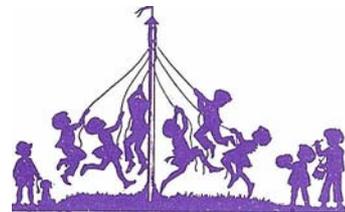


Child Protection: Ten Years On

THE MICHAEL SIEFF FOUNDATION - Working Together for Children in Need

REPORT OF THE CONFERENCE HOSTED BY THE
MICHAEL SIEFF FOUNDATION HELD AT
CUMBERLAND LODGE SEPTEMBER 1996



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Summary

This conference used the tenth anniversary of the first conference in the series to look back as far as the Beckford enquiry and to consider what has been achieved since then. It also looked forward, with a major policy statement from the Department of Health about the re-focusing of children's services on to a comprehensive provision of differentiated services tailored to the individual requirements of children in need, with the emphasis on early intervention.

The guidance *Working Together* is about to be revised. Discussion about how this should be done is just beginning, and a considerable amount of time was spent looking at the alternatives.

There was much analysis of the social and economic environment in which children's services are operating, and how that is likely to develop in the future. This was unremittingly gloomy. In sharp contrast were presentations describing work in Kent and in Earls Court, both of which are shining examples of best practice, delivering services with optimism and enthusiasm.

The issues were examined from the perspectives of national and local government, politicians, the police, education and health services, and the voluntary sector. The discussion groups achieved a consensus in a number of areas which are reported in section eleven.

Throughout the conference tributes were paid to the life and work of Lucy Faithfull. As Lady Hayman said at the start of The Michael Sieff Address:

*We must ensure that the things she worked for during her lifetime
are not neglected after her death*

11 Synthesis of Group Discussion Work

The conference devoted substantial periods to work in groups which gave all participants the opportunity to put forward ideas contributing to the re-focusing debate. **Richard White** presented a synthesis of the discussions of the groups.

A central question concerned the guidance, if any, to be published by the Department of Health as a sequel to *Working Together* under the Children Act 1989. It was noted that the debate concerning the re-focusing of children's services was taking place in an expanding needs-led environment for which it was unlikely there would be new resources.

The Department of Health made it clear that there would be a process of consultation about future guidance. It was emphasised that any changes needed to be gradual to avoid violent swings of the pendulum. Revision of guidance was likely to be a long term process, since it involved preliminary consultation on a set of core principles to be incorporated in practice and then further consultations on a detailed document. It was important that the existing detail of *Working Together* be retained during this evolutionary process so that child protection standards did not fall below an acceptable minimum.

Consideration had to be given to the nature of the future document. Wendy Rose had suggested that it could be updated, slimmed down or extended. The conference considered that there might be a need for all three in different ways. It needed to be re-framed. There was a broad level of agreement that the guidance should relate to children in need based on child development and the needs of children and their families. In some cases these needs might involve protection, even urgent removal to a safe environment.

The document had to provide for all agencies concerned with children. It was essential that it should accommodate the problems caused by the fragmentation of health and education services.

It might be that the core document which would be issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 would be relatively limited. It could provide guidance for certain aspects of practice considered below, but it would also link to children's services plans, published criteria providing

for standards of practice and procedure, and other publications on good practice. It was important to ensure that minimum requirements were not simply an invitation to provide a minimal service.

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A further important theme which should be authorised by the revised document was the need to develop the concept of a continuum of need. We needed to move away from rigid systems of assessment of need, harm or risk. This would require a flexible approach and multiple entry points into the assessment system. The system would need to be piloted to establish that they were workable. A tension was identified between the need to provide informal assessments linked with services, and indicators of the need for services. Further discussion was required in relation to this.

The groups were also concerned to seek to establish thresholds for the provision of different levels of service. It was suggested that these might be defined as *access criteria*. It was noted that there were now available acceptable standards for the provision of services, but that they still needed to be agreed.

Prioritisation for the provision of more expensive services should depend on the likelihood and severity of harm or impairment

Prioritisation for the provision of more expensive services should depend on the likelihood and severity of harm or impairment, irrespective of the cause of the harm. Concern was also expressed that any system developed should encourage the involvement of experts at an early stage if that was appropriate. There was also a tension between those emphasising the need to take greater account of the views of the needs expressed by parents and children, and those concerned with ensuring that a proper professional assessment of the child's need was undertaken, where there was conflict about the interests of the child. These were issues which would have to be determined locally but some guidance and structure would need to be included in the Section 7 guidance.

It was proposed, though not fully discussed, that the decision to cross the threshold to the use of coercive measures would require consideration of the following questions:—

- Is the child thriving or not thriving well enough considering its resilience or vulnerability?

- Is the child likely or not likely to thrive well enough?
 - Is there a serious threat to life and limb?
 - Is there a threat of serious sexual assault by a parent or carer?
 - Is there a good enough relationship with the main parent or carers?
 - Is at least one parent or carer showing some willingness to meet the child's needs?
 - Are parents or carers *willing* to accept help?
 - Are parents or carers *able* to accept help?
 - In respect of an older child, are they able to accept help?
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- Would the formal child protection procedures do more harm than good? What are the risks of using or not using coercion?
 - What evidence is there that there is a type of service or combination of services which has a chance of being effective?

The scope of resources available had also to be identified although it was likely that on an interagency basis this would be dealt with in children's services plans. The importance of political acceptance of those plans and the potential for joint commissioning and joint budgets was noted.

Outcomes had also to be considered. It was agreed that it was not always possible to provide a service on the basis that it had an identifiable outcome, but it was reasonable to clarify expectations and seek to evaluate services. Evaluation in this context included the efficiency of the service, its relationship to other services and their impact on children and families. It was noted that educational standards could provide a good indicator. Concern was also expressed about the failure to provide services for children where it was decided that they did not need them but the effect of that decision was to leave the child isolated.

The role of the Area Child Protection Committee was considered. It was suggested that if the general scope of guidance related to children in need, the committee, which might be renamed an Area Children Committee, would need to reflect the wider area of responsibility. There might be separate groups to manage different remits.

There was also debate on the future role of child protection conferences and child protection registers and the problems that might emerge in relation to the exchange of confidential material if it related only to children in need. These were matters which were recognised as needing further debate.

The importance of training was acknowledged. This needed to be interdisciplinary. It was felt that the recognition of the breadth of work with children and families and its complexity gave greater emphasis to the need for a three year training course for Social Workers. If, as suggested elsewhere, the quality of the relationship between the worker and the family was a key factor, attention would have to be given to that training.