

Child protection must focus on the child, not on rules and targets

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LSE professor [Eileen Munro](#) has signalled a new approach on child protection with an interim report for the Government which focuses on helping children, rather than on the regulations, inspections and procedures that have thrown the system out of balance.

Too often in recent history, the child protection system has, in the pursuit of imposed managerial targets and regulations, forgotten that its raison d'être is the welfare and protection of the child. It is in this context that the Secretary of State for Education asked me last June to conduct a review of the system, with a focus on strengthening the social work profession, to put them into a better position to make well-informed judgments based on up-to-date evidence in the best interests of children and free from unnecessary bureaucracy and regulation.

The first part of my report [A Systems Analysis](#) set out the current problems in the child protection system and offered an analysis of why these problems had arisen. It concluded that an imbalance has developed between the demands of the management and inspection processes and professionals' need for a work environment – and the right capabilities – to help them exercise professional judgment, provide effective help, and keep a clear focus on the best interests of the child.

The aim of my interim report, [The Child's Journey](#), was thus to set the characteristics of an effective child protection system and to outline the reforms that might help the current system get closer to the ideal, while seeking feedback on these proposals before making detailed recommendations to Government in the final report at the end of April. This phase of the review looked at how the system could be reformed to keep a focus on the child's journey – the journey from needing help to receiving it.

We know that providing effective help to children who are at risk of abuse or neglect has both immediate and long term benefits. Child maltreatment has been associated with the following long term impacts:



Yet all too often questions are asked if child protection rules and procedures have been met but not whether this has helped children. Everyone in the profession can think of meetings and forms that don't actually make a child safer. Whilst some regulation is needed, we need to reduce it to a small, manageable size. Professionals should be spending more time with children, asking how they feel, whether they understand why the social worker is involved in their family, and finding out what they want to happen.

I have identified several areas of reform that are needed to deliver improved outcomes and more focused interventions:

- The importance of a management and inspection process that monitors whether children are getting the help they need, rather than being a tick box exercise. We will work with Ofsted, the children's service regulator, to develop a more child-centred inspection process. The consensus view in feedback to the review has been that announced inspection carries a considerable amount of bureaucratic burden. The review is recommending that announced inspections should end as part of forthcoming revisions to the inspection framework. Instead, unannounced inspections should be given a broader remit across the contribution of all children's services to the protection of children.
- Developing social work expertise by keeping experienced, more senior social workers on the front line so they can develop their skills and better supervise more junior social workers. Senior leaders from local agencies currently work together, through the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), to provide local leadership and clarity about working together to help keep children and young people safe. LSCBs are uniquely placed to take a holistic approach to child protection. The review is minded 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.
- Giving other professionals -health, police and family support services -easier access to social work advice when they have concerns about abuse and neglect. All who come into contact with families have a part to play in identifying those children whose needs are not being adequately met. Some of these needs can be helped by universal and early intervention services, while others may need referral to more specialist services, including children's social care. Evidence submitted to the review shows strong support for the current policy where, with the family's consent, an assessment is made, using a format common to all local agencies, that can be shared as appropriate with other professionals. It is important to minimise dependency and empower families, giving them ownership of their personal assessment.
- Revising and reducing the statutory guidance [*Working Together to Safeguard Children*](#), which is now 55 times longer than it was in 1974, so that core rules are separated from professional advice. One of the reasons for this growth has been the inclusion of professional advice alongside statutory guidance. The review is working with a group of representatives from the relevant professions to consider how statutory guidance could be separated out from professional advice, with the professions taking responsibility for the latter. In the next report the review will make recommendations on how this would allow for statutory guidance to become a shorter manual in which the core principles and rules are clearer to all professionals.
- Considering having a national system of trained reviewers of serious case reviews (SCRs), who can share findings so that lessons can be learnt nationally.

Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) have been criticised for failing to identify or explain the factors that have contributed to poor practice. The review is therefore considering adopting the systems approach used in the health sector, which explores these factors and therefore offers the potential for deeper lessons and improved learning. The review has also received evidence that the system of external evaluation of SCRs has distorted the priorities in conducting these reviews, adding to bureaucracy, and inhibiting learning. Alongside the Government's policy that SCR overview reports are published, the review is recommending that Ofsted evaluations of SCRs should end in due course. Instead, the quality of learning more generally should be given greater coverage within the overall inspection process.

In the next stage of the review we will test out how to give front line social workers greater autonomy so they can better exercise their professional judgment. The Secretary of State for Education is considering using his powers to grant five local authorities temporary suspension of certain aspects of statutory guidance, subject to conditions. Social workers in Cumbria, Knowsley, Westminster, Hackney and Gateshead would be able to complete certain assessments and hold child protection conferences within timescales that they think would best meet children's needs. The trials would be rigorously monitored to ensure the safety and welfare of children, and to minimise delays.

I recognize this review is taking place at a time of major reform in all of the relevant public services, where serious financial constraints are being applied and with major workforce issues particularly in the field of social work. It remains essential that the protection of children is a priority within these reforms. It is in this context that the review will be seeking the help of each profession within the sector to develop the reforms proposed in this report and work with a range of groups to develop its thinking before producing a final report and recommendations to Government in April.