social Work, for example, has cut the cost of children’s social care by 4.97 per cent, according to an

independent evaluation by Munro. The savings were attributed in part to a 30 per cent fall in the number of looked-after children.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly Catch22's Project Crewe in Cheshire East will improve outcomes, reduce repeat referrals and save on operating costs for the local authority. While it is encouraging that the Department for Education's Innovation Programme has invested in this innovative project, it is yet to be seen whether the innovations being delivered here will be rolled out more widely if the project is successful.

Perhaps the Crewe model is not suitable for all local contexts, but it certainly demonstrates that there is appetite among some commissioners for different solutions to stubborn problems. We must build on this and do more to encourage local authorities to try something different. In order to do so, there must be a drive from government to encourage further innovation by removing some of the barriers that prevent applying different models. Crucially, this includes challenging the way the regulator operates.

Speaking recently about broader public service reform<sup>36</sup>, the Prime Minister said it was time to "break monopolies and bring in new ways of doing things". It could be argued that the State has had a monopoly on this market for too long and it is now time to challenge what Cameron described as "tolerance of state failure". The social and economic costs of this failure is frequently borne by the most vulnerable in society and Cameron points to children in care as a priority area in which we must seek to innovate and improve.

We are not talking about first generation outsourcing here. It is too limiting a concept and suggests that cost saving is the primary driver. What we are talking about, and what we must all strive for, is a more flexible framework for delivery and commissioning. It must enable innovation alongside a radically new approach to drawing in the range of resources available with the goal of delivering the best possible outcomes for children and families.

**Chris Wright is Chief Executive of Catch22.**

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## 6. THE KEY TO SUCCESS – HIGH CALIBRE, WELL TRAINED SOCIAL WORKERS

Sir Martin Narey discusses reforms to social work recruitment, training and education

The challenges facing Children's Services in the next few years, not least financial, will mean that more than ever before, social workers will need to be extraordinarily effective to protect vulnerable and abused children. They will need to be of high calibre, well trained – particularly at University - and their work will have to be consistently informed by evidence.

There are already very many social workers who are of high calibre, who have been well trained, and whose grasp and adherence to evidence is not in question. But, as I discovered when I reviewed standards of education for children's social workers in 2014 that is not always the case.

My suspicions about the variability of children's social workers were first aroused when

I was running Barnardo's, the UK's biggest children's charity. When I arrived in 2005 I was soon introduced to the prevailing philosophy about child neglect which suggested that public care should be avoided at almost any cost and that managed neglect in the home was better for children than care. What I discovered of course was that the research didn't support that, indeed that research demonstrated that overall care made things a little better for neglected children. As Professor Donald Forrester and others put it in 2010, "research studies consistently found that children entering care tended to have serious problems but that in general their welfare improved over time... This has important policy implications. Most significantly it suggests that attempts to reduce the use of public care are misguided and may place more children at risk of serious harm."

Later, when I left Barnardo's and was commissioned by The Times to write about adoption, I was continually struck at the gulf between some professional assertions and what the research suggested. And, it has to be said, I was troubled by the apparent inability of more than a few social workers to write cogently and persuasively. The standard of numerous adopter assessment reports which I saw going to Adoption Panels was sometimes very good. But more often, inordinately long submissions were, analytically, terribly weak.

So, in 2013, Michael Gove asked me to review standards of education for children's social workers (the Department of Health commissioned their own review - of the adult field - a few months later). I discovered huge and unjustified variability in the curriculum followed by students; evidence of the recruitment of too many students of limited calibre; and grave inadequacies in the quality control of University education, primarily by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Additionally, I found too many students graduating

without good enough placement experience, with some never having exposure to child protection work within a local authority. Those same students often found it difficult, if not impossible to gain employment. As I discovered in researching my report, 13 per cent of local authorities had a social worker vacancy rate of over 20 per cent and 50 per cent had a vacancy rate of over 10 per cent while, simultaneously 27 per cent of newly qualified social workers in England were unemployed. That told its own story about the variability in the quality of new graduates.

I argued for Universities to be guided by a curriculum prescribed by the Chief Social Worker for children; greater specialisation at University, with those entering social work with children primarily prepared for that task; and much greater scrutiny of standards at higher education institutions.

With a few exceptions, academic opposition to the recommendations in my report was initially profound. This despite much of what I argued reflecting earlier positions taken by academic bodies. On one of the key issues – my assertion that

too many students of inadequate calibre were entering social work courses, and that some good students might be discouraged from studying a subject for which entry was so easy - the Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) had told a Select Committee in 2009 that “an issue, which has been of concern to members of the APSW, concerns the variability of the academic requirements for entering degree programmes. There are concerns that students with good A Level grades are not applying for courses and that entry requirements for some programmes are very low”.

Some critics argued that the calibre issue had been addressed through the raising of the minimum UCAS points requirement for entering a social work undergraduate programme. But I found two problems with that optimistic view. The first was that I found that some Universities abandoned the prescribed minimum points requirement – modest as it was – particularly during UCAS clearing. The second problem, more substantial, was that only a minority of students entering undergraduate programmes had

any A levels at all, instead entering through so called Access Courses. Here again, APSW – if somewhat guardedly – shared their anxieties with the Select Committee telling them “we note the difficulties there appear to be in assessing the quality of Access programmes or the quality of a student’s overall performance on Access courses”.

Because of those sentiments, publicly expressed, but also because of what I’d heard privately from numerous academics, I had hoped for more engagement from Universities. In truth, I think the many very good Universities, who recruit high calibre students and provide them with a high quality education, needed to be braver in acknowledging that standards elsewhere were variable and that more robust inspection processes might be needed. Misplaced loyalty has obscured the reality that some Universities do a very good job. My consistent experience has been that, in private discussion, academics have been considerably more critical of things than they have been in any public utterances. Almost every academic with whom I had private conversations shared with me their concerns at the over

recruitment of students and ease of entry at some Universities. And some have repeated that, and other concerns, since. But rarely publicly.

I offered an opportunity for academics to play a major role in the quality control of university social work education, by recommending a much greater role for the College of Social Work in auditing the quality of university education. I recommended that their endorsement scheme, suitably improved, should replace the terribly weak HCPC process. And, in suggesting that the College should also take on HCPC's role in the registration of social workers, I was providing the means for the College to assume financial independence. But the opportunities weren't grasped and the College – very sadly – became insolvent and had to close a year later.

My sense has been that in recent years, the debate around social work education has been strangled by consensus. Through the Social Work Reform Board this has led to some important improvements but has also left some big issues unaddressed.

I sought to ventilate once again important views which had, I felt, been ignored. For example, although my proposal that we should allow more specialisation in the degree was treated as if it was both revolutionary and dangerous, I was echoing Lord Laming's view. If anyone should have been listened to in recent years it is Herbert Laming. He could not have been clearer when he said in 2009 "at the heart of the difficulty in preparing social workers through a degree course is that, without an opportunity to specialise in child protection work or even in children's social work, students are covering too much ground without learning the skills and knowledge to support any particular client group well... There are few placements offered in children's services and fewer still at the complex end of child protection or children 'in need'. It is currently possible to qualify as a social worker without any experience of child protection, or even of working within a local authority, and to be holding a full caseload of child protection cases immediately upon appointment." Now, two years later the Department for Education has made substantial progress.

Crucially, the Chief Social Worker for Children has consulted on and now published a key knowledge and skills statement. With commendable brevity, it offers dramatically more clarity about what a children's social worker needs to learn at University than the plethora of documents, amounting to hundreds of pages, produced by HCPC. Teaching partnerships launched by the Department for Education are now bringing together Universities and social work employers and we can expect graduates emerging from those Universities to have followed a more relevant curriculum, and to have had both their placement experiences in a statutory children's setting.

The success of the partnership approach has already been demonstrated by the Step Up To Social Work initiative which for three years now has brought in bright graduates (with at least an upper second) into a shortened post graduate qualifying programme. More recently, Frontline, modeled initially on the Teach First initiative has put two cohorts of extremely impressive graduates through even more

intensive preparation, putting them to work in local authorities within weeks. Frontline has yet to be formally assessed. But having spent time with the participants, and spoken extensively to employers of their early experience of the Frontline students, I shall be astonished if the assessment is other than very positive.

Things have improved. Isabelle Trowler's appointment as Chief Social Worker for Children has been a huge success and she has driven the reforms forward. But there is much more yet to be done, not least on the quality assurance of Universities. But the quality of social work education is, once again, in the ascendancy and we can be confident in the ability and potential of so many of those who are now entering this remarkable profession.

**Sir Martin Narey is an adviser to government and former CEO of Barnardo's.**

## 7. LESSONS FROM ROTHERHAM AND MY WORK WITH TROUBLED FAMILIES

Louise Casey reflects on her recent work concluding that a change in mind-set across public services is key to keeping children safe

When thinking about children's services in recent months my views have been shaped by two hugely significant events for me in the past year. In their own ways they have highlighted both some of the best and some of the worst practices I have seen in my years of public service. As ever, I and possibly we, have much to learn from both and the lessons are often interconnected.

To begin with, the worst. In February 2015 I concluded an inspection and published a report on Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and its failings over child sexual exploitation, itself a follow up to the findings of Professor Alexis Jay in August 2014. That inspections findings included:

- a local authority that left children's services to their own devices, rather than considering this most primary of duties to be a corporate priority across the whole council, and
- an ostensibly impressive set of systems and structures that effectively masked rather than effectively managed widespread failure on the frontline, and
- a culture where victims as young as 12 of horrific sexual violence were treated as consenting adults or – worse still – initiators of their own abuse, rather than the most vulnerable of children who needed significant protection, regardless of whether this fit with traditional models of social work or assessments of risk.

I am always the first to say that Rotherham was neither the norm in local government nor close to it – and thank goodness for that. But it shines a light on where we are all still in danger of failing and perhaps have done in the past. Child sexual exploitation and our response to it holds up a mirror to the inadequacy of our 'corporate

parenting’, the dominance of a children’s social care model blinkered to wider issues and perhaps blinkered to challenge and change. Fundamentally, it exposes how across all of our public services we have at times treated the most vulnerable in our care.

But for all the bad practices that we found in Rotherham, it’s important to note that there was some excellent work and many good people there too. The best of both were found in the former ‘Risky Business’ outreach service that was closed by the Council in 2011. The workers there were everything we would want public servants to be: motivated to do the right thing; engaging with families on a level that worked for the users, not the providers, of a service; and willing not just to refer onwards but to challenge other parts of the system when they could see they were failing children and young people.

In many ways they reminded me of the workers at the centre of the more optimistic half of my year. As of May 2015 we had completed the first phase of the Troubled Families Programme, which has helped to turn around the lives of almost 117,000 of the most disadvantaged

families in England. This does not mean that they are now all model citizens, or indeed that everything about that programme was right, but that children are back in school where they were previously truant or excluded, youth crime and anti-social behaviour in these families have been cut, adults are in many cases in work or better able to look for work, and the early signs are that money has been saved that can be reinvested elsewhere. These are all positive steps.

There are many factors behind this. In my mind they are less to do with national policy and more about the leadership shown by local government in grasping the opportunity, the brilliance of the frontline workers and the role of the families themselves in being willing to change. But while these families and this programme still have a long way to go, the success so far for me has mostly been about a change in our collective mind-set and a determination that we can do something about this: families written off as helpless and hopeless can be helped and can have hope that change is possible.

Central to that for me has been a change of mind-set on the frontline

too. The best family intervention workers at the heart of the Troubled Families programme are human beings who the families can relate to, earning their trust by being unafraid to tell it like it is, as well as offer practical help and advice.

They see the family as a whole and work on all of its problems, rather than individual agencies dealing with the individual problems of individual members, understanding that a mum is less able to get her kids to school if she herself is depressed for instance. At its essence is the mantra – coined in Sheffield – of ‘one worker, one family, one plan’ with clear goals and incentives to change.

By getting in through the front door of a home they get to the root causes of problems rather than only the presenting need; the violence in the home for example as well as its symptomatic misbehaviour at school. But they are persistent and assertive in challenging families to change too, as well as willing to challenge the agencies that work with them when necessary, cutting through the structures, systems and red tape that too often leave us all hidebound in inaction and

bureaucracy. We had to back them in doing what they needed and wanted to do.

None of this is revolutionary. It is very often common sense. But it has perhaps been too easily lost in a world of ‘multi-agency meetings’ rather than effective action to change real people’s lives.

In Rotherham, the Local Safeguarding Children Board, as is common, had all the right people around the table; the local authority, police, health and voluntary sectors and it was independently chaired. On paper it looked strong, but in practice it was weak. It did not lead, did not challenge and did not make enough impact upon the services to abused children and those at risk of abuse that it should have been protecting.

I look across central and local government and sometimes wonder if there aren’t lessons for all of us here too, if we’ve not got caught up in too much inaction and bureaucracy ourselves. Over several decades now we have revised those structures and systems without fundamentally challenging the status quo. Safeguarding children from harm should not be left only

to social workers who are at full stretch if not overstretched already. It's a core responsibility of everyone in public service, from the licensing of the taxis to the houses that children live in to the schools they do or don't turn up to. That has been my personal lesson from the Rotherham Inspection.

Children's services – like every service – can and must improve. In my view it must be a brilliant and focused 999 service, a rapid and decisive SWAT team for when all else fails. So reform of child protection is a reform not of social work alone but of the public sector as a whole. It affects every part of and all of us in public service – our reputation should be built on how we protect the most vulnerable.

The first Troubled Families programme was less than perfect and we've taken learning and lessons from it into account in the expanded programme. But it did provide an example of proactive, challenging and genuinely multi-agency work that can be applied elsewhere. It is now being scaled up to be able to deal with a wider range of problems that reflects the breadth of issues we know the most vulnerable families have (an

average of nine serious problems each including drugs and alcohol, domestic violence and health and mental health concerns on top of our original focus on education, crime and worklessness).

We need to continue to reform services to so that these families are effectively helped to function successfully. And when we cannot help them do that, we must be prepared to act decisively to take those children into a care system that works.

Put like that it sounds simple, which of course it is not. Pressure on scarce resources will not let up any time soon. Crises and tragedies will always regrettably happen. But neither is it impossible to improve. The frontline workers in the Troubled Families programme have shown me that, and slowly but surely I am confident Rotherham will do too. From both I have learned that more than anything change is about a mind-set, a collective will and a willingness to put vulnerable people first in everything we do.

**Louise Casey is a Director General at the Department for Communities and Local Government.**



## 8. PUTTING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AT THE HEART OF SERVICES

Michael Little argues that the importance of connection is key to how services must operate

I read the exam question as ‘how will children’s services change in the future?’ or ‘how do I think they should change?’ Most prediction is folly. If I were a betting man I would put my money on children’s services being much the same in 2025 as they are now, only less of them. There lies the road to depression and unemployment, so let’s see if I can come up with something more inviting.

At the moment I spend most of my time on the road talking to elected members and senior officials in local authorities looking for ways out of the imposed fiscal crisis. I generally give four options.<sup>37</sup> Here I will concentrate on one, the potential of (for want of a better descriptor) relational social policy.

But first the backdrop. There are three compelling catalysts for change. First is what I call faux austerity, fiscal policies that talk

up deficit reduction but allow the deficit to rise. It enhances the power of those with money and further constrains those that have little. The stated policy is to reduce the proportion of government expenditure on public services to 35 per cent by 2020. The goal might be fantasy, but core children’s services will not escape the rhetoric.

Second, the dominant operating model of the last three decades, the outcome paradigm, is currently running out of steam. The focus on cause before condition, the consequential interest in prevention and early intervention, the drive to find things that work and, in the systems context, the whip hand of outputs demanding more accountability has done a lot of good but in recent years talk has decreasingly translated into action.

*“Child abuse is distributed across society, reaching all classes and ethnicities but child protection remains narrowly focused on a small proportion of highly disadvantaged people”*

Third is the gap between service and need. It is foolhardy to think that we can reduce severe familial violence against children (five in every 100 children) by subjecting three in 1,000 primarily poor children to a lot of surveillance and precious little intervention. Child abuse is distributed across society, reaching all classes and ethnicities but child protection remains narrowly focused on a small proportion of highly disadvantaged people who may or may not have maltreated their offspring.

There are alternative visions for children’s services. One comes from the idea of putting more store in human relationships. It is a slippery concept. It is hard to find anybody against relationships. But it tends to mean all things to all men. For some, it is simply a riposte to things they don’t like about the orthodoxy. Its not about evidence, it’s about relationships, they say. Or its not about targets, accountability, systems, or inspections, it’s about relationships.

Let’s put to one side the reactionary response. In positive terms what does it mean to put relationships at the heart of children’s services? First it requires an ordered set of ideas about how one person might help another without recourse to a formal state sponsored intervention (or how the person helping might aid the helped to get more out of an intervention). It goes something like: a strong relationship between helper and helped gets the helped to think differently. It produces cognitive change. Its get kids thinking that they don’t *have* to bunk off school, take drugs, sofa surf and so on. It depends on agency, on the child or young person understanding their capability for change and, as a result, making different life decisions. What people in need of help think and do once again has currency.

Second, the ideas extend into the way public systems relate to each other, and to the way systems collectively relate to civil society, to families, neighbourhoods, informal

networks in communities and the non-state-contracted voluntary sector. Public systems have put a lot of effort into working out how to buy civil society resources to achieve their own ends. Now they must entertain the possibility of engaging with civil society to figure out how to achieve mutually agreed ends.

So far, so abstract. What does it really mean to people facing significant challenges in their lives? In our recent book *Bringing Everything I Am Into One Place* we give dozens of examples such as the start-up charity Safe Families finding community volunteers to support children who would otherwise be taken into care (including sheltering the children overnight); methods like Circles to bring people together in a community for fun and then not being surprised when they help each other in times of need; Relational Schools to engineer feedback loops from students to teachers so that the latter relate better to the former (and so help pupils express their gifts and talents); a new deal between council and citizens, as in Wigan (see chapter four), to make clear

what each can do in the service of more fulfilled lives.

I could fill the rest of the article with other illustrations. What do they say about how children's services may evolve?

The stated purpose of children's services in the last three decades has become better outcomes. The practical manifestation of this goal became better outputs. In the relational world it is connection, making sure more people have the access they need to people who can help them<sup>38</sup>.

It follows that public services will begin to acknowledge that they do not exist to sort out people's problems, that family members, people next door, people who have experienced similar difficulties might be better placed to do that. Implicit is a loss of control and a preparedness to take risks. Allowing volunteers to take the role of foster parents does not come easy to many public service leaders, and it demands a new way of thinking from government inspectors. The state's voice must be muted when citizens agree to sort out their own problems.

*“The state’s voice must be muted when citizens agree to sort out their own problems”*

The nature of help is going to change. Ordinary people do not think in terms of intervention. To use the words of American social worker Brené Brown they ‘lean in’ and listen. They are not encumbered by training or the constraints of public systems so they tend to be direct, say what they mean, exuding what we called in the *Bringing Everything I Am* book a ‘hard empathy’. There is no arm around the shoulder indicating that it will all be alright. We might reasonably expect these attitudes to seep into the professions.

Talking of which, it is widely acknowledged that some practitioners are better at displaying this hard empathy than others, which may translate into different recruitment practices, or new ways of encouraging the best staff to stick around.

There might also be space for recovering ordinary human dignity. In the last three decades society has been getting stuck in and sorting out failing schools, turning around troubled families, and

coming down hard on paedophiles, most publicly the older celebrities among their midst. But failing schools are full of teachers who entered the profession to change the lives of children. Troubled families comprise mums, dads and children who amount to more than their failure to go to school, find work and get along with their neighbours. Paedophiles? Can we bring ourselves to talk about their humanity? At Project Dunkelfeld in Germany they have found a way to do so, and it offers one realistic alternative to the current hopeless hegemony of detect, demonise, detain and, most fancifully, deter.

Writing about this stuff without descending into cant is not easy. Helping public systems translate the ideas into policy and practice is harder still. But travelling around the country I am tapping into many rich veins of potential innovation, all of which imply a state that takes more risks.

So people are thinking hard about who does the work. In particular, local authorities are beginning to

push the boundaries of what a volunteer can do, and what work requires professional intervention.

Others are beginning to explore what can be done to relieve civil society organisations from the shackles of sham measurement and evaluation. If the goal is to connect more people, why not count the number connected instead of wrapping a simple idea up in an academic gown of a logic model?

Many would like to see what life was like without the heavy hand of inspection, of children's centres, of schools, of local authority children's services, decoupling from the roller-coaster of bad inspection, staff flight, consumer wariness and consequent change of leadership that urges a risk aversion hardly

tenable in times of austerity. There is no silver bullet in this relational approach. To some extent it is new and untested, and by another measure it is as old as the hills. It has a tendency to romanticise social responses to human suffering. As any decent social worker knows, their world comprises difficult people, some who routinely beat up their partners, others who sexually abuse their children, and plenty who simply cannot ensure their offspring are fed, clothed and sheltered. There are times when the state must intervene, but there are many more times when the state can best support civil society to resolve a problem or, better still stay out of the way altogether.

**Michael Little is Co-Director of the Dartington Social Research Unit.**

#### NOTES

- 37 The other three options are: (i) reducing the volume of high end provision, such as children in foster care, as a mechanism to protect and boost prevention budgets; (ii) public health, population wide, curve shifting interventions like the building of collective efficacy across communities; and (iii) harnessing the power of civil society in the design, implementation and governance of place based reform.
- 38 It would be a mistake to see outcomes and connection as competitors. It is possible and desirable to have: outcomes without connection -e.g. fluoride in the water to prevent tooth decay- and connection without outcomes - e.g. a hospice for the terminally ill. But most outcomes depend on connection, and most connection produces an outcome, albeit of the kind that may be difficult to measure.

## 9. THE INSANITY OF COMPETITIVE MARKETS

Kathy Evans makes the case for radical reform to how services are commissioned and delivered

**“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”**

**Albert Einstein**

Children’s services are not alone in being described as a public marketplace, nor are they alone in facing profound funding challenges and demands for reform. In some areas of public service, like Probation and the Work Programme, the onset of outsourcing is a relatively recent development.

In the children, young people and families’ service sector, however, a ‘mixed economy’ of public, voluntary and private organisations has been familiar for over a century. Never in our national history has there been a time when the state ran all children’s homes, all schools or all nurseries. Many children’s services, including of course child protection social work itself, were first conducted and funded by charities.

In children’s services the boundaries between public and voluntary endeavour have always been blurry. The same kind of family services provided by a local charity in one community might be run by the local authority in another, without there being any major ideological disagreement over who should provide.

Over the last 30 years or so we have increasingly seen that diverse mix of agencies involved in supporting and caring for children re-framed as a ‘competitive marketplace’. Competitive tendering for highly specified and increasingly complex short term contracts has become the ubiquitous preference of the public service procurement industry, while discretionary grants to invest in smaller community groups have gone wildly, and inexplicably, out of fashion. Some former public sector practitioners have faced not just one but many TUPE transfers to new employers over

the last 10 years, just to keep doing the same job in the same community. These 'marketising' trends were already well established in children's services long before the credit crunch and the subsequent austerity policies of the Coalition government.

As the membership body for children's charities, Children England has observed and documented a worsening pattern of essential support services for children spending disproportionate and too-often wasted amounts of money, time and effort on competing with each other to do the same thing, while levels of unmet need increase. Even worse, too many contract awards are weighted to the cheapest bidder rather than giving equal or greater weight to quality and social value. Local authorities often feel they have little choice in this, with annual budget uncertainty, severe cuts from Whitehall year after year, and increasing service demand to which their budgets must stretch.

With only one or two years' worth of contracts on offer before re-tendering, even the best service provider would struggle to make a demonstrable impact on real outcomes for children before being asked to compete – and to reduce cost – yet again. These 'ever decreasing circles' of the contracting merry-go-round seem primarily to serve an interest in seeing competitive market mechanisms flourish, rather than ensuring that increasingly scarce public money gets as quickly and efficiently as possible to where it is most needed and could have most impact.

If we could put fluorescent markers on every taxpayer and charity pound being spent purely on the processes of market competition then we might all be able to see more clearly the sheer scale of resources being drawn away from the front line of children's services. In just one local area we analysed for our Perfect Storms study in 2012, and in one contracting exercise alone, we know that the costs of the competitive process across the council and just five of the bidders was at least £1 million.

*“We must collectively agree to suspend competition as the primary means of decision-making, and knuckle down to sharing power, money and ideas”*

That’s before a single penny was spent on delivering the resulting contracted services.

We do not believe that radical systemic and financial reform for children’s services can possibly be achieved by outsourcing the last remaining public functions, like child protection services. We believe that market competition has been eroding our collective resources and our sense of common cause across the children’s public and voluntary sectors for far too long. By rewarding ‘business success’ competitive markets actually entrench rather than challenge existing business models, stifling our collective imagination to conceive of radical alternatives. And even if there are still a number of competitors for many contracts issued today, the prospects of there being anywhere near as many remaining ‘in business’ and willing to compete over the medium term are slim.

Individual organisations can’t change competitive marketplaces by simply dropping out of them.

We must collectively agree to suspend competition as the primary means of decision-making, and knuckle down to sharing power, money and ideas. Firstly, this means collaborating rather than competing. The development of bidding consortia and other creative partnerships between multiple different services and organisations over recent years has been founded on recognition that collaboration can be a powerful way to make the most of resources on offer. Just as importantly they can be a vehicle for designing effective service delivery and coordination of different specialists, improving one of the most enduring and costly problems for children with multiple needs.

Provider partnerships should be, however, only the beginning of exploring the potential for collaborative ways forward.

What about collaborative funding? Just imagine if, instead of issuing an invitation to tender for a small and finite amount of public money, and then paying a procurement firm to run an expensive competition for winning it, that total amount of public funds were put on an open community table, and a wide range of trusts, foundations, charities and voluntary groups added to it with their voluntary income and charitable grants.

Imagine all organisations offered creative use of their buildings and premises, the skills and passions of their personnel, their supporters and volunteers. Imagine we then added the goodwill and philanthropy of local people and businesses, and together we aimed to solve the conundrum of how to make all of those resources and efforts really work together, led by the imaginations and mind-bending creativity of children and young people themselves. We believe that would be a far greater asset base from which to think seriously and entrepreneurially about making every penny and every child count.

Secondly, let's look beyond the allocation and management of expenditure, to look creatively and long term at assets, public ownership and democratic control. In our political economy public ownership of services, land and other collective resources is understood to be accountable to citizens through the ballot box. The only citizens who rely on good public services, but who are excluded from that democratic accountability mechanism, are children and young people. On current demographic projections under 18 year-olds stand to become less than 20 per cent of a rapidly ageing population in the next decade, competing not only for resources and political priority, but without political voice of their own.

Professional services need money to be able to do what they are there to do for children; commissioners and charitable trusts have money to spend; that money gets allocated to services with strings and targets that are decided upon by officials. This is the power structure of service commissioning, and the child at the bottom is powerless. If

children want to see the money spent and services organised a different way from officials, parents or the government, how can their views ever carry their own weight by comparison to the power of money and electoral mandate?

The emergence of some very new ‘Youth Cooperatives’ in a small number of areas (so far) is an exciting start in practically giving children and young people their own real ownership and control over the resources, activities and services they use. Children England, with support from the Lankelly Chase Foundation is just embarking on the financial, legal and policy development of our idea for local ‘child-owned’ trusts, using a hybrid of charitable and inheritance trust law, and building on the many major advances in youth democracy and voice over recent years.

Our idea is only an idea so far – an attempt to think really differently about assets, money, power and leadership in children services, potentially giving

children an unprecedented level of control over their communities’ resources. It may not work, of course. And there may be many other great ideas that emerge as potential transformational systems change for children. But we must have the courage to try some big bold new ideas if we are to stop the insanity of doing the same things as we have been doing for decades, and expecting a different result. Outsourcing and market competition really offer no solutions for the future of children’s services. They are part of the problematic past that we must move away from.

**Kathy Evans is Chief Executive of Children England.**

# CONCLUSION

Enver Solomon and Anna Feuchtwang set out some key themes to reflect on

In January the government set out its vision for children’s social care reform stating its ambition to “radically reform the children’s social care system, putting practice excellence and achieving more for the children we serve at its heart.” It set out three areas for reform:

- ‘First, people and leadership – bringing the best people into the profession, and giving them the right knowledge and skills for the incredibly challenging but hugely rewarding work we expect them to do, and developing leaders equipped to nurture practice excellence.
- Second, practice and systems – creating the right environment for excellent practice and innovation to flourish.
- Third, governance and accountability – making sure that what we are doing is working, using data to show us strengths and weaknesses

in the system, and developing innovative new organisational models with the potential to radically improve services.”<sup>39</sup>

The stage is now set for a period of great change. Generally, the conclusion of publications like this would set out a number of recommendations under the three areas that the government focuses on. However, given the purpose of this book is to reflect and take stock we think there is greater value drawing out a series of important points and themes for reflection that can frame discussions about the future and shape how the reforms are taken forward.

## AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

The nature of the abuse and harm that children face is undoubtedly different today than it was in the past. At the same time the level of need has not diminished. The resources available while certainly substantial (children’s services cost the taxpayer around

*“a clear vision is required which sets out the fundamental purpose of children’s services”*

£6 billion each year) are not likely to increase given the Treasury’s limits on public expenditure. This inevitably creates great challenges. The Association of Directors of Children’s Services has talked of a perfect storm of new demands; less overall resource, expectations of higher standards and having to take forward new ways of working. The risk in their view is that the storm develops into a hurricane.

An honest assessment of the current predicament and what it means is needed to create a shared commitment to reform. Without this, any reform programme risks being met by a combination of cynicism from those who feel the weight of the challenge on their shoulders and outright opposition from those who feel their frontline experience is ignored. What’s more, without chapter one’s “spirit of joint endeavour” a damaging culture of blame could take hold, leading to division and conflict.

## A COHERENT VISION

A strong message from the contributions in this book is that a clear vision is required which sets out the fundamental purpose of children’s services. This needs to be more than a narrative of the technical solutions that are being proposed. Instead it should be a strong statement of the primary aims and outcomes that everybody working to keep children safe can focus on. Suggestions set out by contributors include the importance of resilience, relationships, children’s agency and voice and prevention.

Without a vision of this sort there is a risk that any attempt at reform will repeat the story of the past focusing simply on what Donald Forrester refers to as “technical attempts at reform.” As he states in chapter two “this is not to say effective management is unimportant: it is absolutely crucial. But management should be the servant of vision, not a lifeless replacement.” In the

absence of this, arguably, there is no shared sense of universal values and aims for children's services which can inspire and revolutionise practice.

## REVIEWING THE STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

It's nearly 30 years since the 1989 Children act was passed. Since it was introduced there have been numerous more acts – at least ten – which have reformed the original legislation. Consequently statutory regulation has grown in a somewhat piecemeal fashion. Given the multiple reforms it's not surprising that many practitioners find the legislative framework complicated and confusing. Perhaps now is the time to revisit the 1989 Act, to ensure it provides clarity and vision of purpose required to meet the needs of children now and into the future.

The risks children face today – not least as a result of changes in technology - are very different

from three decades ago when the legislation was created. Equally, local authorities face a range of resource and capacity issues in meeting the statutory duties, particularly the Children in Need provisions in section 17 of the Act. The commissioning and regulatory frameworks that have grown from the Act are not as effective as they should be in delivering quality services, as highlighted by Chris Wright in chapter five and Kathy Evans in chapter nine. Root and branch reviews are not popular but a clear theme from the essays is that there are some legitimate questions to be asked about whether or not the statutory duties that local authorities have under the Act and the associated regulatory and commissioning frameworks need to be fundamentally reviewed.

## WHO KEEPS CHILDREN SAFE?

Safeguarding is everybody's business has become something of a mantra following the

*“Perhaps now is the time to revisit the 1989 Act, to ensure it provides clarity and vision of purpose required to meet the needs of children now and into the future”*

*“there needs to be more flexibility and creativity in thinking how non-qualified social work staff and volunteers can be deployed to work in different types of teams”*

scandals of the past. There are 27,000 locally employed child and family social workers at the forefront of keeping children safe from abuse and harm. Led by a Chief Social Worker, the government has embarked on an ambitious programme to reform their professional skills and competencies. But is there a much wider resource of professionals and non-professionals that have an equally important role to play in keeping children safe?

Our contributors certainly believe so. In fact the consensus is that there needs to be more flexibility and creativity in thinking how non-qualified social work staff and volunteers can be deployed to work in different types of teams. Even more radical is the suggestion that

children’s services should do much more to engage with their local communities and see the people in those communities as a resource that can be drawn on to work alongside and support qualified professionals. This involves ceding control. It means thinking of different models of services that question the status quo, such as chapter eight’s example of community volunteers supporting children who would otherwise be taken into care. It also requires a different conceptualization of the notion of the children’s workforce and a rethink of the statutory functions that sit with children and family social workers.

### **CO-PRODUCTION OF SERVICES**

A number of the contributions highlight the importance of seeking solutions collaboratively

*“A number of the contributions highlight the importance of seeking solutions collaboratively with the children, young people and families that services are intended to support”*

*“There need to be organized means of enabling authorities and non-statutory providers to come together to share the work they are doing”*

with the children, young people and families that services are intended to support. This notion of co-production has been talked about a lot in recent years and attempts have been made to apply it in a variety of ways across both health and social care. It is a fundamentally different approach. Instead of imposing solutions on communities or service users it works to empower them to come up with their own solutions to the problems they face.

For children’s services this requires a dramatic change in thinking. It means not simply engaging with their local communities to ask for their views and opinions but actively giving them the capacity to work alongside practitioners and decision makers to achieve mutually agreed solutions. Ultimately it means a radical reappraisal of how day to day work is carried out with children, young people and families so they

are given far greater power over how they are helped and how decisions about their lives are taken.

### **SHARING AND LEARNING TO DRIVE IMPROVEMENT**

Very few reports or speeches are written about children’s social care without the notion of sharing good practice being highlighted. Nobody disputes the importance of it. Yet it is alarming how little of it is done in a coordinated and effective way. If anything it seems to happen more by accident than design. It is starkly illustrated by the fact that neither Wigan nor Camden local authorities in submitting their chapters to this book were aware that the concept of resilience was at the heart of both of their programmes of reform.

There need to be organized means of enabling authorities and non-statutory providers to come together to share the work they are doing to address the

current challenges they face. This could be done through a central government mechanism but equally it could be done by authorities themselves. What matters most is that it happens in a systematic way that allows for organised shared exchange and learning which is sustained over a period of time rather than being a one off. Without this too many opportunities for improvement and innovation will be lost.

The ideas set out in this collection of essays have great potential and some of them are already

being developed and trialled by local authorities and the voluntary sector in different parts of the country. They are long term proposals requiring both brave and bold new ways of thinking and working that will not deliver change overnight. Most importantly, they all embrace the need for change and seek to positively challenge the status quo.

**Enver Solomon is Director of Evidence and Impact and Anna Feuchtwang is the Chief Executive at the National Children's Bureau.**

#### NOTES

39 Children's social care reform: a vision for change, 2016, Department for Education



