

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN'S WELFARE

Family Support in Protecting the Child



£4

**REPORT OF THE CONFERENCE HOSTED BY THE
MICHAEL SIEFF FOUNDATION HELD AT
CUMBERLAND LODGE SEPTEMBER 1994**

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Conference Report No.9 by Jonathan Cooley

SUMMARY

The conference considered the relationships, similarities and differences between family support, child protection and preventative work from the points of view of the Children Act, and those charged with implementing it.

The importance of providing non stigmatizing services was stressed and two main ways of doing this were discussed in depth:-

- Harnessing the rich resources of the voluntary sector, which might or might not be appropriately done via service agreements, and
- Providing universal services. The outstanding examples of this which are already in place are the health visitors, and there was a passionate feeling in the conference that their present role should be retained.

The idea of working in partnership with users of services rather than imposing solutions on to them was explored.

The concept of 'children in need' was examined from a variety of viewpoints, and the extent to which local authorities are fulfilling their obligations under the Act to these children was questioned.

Family support services were presented as a sensible financial investment for the future, and their accessibility was stressed - child protection must not be the only gateway to these services.

A constant background theme throughout the conference was the prevalence of poverty, poor housing, unemployment, ignorance and general social deprivation. It is not easy to identify families who might benefit from family support interventions when so many have major problems resulting from multiple deprivation.

9 Discussion Group Reports

The conference divided into seven working groups, each of which met for a total of five hours. The following is an attempt to summarize some of the common themes which arose from the groups and from the plenary session at which they presented their conclusions.

Poverty

Between one in three and one in four of the twelve million children in the country are living in poverty. This is a background theme - a constant feature of child protection and child welfare issues. There is an increasing sense of social injustice because the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. As in the Victorian era, we again have the 'deserving poor' - those whose inadequacy is not of their own making. There is widespread poverty not just in the financial sense, but also in the emotional sense. There is a shortage of skills, a lack of self-esteem and an inability to make use of available resources.

Poverty is a constant theme of child welfare and child protection issues

There is an important professional and ethical issue bound up with this. When an individual or a family comes to one particular agency for help and assessment, it is sometimes quite clear that the problems are due to poverty, social conditions and bad housing. They don't need to be the exclusive concern of one agency; they need resources of a different sort. It is important for professionals to be frank with other agencies and with clients when this happens.

A national co-ordinating body for family support

There was strong consensus on the recognition of the need for this, but some discussion over the precise form it should take.

In terms of training, it was suggested that the body could produce a multi-disciplinary training module in family support which emphasizes positive aspects of the subject, such as child development and attachment theory, rather than the negative pathological aspects. The module could be taken by workers in the voluntary sector, health visitors and GPs, not just social workers. It could be developed in conjunction with JAFIG [the Joint Action For the Implementation (of the Children Act) Group] and the Children Act Advisory Group. It was felt that the contents of such a module would be valuable to a wide variety of pro-

professionals, in the way that the members of an orchestra, though highly skilled in the playing of their own instruments, need a common grasp of broad areas of general musicianship.

There was concern that a module might 'give the impression that a one-off course can set people up for the rest of their careers. 'Professional development' might be a better term since it is necessary to maintain one's knowledge and awareness in the light of new research and outcome information. There was also a call for training to move away from information and knowledge, towards attitudes and skills.

The national body could be a long term, possibly governmental, strategic organisation to carry forward initiatives in training and make sure they are not lost after the lifetime of a political administration. It should certainly be a high level body - some thought it might be headed by a minister, others were anxious to keep it outside the political arena.

Beyond the narrow area of training, it could be a high level, high profile, perhaps almost symbolic body designed to promote the development of over-arching cross-ministry strategy, and to make things happen at local level.

Area family support committees

The best Area Child Protection Committees have budgets to provide information to parents, and are beginning to look at prevention and family support, but we can't go on enjoining ACPCs to do ever more and ever better things. Area family support committees are a natural development, but they would need funding. There must be either 'kickstart' money for family services or at least a series of demonstration projects and seminars to show how some local authorities are moving forward.

Area family support committees could open up ways for families to receive services without using child protection as a gateway. They could also be extremely helpful in implementing Section 27 of the Children Act, which requires co-operation between social services, education, housing and health in achieving the aims of Part III (local authority support for children and families).

Information

The gap between strategic and operational managers in social services departments is widening

Although many at the conference had doubts about the advisability of having a one-stop shop for provision of services, there was general agreement that a onestop information bureau for service users would be a good thing. This could be a telephone service to save

money - a single telephone number for finding out where to call next.

As regards management information, there is now a reasonable amount of research, audit, evaluation and inspection at national level, but the poverty of information about children in need at a local level is quite worrying. People are worried about what is in the Audit Commission report, but they would be on much stronger ground if they had the information to challenge what is being said. The gap between operational and strategic managers in social services departments is widening, and it will not be possible to make appropriate decisions about the allocation of resources until good local information is available.

There is no simple way to disseminate information about successful initiatives in family support

There is also a need for transfer of information between agencies, authorities and professionals. There is at present no simple way to disseminate information about successful initiatives in family support. Although local authorities are required under the Act to publicize the services they provide, there is no such requirement for the voluntary sector and social workers are often not aware of what the voluntary sector can offer even in their own area.

Universal Services

Throughout the conference there was strong support for the maintenance of the present role of the health visitor - seen as an outstanding example of a valuable universal provision - and opposition to the suggestion of the Audit Commission that, after a first (universal) visit, subsequent visits should only be made with a purpose.

The primary object of this sort of intervention is the proactive one of achieving the welfare of children rather than the reactive one of responding to needs and problems as they arise. It is also preventative, and stops problems reaching the stage where it is difficult to do anything about them. Making services universal is also the easiest way of making them nonstigmatizing and easily accessible gateways to other services.

Preventative work involves savings in the long term in the same way that the National Health Service targets for promoting health ultimately result in savings, since there is a lesser need to provide for some areas of sickness once the incidence has been reduced.

If this kind of preventative work were to become the norm, it seems very likely that juvenile offending would be reduced dramatically.

Family support as a context for child protection

Family support in the broadest sense must be seen as an integral part of an overall child protection strategy and recognized as necessary due to the increased isolation and fragmentation of families and communities of origin.

A key objective should be to increase the social support network available to families by 'normalising' the community's way of supporting families so that services and help are accessible and not stigmatizing. Professionals and their methods of working need to become more accessible to the members of the community and a partnership approach needs to be adopted. Users should be able to access services themselves, and be involved in decisions about the services they should receive.

Social services have the key role in developing community resources and building alliances within the community, at a time when they are also facing the challenges of local government reorganisation. In Scotland the reorganisation has been carried out with no regard for social work. Areas now vary greatly, and usually share boundaries with no other agencies.

If risks are being taken they must be acknowledged

If there is to be any move away from investigation in child protection cases to free money for family support, it must be acknowledged that risks are being taken. There would need to be clear statements from politicians and others about the criteria for investigation and registration, because some children would die and front-line workers, not to mention directors of social services, would feel very insecure. If a debate is to take place about this, perhaps the Secretary of State should say so clearly. It was suggested that the Social Services Inspectorate, which currently comments on the degree of thoroughness with which local authorities carry out their responsibilities in relation to *Working Together* and other guidance, might extend its comments to cover the thresholds which authorities use for commencing investigations.

There was a radical suggestion that the whole concept of the child protection register might need to be reviewed. At the moment the point of the register is that it provides a place where other people can look to find whether there is a child-abuse concern about a child. It was suggested that registration is highly stigmatizing, and that if a case conference is able to come up with a good child protection plan, enabling inter-agency communication and encompassing sufficient safeguards, there might be no need to register a

child. At present registration is a necessary prerequisite to the drawing up of such a plan .

Contracts or service agreements

Guidance is needed for contract specification for children's services, particularly about what *must* be included and what *can* be excluded. Contracts enable authorities to retain a power of comeback and the ability to sue, which sits uneasily with the essential looseness and attractive flexibility of organisations such as *Homestart*.

There is a need for guidance about what *must* be included and what *can* be excluded

Legislators need to understand that some of the sorts of work which are being contracted out contain a large element of untidiness and randomness. Mental disorder, for example, goes hand in hand with child abuse, and when people are working with other people there has to be space for stress and support, or there will be massive demoralization, burn-out, and no service left.

There has to be space in contract arrangements for stress and support, or there will be massive demoralization and no service left

Contracted out services should be seen and resourced as an essential addition to core social work, adding increased choice and diversity of provision for families and children in need. The worst scenario would be for social services to retain the heavy end of child protection work and contract out all the other services.

There needs to be a creative dialogue between social services and the service providers about service development, and those in social services must retain an overall perspective and the concept of a comprehensive service. Leadership and direction facilitate working across agency boundaries, and this should come from a public sector agency.

All services, including those contracted out, must have a clear system of accountability, support for their staff, an accessible complaints procedure, opportunities for the practitioners to undergo joint training, and clear criteria for staff recruitment and vetting.

A plea was made for support for small voluntary organisations which might have valuable services to offer, but have no idea about how to set about negotiating a contract.