

The Munro Interim Review: an overview

This interim report is entitled '*The Child's Journey*' and looks at how the child protection system could be reformed so that it keeps a focus on the child's journey from needing help to receiving it. The final report in April will not look for quick fixes but will address how barriers to good practice can be removed and incentives to better practice be put in place.

The evidence continues to demonstrate that the current system does not support child centred practice, and does not provide a means of understanding the child's journey when in need of, or in receipt of help. The systemic approach taken in the first interim report is a helpful way of understanding how well meaning reforms to one part of the system have negatively impacted on others. This report further examines the evidence for this and the alternative approaches taken by some local authorities and professionals to refocus on the child and to encourage the development of intuitive and adaptive professional practice. This includes an exploration of the potential changes required to support a move from what are now procedurally driven organisations, to adaptive, learning organisations where good practice can flourish.

Multi agency teams and early intervention:

The review team has looked at multi-agency teams which include social workers, located in the community alongside universal services. This has helped professionals in universal and early support services to decide whether to refer to children's social care, as it is recognised that the complexity of individual cases, the uncertainty, and anxiety all play a significant part in making such decisions. Social work input at this early stage can be extremely positive in improving outcomes.

The review will explore how local areas can be supported in developing their own arrangements to meet the local needs of the community and, as such teams provide benefit to many agencies, to consider whether the funding for such resources should be shared.

There is strong support for shared thinking and working among professionals, but experiences are mixed and there is a lack of consensus about how well professionals are understanding one another's roles and working together. This highlights the need for thoughtfully designed local agreements between professionals about the best ways to communicate and work with each other.

The review recognises that it is these informal relationships between different types of expertise which are crucial to improving early help. Effective early multi agency arrangements do help to reduce the number of unnecessary referrals to children's social care and gives universal services and family support workers better opportunities to talk through concerns, even when they are not immediate child protection issues. In its next phase the review will consider how this mutually beneficial relationship between services can be fostered and encouraged.

Early prevention:

The review endorses efforts to improve family support services in the community such as Sure Start Children's Centres and the health visitor service. The number of health visitors is due to be substantially increased by 2015. Successful interventions include, for example, Family Interventions (FIs) offering intensive' and 'persistent' support to vulnerable and disadvantaged families and the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) programme which is a preventive programme for vulnerable young first-time mothers. These strategies will be taken forward in partnership with Sure Start Children Centres, local authorities and the new Health and Well-being Boards that local authorities will lead.

Assessments & timescales:

There is strong support for shared assessments using a common format. The review has also been working in partnership with five authorities around more flexible assessments and is considering whether, when a child is referred to children's social care, any existing assessment is continued by social workers, rather than starting a new bureaucratic process of initial and core assessments. Timescales need to be balanced with the quality of assessment, they matter but so does quality, and local arrangements should monitor both. The review is also working with the Family Justice Review to explore how local authorities can contribute to reducing unnecessary delays through the courts and care proceedings. (see appendices)

Management & professional practice:

The quality of any one social worker's performance is not just about expertise but involves the interaction between what they bring to the job and the work environment. A dysfunctional workplace makes it difficult for even the most skilled and motivated social workers to work as well as they would like. This applies not only to the major obstacles to good practice such as heavy caseloads or lack of supervision, but to the more subtle influences of the design of assessment tools, or organisational messages about priorities.

The current management style puts too much emphasis on the bureaucratic aspects of the work and radical reform is needed to recognise the importance of the cognitive and emotional requirements of the work, the need for continuing professional development, and for access to research. The managerialist approach has been called a 'rational technical approach', where the emphasis has been on the conscious, cognitive elements of the task of working with children and families, on collecting information, and making plans. The focus of previous reforms has been on providing detailed assessment forms, telling the social worker what data about families to collect and, how quickly to collect it. Less attention has been given to helping frontline staff acquire the skills to analyse the information collected.

Knowing what data to collect is useful, but it is equally useful to know how to collect it; how to get through the front door and create a relationship where the parent is willing to tell the social worker anything about the child and family; how to ask challenging questions about very sensitive matters; and having the expertise to sense that the child or parent is being evasive. Above all, it is important to be able to work directly with children and young people to understand their experiences, worries, hopes and dreams

The review is considering how professional guidance can be separated out from statutory guidance, how to minimise rules and maximise the opportunities for professional judgment, allowing work to be centred on the unique child.

Tools & ICS:

The review is considering how user-centred assessment and decision making tools can provide better aids to professional reasoning and is working with practitioners to make the Integrated Children's System (ICS) software more user-friendly and efficient.

Supervision:

Supervision provides the space for critical reflection. Social workers need to make best use of evidence on how to help families change which includes both evidence about the nature of effective working relationships, and of the best methods to use. The review is thinking about separating the two roles of managerial oversight and professional. This would lead to a professional career pathway.

Career structures:

The review is building on the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) capabilities framework. The career structure should be altered to give social workers a long-term professional career without becoming a manager. There would be a number of very senior social workers who could provide good support to a Chief Social Worker

Working Together & statutory guidance:

One of the reasons for the growth in statutory guidance has been the inclusion of much professional advice. There is a risk that this has actually contributed to the deprofessionalisation of child protection, doing things by the book rather than using professional judgment. The review will consider how statutory guidance can better reflect the inherent risks and uncertainties involved in child protection and how statutory guidance could be separated out from professional advice, with the professions taking responsibility for the latter. The final report will examine how and why local procedures have sometimes had unforeseen, negative implications for practice and how a more adaptable system, capable of learning from its practitioners, can be encouraged.

Inspections & Serious Case Reviews:

The review is recommending that announced inspections should end and unannounced inspections given a broader remit. Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) have been criticised for failing to identify or explain the factors that have contributed to poor practice and the review is considering adopting the systems approach used in the health sector, which explores these factors and offers the potential for deeper lessons and improved learning. It is also recommending that Ofsted evaluations of SCRs should end and the quality of learning given greater coverage within the overall inspection process.

LSCB's:

The review wants to strengthen the role of LSCBs in monitoring the impact of practice, training and learning on the child's journey, as well as identifying and addressing emerging problems in the system.

Accountability:

The Director of Children's Services should continue as the key point of professional accountability for child protection services within the local authority without diluted or weakened accountability.

Performance indicators:

The National Indicator Set will now be replaced with a single comprehensive list of data required centrally. The review is thinking about a minimum data set for child protection made up of a 'twin core' of nationally collected data and standardised local data which would map the child's journey through the system and informs discussions about local practice, rather than being used as absolute indicators of 'good' or 'bad' performance.

The media and the public:

The review, working with the College of Social Work is considering how to help the public gain a better understanding of the complexity, uncertainty and emotional challenge inherent in child protection. This includes improving the response of the social work profession to public debates about their work, especially in a crisis, so that there is a clearer account of professional practice

A learning system:

The LSCB has a major role in the local child protection system locally, including multiagency learning and training. One key responsibility is to carry out serious case reviews and the review has been impressed by the systems approach used in healthcare which would be valuable for learning from practice.

The child protection system:

As public services are reformed the review is looking at the need for a panel to advise Government and the professions on how the different parts of the child protection system are interacting and whether problems are emerging.

Appendices:

The principles of child protection:

The following list is an initial draft for consideration:

- the family is the best place for bringing up children and young people, but the child protection system faces difficult judgments in balancing the right of a child to be with their birth family with their right for protection from abuse and neglect;
- the child protection system is a multi-professional, multi-agency operation requiring all who work with children, young people and families to consider the effectiveness of their work;
- the child protection system should be child-centred, recognising children and young people as individuals with rights, including their right to participation in major decisions about them, in line with their evolving capacities;
- the child protection system understands its dual mandate to support families and help them provide adequate care and to intervene authoritatively when children and young people need protection;
- the general public and all who work with children, young people, families and carers have a responsibility for protecting children and young people;
- helping families involves working *with* them and therefore the quality of the relationship between the family and professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given;
- children's needs and circumstances are varied and so the child protection system requires sufficient flexibility, with space for professional judgment to meet that variety of need;
- the complexity of the world means that uncertainty and risk are features of child protection work and that risk management cannot eliminate harm, only reduce its occurrence;
- a learning and adaptive system is characterised by regular questioning of how the system (locally and nationally) is functioning and whether children are receiving effective help; and
- good professional practice is driven by knowledge of the latest theory and research.

Factors that would have a significant and positive impact on a child's journey through care proceedings:

- social workers who are well prepared, knowledgeable about a child and family, articulate and confident in their evidence and confident in their professional judgements;

- processes in place so that children and young people have a voice throughout pre-proceedings and through care proceedings;
- constructive challenge and authorisation arrangements within the local authority so that only the 'right' cases are brought into care proceedings;
- continuity of social workers allocated to cases in proceedings;
- effective pre court work including Family Group Conferencing and full exploration of all potential family carers;
- effective parallel planning and panel processes that have timeliness for the child and the child's journey central to their purpose and function;
- pro-active and highly efficient local authority legal service departments composed of experienced child care lawyers, so that good quality advice is available to social workers;
- effective engagement in the Family Justice System so that learning between the courts and the local authority takes place and informs practice on an ongoing basis; and
- appropriate scrutiny and oversight of care planning and final care plans by the local authority, including agreed levels of support and resources available to deliver them.

Ref:

The Munro Review of Child Protection, Interim Report: The child's journey.

<http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/downloads/Munrointerimreport.pdf>