
BEING MORE HUMAN

Why children's social care should be more about people and less about paper-work

'We recommend a new local authority department, providing a community based and family oriented service...it will enable the greatest possible number of individuals to act reciprocally, giving and receiving service for the well-being of the whole community.'¹ In 1968, the Seebohm report recognised the need for social care to be built around the communities in which children and their families live. It said that a social services department should be made-up of combined provision from other departments, across health and social care. It emphasised the financial benefits of this preventative way of working.

Our social care systems, in England and Wales, have been led by these good intentions ever since. But time and again, good intentions have been let down by systems which have been designed to ensure compliance and manage risk. This has resulted in services which have become distant from the people they seek to serve. 50 years on from the Seebohm report, how much do we allow these principles to underpin good social work?

Children's social care is, rightly and properly, concerned with reducing risk to children and ensuring their safety and well-being.

Governance structures are in place to drive quality and effectiveness and the appropriate levels of accountability for those who are entrusted with the care of children. This is essential. But this creates a layer of bureaucracy for social workers which can be hard to penetrate - it deflects their attention, impairing their ability to undertake the relational work that really matters. Dorset County Council last year set out to tackle exactly this problem with the feeling that 'social work had become too bureaucratic, too process-led and too task-driven. It was not enough about improving lives.'²

The media's response to high-profile children's social care cases is often reactionary; and the reaction of the state is to create more layers of bureaucracy primarily to mitigate negative headlines as opposed to question what's wrong with the current arrangements. We become trapped in a cycle, moving further away from what's right for the child and their families. And all of this at a time of continuing 'austerity'.

¹ Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services, July 1968, p.2, <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-129-138-c-88.pdf>

² Article on Community Care, sponsored by Dorset County Council, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/07/26/outcomes-outcomes-outcomes-dorset-reinvigorating-social-work/>

The time to act is now

We constantly hear that reductions to local authority budgets are affecting both the quality and capacity of children's social care services. We recognise that the demand for such services is steadily increasing. But where is the argument about how to do things better? We must be prepared to challenge the status-quo which has developed over time.

The term 'austerity' suggests that the reduction in spending on public services is temporary; it assumes that we will return to more 'normal' levels of government spending. I will be first to acknowledge the huge challenges that this new economic environment has brought for the people we support and work with, but we cannot continue to try to do more with less. We need to move away from this way of thinking by looking at the opportunities this new economic reality can provide, and ask ourselves how we develop sustainable solutions that respond to fiscal realities, all the while making sure that children and their families have the safest and best possible lives.

Back to basics

I believe that within children's social care, innovation is fetishised. It seems that evidence-based programmes have become the go-to solutions but none of these can be delivered effectively without the ability to engage and relate. We must ensure that the relationship does not become subservient to the intervention. The results of a recent Loughborough University feasibility study highlight how much of the relevant research literature, 'notes the use of the 'wrong' evidence, such as indicators that encourage a focus on processes rather than quality (Stein 2009) and those that can negatively affect the development of social work expertise,

learning from evidence and the application of professional judgement (Munro 2011).³

This isn't about reinventing the wheel, many of our reform ideas would be decidedly familiar to the Seebohm committee; we advocate for building trusted relationships, unlocking the capacity that exists in communities and considering alternative governance models that place power back in the hands of people in communities. But the question then still remains, how do we do this safely and effectively with ambition for the future?

In order to answer this question, we must understand what 'good' looks like for a child. You could ask me this question a thousands times, about any aspect of social work. And the answer always remains the same; it's about ensuring that everyone has a safe place to live, the right trusted relationships around them and then the ability to fulfil their purpose in life. People are the same, 50 years ago and 50 years on - what they need doesn't change.

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Be more human

We have to be more human and less transactional. We lose humanity when we are driven by a compliance culture. Children want to be supported by people who want to make it better for them. Children working with the system know that, often, the people who are meant to make decisions about their life don't know them at all. The recent report 'No Good Options', published by the APPG for Children, highlighted research showing that only 19% of children and young people with a care plan were involved in writing it, 39% don't know how to access an advocate and around 33% of care leavers said they didn't feel like they left care at the right time.⁴ We are failing at the first hurdle. It's about empathy and building trusted relationships.

Local accountability

Local communities must feel invested in solving these social problems, on their doorsteps, and this will only happen when they are given the autonomy and the tools to fix them. At present, decision making takes place too far from the impact of the decisions and consequently leads to breakdown in trust and ownership.

The state doesn't need to do everything itself, its role has to change to that of an enabler and a convenor. It considers itself the only authority able to 'manage' risk. Unless the State is prepared to challenge this, we will all be held back from driving real change and doing the right thing. And nowhere is this more evident than with the recent debate around the 'Power to Innovate' clause in the Children and Social Work Bill. The clause divided opinion in half – are we 'risking sovereignty of the state and putting children at risk', or are we 'providing risk managed freedoms for local authorities to try new ways of working

at a time of reduced spending and increased strain'? I believe the latter. This clause set out to legitimise the idea that there are answers beyond the current statutory framework and this can still be done whilst safeguarding children and their families. This is essential if we are to make real, human progress.

The emergence of different governance structures such as Free Schools, Academies, NHS Foundation Trusts, and Children's Trusts, although far from perfect, demonstrate how more flexible governance has enabled a greater imagination in the design and delivery of services, while still maintaining high standards and accountability. Learnings from these types of governance structures could be more widely used; by introducing more entrepreneurial thinking they could be successful in informing new ways of organising and delivering children's services, but, they too will fail if we simply 'lift and shift' existing delivery models. We must allow structures to have new ways of engaging people.

Collective Impact

Much of this comes down to the role that councils play. Local authorities must step-up as leaders and as place-shapers by opening the door to the communities they seek to serve. The Government's 2015 working together framework states: 'Whilst local authorities play a lead role, safeguarding children and protecting them from harm is everyone's responsibility. Everyone who comes into contact with children and families has a role to play.'⁵ Let's make this a reality.

In the United States, 'collective impact' programmes have gained traction, and projects such as the Harlem Children's Zone in New York are helping to transform not just the individual lives of children, but also whole communities by uniting decision makers,

⁴ APPG for Children, No Good Options, March 2017, p.41 – 42,

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/No%20Good%20Options.pdf>

⁵ HM Government, Working together to safeguard children, March 2015, p.5 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/592101/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children_20170213.pdf

communities, leaders and not-for-profit organisations to produce transformative change for children and their families. This is a framework and concept we could learn much from and could apply the UK.

Frameworks like this can be used in powerful ways to deflect children, in a positive and meaningful way, from needing the care of the state. But, the current system is failing children. This is illustrated by the disproportionate representation of children who are looked after by the state in the youth justice system - looked after children are five times more likely to be cautioned or convicted than children in the general population.⁶ This is further evident in education, with only 17.5% of looked after children achieving A* - C grades at GCSE, compared to 58.8% of non-looked after children.⁷

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In these cases we can use these frameworks to inform how we deliver care in a community-based way, providing the right, safe places for children to live. Can children always be housed within their own familiar communities? If not, then can we ensure that children's homes are

designed to be genuinely like a 'home'? We have to think differently about using capacity that already exists in our communities. Family and kinship are central to this debate. We know how powerful familial relationships can be, but the question is how we take these bonds and extend them beyond the traditional family walls, into the community and find ways of accessing more volunteer support. On the face of it this might seem to be too risky, but should the same rules for determining the suitability of foster carers apply across the board or could they be interpreted more flexibly in order to encourage more to become involved? This is about providing and accessing the right kinds of support when children have to enter the care of the state.

Unlock capacity

‘There is no money?’ There is no excuse. Unlocking this capacity in communities must be central to a new approach to delivering children's social care services. In Barack Obama's farewell speech this year, he looked back to ‘one of the most profoundly influential experiences of his life’ as a community organizer in Chicago. He said “If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing.”⁸ We should take note.

Initiatives like the West London Zone are starting to drive meaningful and positive change for young people and their families. Link workers have been knocking on doors, asking people what support they could provide in the community. The first year pilot report has indicated some improved outcomes, while acknowledging that there is work still to be done.⁹ If we can galvanise communities in the right way, we can support children in the right way. Once more I find myself quoting from the Seebohm report; by unlocking capacity we

6 Department for Education, Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers), year ending 31 March 2015, additional tables https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/483718/SFR34_2015_Text_AdditionalTables.pdf

7 Department for Education, Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31 March 2016, p.12, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602087/SFR12_2017_Text.pdf

8 The Telegraph Online, Barack Obama's Farewell Speech in Full, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/11/barack-obamas-farewell-speech-full/

9 Summary of the West London Zone Pilot Implementation Study, <http://westlondonzone.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Executive-Summary-of-WLZ-Implementation-Study-1.pdf>

will 'provide better services for those in need because it will ensure a more co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to the problems of individuals, families and communities...more effective in detecting need and encouraging people to seek help...able to attract resources and use them more effectively, and should make it possible to plan more systematically for the future.'¹⁰

Cost-saving

Stripping back bureaucracy and redefining regulation will not just help the people we seek to serve, but it will save us money. Catch22's innovative pilot for Children in Need, Project Crewe, helped children in need with a more effective service, at a lower cost. The programme set out to work with children on the cusp of the system, to prevent escalating needs, risks and costs. Its innovative staffing and delivery model combined the expertise of social worker with the experience and flexibility of differently qualified frontline staff. Children in Need teams were split into pods managed by social work consultants with non-social work qualified family practitioners and volunteers, matched with children and families.

The model was ultimately designed to free up social workers to manage their high risk caseloads and focus new and different resources on lower risk children in need, preventing their potential escalation into system. In the two years since its inception, the programme has shown improved outcomes, reduced repeat referrals and savings on operating costs for the local authority.¹¹ This is a leap forward and we are looking to how we can replicate and scale this model across the board.

Conclusions

I don't have all the answers and I'm not claiming to. If you read back, what I argue for isn't radical or uninformed. And it's not about innovation for innovation's sake. It's about remembering why we do social work and why you are taking the time to read this. We are all human and what people need will never change.

I write this on the day Article 50 has been triggered and the future is still uncertain. We are living in a challenging time, but if history has taught us anything, it's that we will continue to experience challenging times – politically, economically and socially. We must learn to turn challenge into opportunity and bring down rather than build walls. We should look back to the words of the Seebohm committee in 1968 and think about why we do what we do - let's get back to basics and let it come from the heart.

¹⁰ Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services, July 1968, p.3, <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-129-138-c-88.pdf>

¹¹ Catch22 News piece outlining results from Project Crewe pilot, <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/news/project-crewe-testing-and-replicating-a-new-approach-to-improving-outcomes-for-children-in-need/>