

The government needs to act now on Munro Review findings

Posted on Monday 16th May 2011

The Munro Review into child protection policy and practice in England was published on 10 May 2011. Professor Eileen Munro's recommendations, if accepted and implemented by government, would signal a sea change for such services and for the children and families with whom they work. The current paradigm – actualised in a wide ranging set of reforms following Lord Laming's inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié and implemented by the previous Labour administration – is based on a command and control model and an assumption that standardisation, control of workflow and rigorous micro-management of practitioners and local managers is social work's royal road to safety in practice. As many of us, based on extensive research, have been arguing for some time, these reforms were based on a particular and flawed view of human judgement and decision-making. They assume that human beings need extrinsic motivation – targets – in order to maximise performance, that practitioners must have a clear, ruthlessly enforced and centrally prescribed practice model in order to work effectively with families and that failures to share and record information are major sources of error in the current system. A tyrannical IT system and inspectorial regime have been designed around these precepts to ensure compliance.

Little wonder, then, that children's services in England hung with baited breath in anticipation of what the review may bring. Many services have attempted redesign of their organisation and practice to take account of the real world of child protection. The embodied experience of entering intimate family spaces to make sensitive enquiries about children and their parents is absent from the thinking of the current paradigm. If we are to build safer organisations there is a need to understand the assets and fallibilities of social workers as human, emoting information and experience processors and the cultural soup in which practice takes place. Here, in the relationships, human attributes and vexing ambiguities, is where errors of judgement take place. Some are inevitable, this is not Euclidian geometry. It is a realm of heightened emotion, often danger, understandable wariness by parents and not infrequently frank deception.

Munro's review challenges this paradigm. Her recommendations are based on an understanding of 'human factors' and require a shift in the mind set of central government, particularly amongst policy makers. The government's response to Munro is to be delayed pending further consultation. This delay is in part understandable – as noted by Children's Minister Tim Loughton, who has been supportive of the review throughout, previous reforms have been rolled out with excessive zeal – reform in haste, repent at leisure. However, there is an urgent need to nurture the fires of system redesign taking place in local authorities. A delay of several months will snuff many out. There are some changes that would make a great deal of difference and should happen immediately. Obvious candidates for swift change are the centrally prescribed, arbitrary timescales associated with several stages in the social work process and a curtailment of some of the activities of the inspectorate. Not only are these cost-neutral, they would save money, liberate innovators, end what research by myself and colleagues has shown to be pernicious dysfunctions, engender optimism and most important of all, radically improve services to children and families and service outcomes. So, I hope the Secretary of State will act swiftly to remove the heightened conditions for error produced by the unintended consequences of the last set of reforms. It must be done and done now.

Sue White

Professor of Social Work (Children and Families) and member of the Munro Review reference group

[Privacy](#) | [Legal](#) | [Cookies and cookie policy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Site map](#) | [Website feedback](#) | [Charitable information](#)

© University of Birmingham 2015

