

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN'S WELFARE

PARTNERSHIP AND THE CHILDREN ACT 1989

A RESIDENTIAL CONFERENCE
HELD AT CUMBERLAND LODGE
SEPTEMBER 1990

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Conference Report by Iain Lynch*



The conference looked at the Children Act 1989 from a number of different perspectives and considered the implications of the Act on partnership between the different professions concerned with the welfare of children.

The Act emphasises and lays down the principles and practice of partnership followed by many professionals over the years. It introduces concepts of parental responsibility and partnership between parents and local authorities to strengthen the rights of the child. Conscious of the diverse professional contributions to the promotion of the welfare of children, the conference identified as key issues for further debate and action:-

- The role of inter-disciplinary case conferences
- The organisation of work around case conferences
- The participation of parents and professionals in the case conference process
- The management of inter-professional services in relation to child protection and children in need
- The need for greater commitment to training and the provision of appropriate information in the implementation of the Act
- The need for local authority elected members to weigh up questions of resources and the welfare of children
- The development of child protection plans.

The conference noted that the Act embodied a good provision for preventative initiatives to be undertaken, but expressed concern that the essential allocation of resources to crisis intervention pre-empted investment in preventative services. It was also noted that Social Services departments had been advised to publish child care strategies and policies to implement the Children Act 1989.

The conference emphasised the importance of consultation with health and education authorities and the wider public about such documents.

Finally the conference drew on a role-playing exercise to demonstrate the different approaches undertaken by the range of professionals when considering whether a child is at risk. This served to underline the fact that much needed to be done before the philosophy of the Act could be effectively implemented.

Working Group Comment

During the conference, participants split into small working groups to discuss the practicalities of partnership in more detail. The first session was intra-disciplinary and the others were inter-disciplinary.

The main points that arose during discussion were as follows:-

- **Case Conferences** There is sometimes a danger of forgetting that case conferences are there to look at partnership with the family as well as between the professions and of letting processes and structures take over. The strategy and objectives of a case conference need to be carefully thought through, and its role should not be confused with other meetings. It was recognised that a lack of co-ordination had been a feature of child abuse cases in the past and suggested that a case work co-ordinator should be appointed, and adequately resourced, in both statutory and voluntary organisations.

Their role should include ensuring that the attendance of parents and children (and reasons for non attendance) were recorded, and for ensuring that action which was identified was

carried through. Data could be collated and kept together on standardized record sheets. It was suggested that a clear statement from the Department of Health about the ground rules and confidentiality of case conferences would be helpful. Children should be allowed to have an advocate of their choice at case conferences and other important meetings and should be advised about their choice of advocate.

- **Training** One of the topics which ran through the talks was developed further during the discussion groups. Public and professional education as a basis for partnership is urgent for all professions and there are insufficient resources allocated to training. It is important to identify the training needs of the whole range of professionals and then identify the trainers and courses which should be mounted. It was proposed that the lead organisation should be based on the Area Child Protection Committees, but that they would need a national structure to fulfil their functions.

It was suggested that the Department of Health should work with the other government departments to provide joint funding for training. It was also suggested that consideration be given to the establishment of a staff college for interdisciplinary training in childcare, health and education.

- **Information gathering and exchange** Current research facilities and the list of treatment centres and permanent care resources available should be publicised. The Department of Health should commission new information on children in care, according to the categories outlined in the Children Act. Local authorities should detail their criteria for identifying 'children in need' and provide more information on who is being 'looked after' by them and for how long. The main aim of information gathering would be to monitor the effects of the Children Act.

The Department of Health should co-ordinate and disseminate information about good practice in relation to Part III of the Act, and collect statistics on service provision. Information should be made available to all those eligible under the Act to have parental responsibility for a child currently in voluntary care. Similarly all children in voluntary care should receive age appropriate information about the new Act and their rights.

Local authorities should develop child care strategies and publish care planning statements for their areas. They should also make a positive attempt to evaluate levels of satisfaction with the services provided by them.

SPEAKERS

Stephen Cretney; Professor of Law, University of Bristol

Dr Jane Aldgate; Lecturer in Applied Social Studies, University of Oxford

The Hon Mr Justice Alan Ward; Family Division of the High Court

Virginia Bottomley, JP MP; Minister of Health

Peter Marsh; Research Director, Social Work in Partnership, University of Sheffield

Bandana Ahmed; Director, Race Equality Unit National Institute of Social Work

David Hodgson; Development Officer, National Children's Bureau

The Hon Mrs Justice Joyanne Bracewell; Family Division of the High Court