

**Briefing from the Association of Directors of Social Work
Labour Party Debate on Child Protection, Scottish Parliament, 24 September 2009**

ADSW is the association representing senior social work managers in local government. This briefing sets out the views of the association about child protection. The aim of the briefing is to inform politicians of the views of Scotland's top social workers ahead of Thursday's debate.

Attached to the briefing is a fact sheet, designed for journalists, but which contains some basic factual information about the child protection system in Scotland.

Summary

Child protection has dominated the media recently and as such has risen up the political agenda. It is important that the approach taken allows us to progress issues in a balanced and constructive way. What we need is an open and informed debate about how best to protect children in Scotland.

1. We do not want to see an inquiry into child protection, which will divert energy and scarce resources away from service delivery; our inspection regime is delivering results and the majority of councils and their partners are delivering good services; those that are not are being supported to improve.
2. We need to be realistic about options for children. We have a shortage of adopters and foster carers and limited resources and cannot take every child at any level of risk into the care system.
3. Social work supports many families in crisis to successfully turn their lives around.
4. Social workers are highly trained individuals whose responsibility is to make informed judgements; they must be allowed and supported to do so.
5. We need our communities to be vigilant and notify authorities if they are concerned about a child or an adult living with that child.
6. We need to accept that no system of child protection can guarantee a child's safety.

Do we need an inquiry into child protection?

HMIe reports show that the vast majority of child protection systems are working well. The inspections which have been established for 3 years show that over 75% of councils have good systems. There have been a few negative inspection reports recently, but follow up reports have showed good progress by the councils involved.

ADSW does not back an inquiry into child protection. The suggestion implies that there is nothing ongoing to improve practice; nothing could be further from the truth. We have an inspection process that is delivering results and we are in the pilot phase of Getting it Right for Every Child, which will provide important information and learning for the effective roll-out of this new integrated early intervention approach. We should value that and not disregard it. The Child Protection Reform Programme was effectively an enquiry into child protection. It concluded that where social work services work well, they have a disproportionately positive impact on outcomes for children – more so than any other profession. We need to build on the quality that we have to address the minority of services that need to improve.

Should we remove more children from their families?

We have recently heard calls from Barnardos to remove more children from chaotic families and arrange for adoption while they are still very young. There are a number of problems with this proposal, not least that it implies that social workers are choosing to leave children in unsuitable families instead of placing them in caring adoptive families. This is not the case.

- Social workers are highly trained professionals who work with families to try and sort out the issues they are dealing with and they achieve many great results and help families stay together and turn their lives around.
- When they can't help a family, or when they think a child's wellbeing is at risk, they will recommend the removal of a child.
- Once a child is removed there is then the issue of where they can live and be looked after.
 - Adoption is not a straightforward option. Many of the children who need to be adopted are in sibling groups, older children or children with disabilities or very complex needs, and it is much more difficult to identify adopters for these children. There is also a reduction in the number of adopters due to advances in fertility treatments and different life style patterns.
 - Kinship care can be a very good option for children, but the complexities of the current benefits and care allowance systems often have a punitive effect on kinship carers. This issue requires to be resolved as a matter of urgency.
 - Fostering can be a good option for children, but we have a chronic shortage of foster families.

When should children be removed?

Statistics show that there are some 50 000 children living with substance mis-using parents. We cannot take them all into care, nor should we. Many families can be supported by social work and health services to function well. Social workers need to make a judgement about whether a family can be supported to cope or whether it is in the best interests of the child to be removed.

Social workers, who deal with complex issues such as these every day, have to make judgements based on the individuals they are dealing with, not a checklist or scorecard. The circumstances in which a child should be removed cannot be prescribed by legislation. Every family is different and we need to trust our highly trained social work workforce to make those decisions.

A family's situation can change rapidly. Many families can be functioning well and supported to do so, but can fall into chaos when the dynamic of the family changes. Many of the high profile child deaths in the press recently have one common factor: a predatory male joining the family. Neither social work, police nor health can be with the family 24 hours a day, but communities are and can notice these changes and should be supported to bring them to the attention of the authorities.

There are no guarantees

No matter how good it may be, no system can offer 100% guaranteed protection. Some people will lie, deceive and cover up their presence and their actions because it is their aim to harm a child. Unfortunately no system can guarantee to protect children from these people; and no re-inventing of the wheel of child protection policy can deliver a system that can.

ADSW acknowledges the inspectorates' findings that the majority of councils are delivering good services and should be supported to improve. A distracting inquiry into child protection services could place more children at risk by diverting attention and resources from front line service delivery.

Further information

We have tried to cover the main issues in this briefing, but should you need more information before Thursday please get in touch with Jane Devine, Parliamentary and Communications Officer for ADSW on 07901 772233 / jane.devine@adsw.org.uk

22 September 2009