



Child Protection: Back to the Frontline

Conservative Party Policy Document

February 2010

Introduction by Tim Loughton MP

Shadow Minister for Children and Young People

In recent years the subject of children and young people has risen up the political agenda. It is only right that it should do as our junior citizens constitute around 20% of the population and with recent research showing that over half of children born now will live to be over 100, getting it wrong for them will mean dealing with children with problems becoming adults with problems for many years to come.¹

While there has been modest progress in securing coverage for the many positive achievements of our young people so easily tagged with labels of anti-social behaviour and NEETS, it is the horrifying cases of the brutal abuse, torture and killing of innocent young children which have gained the most prominent headlines. When it is at the hands of their parents or carers it is particularly tragic and challenges the credulity and tolerance of our whole society.

While names such as Maria Colwell and Jasmine Beckford are the totems of child abuse in the 1970s and 1980s, the first decade of the twenty-first century has been scarred with the cases of Victoria Climbié, Baby Peter Connelly and, most recently, the Edlington brothers. February 25th 2010 marks the tenth anniversary of the death of Victoria Climbié. Surely few adults can be unaware of the name of the eight-year old from the Ivory Coast whose life was miserably cut short at the hands of her aunt and her boyfriend. Behind this tragedy lay a massive systemic failure by the agencies who should have been there to protect her.

Such cases of child cruelty will never go away. There will always be evil individuals who, for incomprehensible reasons, inflict cruelty on the most innocent and vulnerable. Yet it is the mark of a civilised society to do everything it can to protect its most vulnerable citizens and it is the job of all those involved in child protection to make it as hard as possible for these people to inflict harm. Each of the above cases has been met by a resounding chorus from all those in authority and in positions of responsibility saying 'we must learn the lessons so that such an act will never happen again'. Yet, with chilling complacency, the system is not fixed, the same mistakes are made, and it does happen again.

Bureaucratic drift

The response to the death of Victoria Climbié came in the form of the first Laming Report with its 108 recommendations. This led to an unprecedented deluge of legislation, new structures in local authority children's services departments, new procedures, and new computer systems such as the leviathan Contactpoint and the much-maligned Integrated Children's System (ICS). The buck of responsibility was meant to stop with the newly created Directors of Children's Services and the whole structure complimented by supposedly better joined-up working between agencies. Ten years on from Victoria Climbié's death, seven years on from the Laming Report and almost six from the landmark Children Act it is time to take stock of whether child protection has improved.

¹ *Lancet* (2009), reported <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/UK-News/More-Than-Half-Of-Babies-Born-In-Affluent-Countries-Now-Have-A-Life-Expectancy-Of-Reaching-100/Article/200910115397525>.

Whilst the shocking Doncaster torture case drew huge media attention even though the young victims in fact escaped with their lives, the deaths of five young children in that local authority who were on social services radar since 2004 attracted little attention at the time.² It is not scaremongering to face up to the reality that despite all the investment, all the legislation and all the hard work of professionals at the sharp end, the child protection system in our country is still not working properly.

This is not the stuff of party politics - the consensus of horror stretches across the political divide. But it serves no purpose to claim that things are so much better simply by dint of increased investment and a plethora of reports and new rule books. Child protection has undoubtedly become a big enterprise, and many more people now have an interest in it than ten years ago. Yet it is not the quantity of legislation and regulation that is at fault but rather the quality, content and direction. Indeed there is now a growing body of opinion that many of the structural changes that we have seen, and particularly the constant upheaval and drain on resources and morale, are actually undermining the effectiveness of child protection systems. As the reaction of Haringey local authority to the death of Baby Peter suggested, have we created a sophisticated system that has inadvertently put protection of that system ahead of protecting the vulnerable children and families it should be there to help?

New priorities

The Conservative Party has played a constructive and vociferous role in the reform of the child protection system particularly since the first Laming Inquiry. We made a number of specific urgent recommendations in the light of the Baby Peter tragedy. Before that we set up a Commission on the Future for Children's Social Workers chaired by myself with a distinguished panel of social work practitioners, academics and elected representatives under the patronage of Herbert Laming and Elizabeth Butler-Sloss. Our report 'No More Blame Game' published in October 2007 made a number of recommendations which we have endeavoured to bring to bear in Government legislation and many of which have more recently been taken up by Moira Gibb's social worker task force.³ A second report produced by the Commission in February 2009 made further recommendations and formed our submission to the second Laming Inquiry.⁴

Three principles underlie our approach to reforming child protection:

- **Protect and strengthen frontline professionals.** Further structural upheavals in the system have already diverted too much time and resources away from the front line. No amount of reforms and new procedures will succeed unless they free up properly trained, motivated and resourced social workers and other key professionals to get on with their job of working with families at the 'sharp end', based on maximising quality face-to-face time with the vulnerable families.

² The children in question were Baby BO5, Child AO6, Amy Howson (Child B), Alfie Goddard (Child K) http://www.doncaster.gov.uk/health_and_social_care/caring_for_our_children/safeguarding_and_standards/safeguarding_children_board/serious_case_reviews.asp.

³ <http://www.fassit.co.uk/leaflets/No%20More%20Blame%20Game%20-%20The%20Future%20for%20Children's%20Social%20Workers.pdf>

⁴ http://www.conservatives.com/News/Blogs/~/_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/SWC_Submission_to_Lord_Laming.ashx

- **Transparency and accountability.** Greater transparency and accountability is essential if we are to start to repair the enormous erosion of public confidence in the system, which has served to demoralise those professionals in practice.
- **Early intervention.** There is no substitute for early intervention. Failing to start early in working with vulnerable families to keep them together wherever possible or to act quickly where children need to be taken into care is always a mistake.

Cutting bureaucracy, encouraging staff

This first point is perhaps the most important and was the basis of our submission to the second Laming Inquiry. Many of the recommendations that we are drawing together in this paper focus on raising the morale of the profession, which has been so devastatingly undermined, and freeing up their time with more user friendly procedures that mean they do not have to spend as much as 80% of their time in front of computers filling in assessment forms.⁵ Lack of support for the front line and a feeling of powerlessness have led experienced social workers to quit the profession, leading to the vicious circle of high caseloads and high vacancy figures filled by transient agency staff. The Government have rightly sought to raise standards in the profession by introducing the social worker degree course, yet this has been undermined by the very low thresholds to get on to the courses and the low pass marks to gain a qualification. Playing this 'numbers game' has serious ramifications for the calibre of new recruits coming into the profession to replace the experienced 'grey hairs' who have voted with their feet and left.

A new professional footing

That is why our proposals around a Chief Social Worker to lift the profile of the profession backed up by a truly independent and heavyweight professional college to lift its calibre are so important. Simplifying assessment procedures and relying on the good sense of good social workers to make quality value judgements based on first-hand encounters is not 'rocket science'. It is also clear that in too many cases there is a serious disconnect between those managing children's services departments, the elected politicians they report to, and the practitioners executing the job on the ground. This has not been helped by the shortage of directors with a children's social care background and compounded by the same shortcomings within the inspecting body OFSTED.

Concomitant with raising the bar amongst professionals must be restoring public confidence. That is what we have put forward the proposal for a Chief Social Worker who can be the public face of the profession and liaise between the media, the frontline and the Secretary of State. In addition we must be able to show that the lessons of previous failures have been learnt and acted upon. When those lessons are secreted in unpublished Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) accessible by only a small number of people, the public have no way of judging what the lessons were and if there have been genuine attempts to resolve outstanding problems. When the thin executive summaries of those reports are revealed as bearing little relation to the underlying report, and when a subsequent Serious Case Review later trots out the same old shortcomings in the same authority, it is little wonder that the public suspect cover-up and obfuscation. That is why we have aggressively campaigned for the full publication of SCRs, subject to the criteria that it should not be harmful to the

⁵ <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2006/01/20/52465/Too-much-paperwork-say-staff.htm>;
http://www.unison.org.uk/voluntary/news_view.asp?did=5112.

welfare of a surviving child or siblings and subject to due anonymisation and redaction. Nothing less will restore public confidence. That view is shared by an increasing number of social workers on the frontline who have been further demoralised by the knee-jerk assumption that social workers are always the most to blame, despite the fact that full serious case review often report shortcomings of police, health and other agencies.

Putting faith in the frontline

Since the first Laming report the whole child protection set-up has become enormously bureaucratic leaving local authorities having to work around the system rather than with it, as Lord Laming complained when producing his second report. The irony is that, despite the best of intentions, Laming Two contained 58 further recommendations on top of the 108 original ones, many of which just added further to the bureaucracy.

If we are serious about improving child protection we need to put much more trust in professionals at the sharp end working together with other agencies properly empowered, motivated and resourced. Sometimes, like doctors or nurses, they will make the wrong call, but it will be based on quality value judgements derived from first-hand encounters rather than from the dubious comfort of a system's analysis made at a computer station in a children's services office. When mistakes are made, they will be able to work out why that call was made, learn from it and reassure the public that the system is now better because of it. For that we need a much more user friendly system where professionals really can be the friend of vulnerable children and we can all be reassured by that.

This short paper encompassing policy initiatives put forward by the Conservative Party over recent years in response to tragic deaths and subsequent well intentioned but often counter productive legislation is intended in that positive and constructive vein, but in the urgent realisation that we can't go on like this.

Child protection has undoubtedly become a big enterprise, and many more people now have an interest in it than say ten years ago. This is right and good. But it is time to make sure that the system of child protection is retuned and refocused so that its chief priority is the protection of children, not the protection and perpetuation of its own bureaucratic process.

Tim Loughton MP

Shadow Minister for Children and Young People

February 2010

Summary of Proposals

In the past 10 years, social work has been frustrated by an invasive regulatory regime. Our central concern is the frontline professional. An incoming Conservative Government will:

- 1. Reduce bureaucracy for frontline social workers**
- 2. Help experienced practitioners stay at the frontline**
- 3. Recruit top graduates and offer ongoing training at all levels**
- 4. Allow social workers to run their own practices like GPs**
- 5. Create a Chief Social Worker to give the profession a public face**
- 6. Focus inspections on face-to-face frontline practice, not just data analysis**
- 7. Publish Serious Case Reviews in full so that lessons can be learnt**
- 8. Replace ContactPoint with a signposting system for genuinely vulnerable children**
- 9. Instigate a universal Health Visitor scheme**
- 10. Promote voluntary social worker schemes**

Labour has been about management, the Conservatives will be about the workers.

Our Policies and Proposals

1. Reducing bureaucracy

Essential to restoring the effectiveness of frontline child protection will be allowing professionals the space to breathe and think. An overemphasis on regulation and centralised control has meant that social workers at the sharp end are now obliged to spend an increasing amount of their time on administration to prove that proper procedure has been followed. This has led to a situation in which some social workers spend up to 80 per cent of their time on paper work rather than talking to families or other professionals.⁶ In order to counter this bureaucratic drift and get social workers back on the beat, we propose to:

- **Send in the experts.** We will immediately set up an expert panel of experienced social workers and academics to examine the utility of social work regulation and guidance issued since 1997, and to report back within six months with recommendations on how autonomy and responsibility can be returned to the frontline.
- **Allow Local Authorities to build systems that work for their employees, rather than Whitehall.** OFSTED recently reported its dissatisfaction that the Integrated Children's Systems (ICS) in many local authorities are cumbersome, time-consuming and have a negative impact on social workers' assessments.⁷ These systems are built to restrictive government specifications which greatly slow down record keeping. Tellingly, Kensington and Chelsea, who refused government grants and had their IT team sit design their own system with their social workers, have just been given an award for their innovation.⁸ We want all Local Authorities to have the freedom to develop their own user-friendly systems to specifications that reflect their needs rather than those of central government.

2. Keep experience at the frontline

As proposed in our 2007 green paper, *No More Blame Game*, we would like experienced social workers to have the option of staying at the frontline.⁹ The career structure of social work presently means that social workers are pulled into management posts rather than remaining as experienced practitioners working directly with families. There was unanimous support from witnesses to our social work commission for the widespread establishment of the 'senior practitioner' or 'consultant' role which would retain experienced social workers, who do not want to go exclusively into management, on the frontline.¹⁰ This approach has

⁶ <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2006/01/20/52465/Too-much-paperwork-say-staff.htm>; http://www.unison.org.uk/voluntary/news_view.asp?did=5112

⁷ <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2010/02/01/113692/ofsted-unhappy-with-councils-ics-child-protection-systems.htm>

⁸ <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2010/01/25/113641/government-rewards-council-that-rejected-ics-grant.htm>

⁹ *No More Blame Game* (2007).

¹⁰ *No More Blame Game*, pp. 35-6.

now been pioneered in Hackney and has resulted in an upsurge in applications for social work posts, and an increase in both morale and effectiveness.¹¹

3. Recruitment and Training

As we recommended to Laming Inquiry, there is an urgent need for a fast-track training programme to get high-achieving graduates on to the frontline.¹² Having been deeply impressed by Teach First which has placed top graduates as teachers in deprived areas, we will investigate a similar initiative, Care First, for social workers so that fresh talent can be brought into areas that need it most.

Across the board we would like to see tougher university application procedures and more demanding pass rates (at many universities the pass rate is 40 per cent). This should be coupled with continual training as we emphasised in our submission to Lord Laming's inquiry following the death of Baby Peter. There we proposed a system of ongoing training such as that required in the legal profession where the judiciary have their own training programme run by the Judicial Studies Board and all judges up to and including the Court of Appeal attend training courses on a regular basis throughout their time on the Bench.

We would like to see all social workers, including those who become line managers, senior practitioners and Directors of Children's Services, complete regular training as part of their CPD which should include secondment to the frontline. This will help keep them abreast of the latest thinking and to reinforce their understanding and sensitivity towards the work at the coal face.

4. Social Work Practices (SWPs)

We believe that social workers should have the right to manage and run their own practices in much the same way as GPs do or barristers their own chambers. David Cameron has proposed to roll out co-operative forms of ownership and deliver throughout the public sector. We believe that this model would work well in social work, as Professor Julian Le Grand has proposed,¹³ through the creation of social work practices (SWPs). SWPs will give social workers greater ownership of their working conditions and professional practice.

A serious failing in current provision is that children often have very many social workers during their time in care – the Centre for Social Justice found that some care leavers had had more than 20 different social workers.¹⁴ This high turnover of staff is often caused by social workers moving on from authorities with heavy caseloads and by long-term absence. Because SWPs will give social workers a stake in their practice it will encourage them to stay put, thereby increasing the stability and consistency of care essential for vulnerable children.

¹¹ [http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/jan/28/hackney-social-care;](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/jan/28/hackney-social-care)
<http://www.hackney.gov.uk/reclaimingsocialwork>

¹²

http://www.conservatives.com/News/Blogs/~/_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/SWC_Submission_to_Lord_Laming.ashx

¹³ Grand, Julian, *Consistent care matters: exploring the potential of social work practices*, Department for Education and Skills, 2007

¹⁴ Centre for Social Justice, *Couldn't Care Less*, p. 15.

Such practices will also be able to develop specialisms appropriate to the needs of children in a given area.

This is why we supported the Government when, in 2008, it introduced a scheme to launch social work practices in six pilot authorities.¹⁵ However we believe that the pilot was too limited in scope and that more authorities and more groups of social workers and care professionals could be encouraged to come forward and take part. We will give all authorities the chance to be involved in setting up co-operative SWPs, but we will also consider obliging failing authorities to outsource part or all of their social care provision.

5. Chief Social Worker

We will create a post of Chief Social Worker to champion the profession. Such a post has been instituted in New Zealand and met with great success in raising the profile and status of social worker following a succession of widely publicised child deaths. When the public are faced with a medical scare they look to the independence and integrity of a Chief Medical Officer for an explanation of the dangers and action to be taken but when children die at the hands of their parents the public have been instead confronted with politicians on the defensive or ill-prepared and anonymous local authority officers standing up for colleagues in the frame. A Chief Social Worker would act as the public face of the profession, promoting positive stories, spreading good practice and, where necessary, acting as a critical friend to local services and as a the link between the frontline and the government department.

6. Inspection

With the advice of the sector we will completely review the OFSTED framework for inspecting children's social care so that it concentrates on frontline results. Since taking on the social care inspection role of Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) there has been criticism at the capacity of OFSTED to extend its inspection regime from schools to child protection.¹⁶ The criticism could be directed at the whole structure of OFSTED given that until recently no one on the board or in senior management was a registered social worker. It is vital that those responsible for inspection understand the complexity of the social work task and the environment in which decisions have to be made.

Too much of the current inspection process depends upon data assessment rather than personal evaluation of staff and their relationships with children and families. Just as school inspectors spend time in classrooms, so care inspectors should spend time with social workers on their rounds. In addition, inspectors should be obliged to examine joint-working between social workers and other agencies to ensure that services are co-operating appropriately. And in order to ensure feedback from the profession, Directors of Children's

¹⁵

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/childrenincare/socialworkpracticespilots/swppilots/>

¹⁶ E.g. the position of the Association of Director's of Children's Services <http://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/968932/ADCS-condemns-Ofsted-wasting-time-money/>; Eileen Munro <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2009/05/27/111653/ofsted-slated-for-tick-box-attitude-to-child-protection.htm>.

Services and key social workers should be able to be seconded to OFSTED and play a part in inspections of other authorities.

We will end the absurdity of child inspection records being destroyed after only three months.¹⁷ In the world of financial services the Financial Services Authority, for example, has the power to demand records be kept going back seven years yet when a vulnerable child is involved the paper trail may be curtailed after just three months.

7. Serious Case Reviews

Since the death of Baby Peter in Haringey we have campaigned for the publication of anonymised full Serious Case Reviews rather than just executive summaries. In both the case of Baby Peter and the torture of two boys in Edlington it was found that the executive summaries did not accurately portray the account in the full report. Full publication is consequently needed to restore public confidence in child protection. Most importantly, we owe it to the families of children who have been killed or injured to learn from each tragedy. At present very few bodies are allowed read full reports – only the commissioning authority, Ofsted and the DCSF – and this clearly limits the opportunities for authorities to learn from each others mistakes.

When a patient who has been in contact with mental health services kills someone, mental health trusts have to commission an independent Mental Health Homicide Investigation. These are comprehensive, painstaking reviews which are anonymised and published in full. These reports are often over 150 pages long and stand in stark contrast to the inadequate 16 pages of the first executive summary of Baby Peter's SCR.

Analysis by Ofsted has also shown that the quality of SCRs is patchy.¹⁸ We are also concerned that Local Safeguarding Children's Boards can potentially commission individuals with strong personal links to the authority and that this might affect a review's impartiality. As a result we are proposing to create a list of approved authors of SCRs maintained by a central body who would act as the arbiter of quality, both of authors and of reports.

8. ContactPoint

We were opposed to the introduction of children's database proposed in the 2004 Children Act and have subsequently committed to scrapping ContactPoint. We believe that a database of 11 million children, accessible by 400,000 adults creates more dangers than it removes. Given the Government's appalling track record of keeping public data safe, it is highly likely that the security of the nation's children will be compromised. Instead of spreading resources so thinly, we propose to introduce a national signposting system for genuinely vulnerable children which will contain minimal details and only be accessible by a small number of key professionals. In order to give added protection to the children on this system, it will not contain the personal details of the child, only those of the children's services department who have handled their case.

¹⁷ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/70/8121004.htm>;
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/baby-p/3703059/Three-children-die-from-abuse-every-week-Ofsted-chief-Christine-Gilbert-reveals.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/News/Press-and-media/2009/October/Serious-case-reviews-lessons-being-learnt-but-more-still-to-do>.

9. Health Visitors

We are committed to introducing a universal health visitor scheme so that all mothers will receive a thorough level of support in the first days, weeks, months and years of a child's life. This is a major undertaking which will give families the extra help they need to give children a healthy, happy start in life. This is the best form of early intervention for families that are struggling – an extra pair of hands, an expert mind and a conduit to other services. But health visitors can also be an early warning system for social workers, drawing attention to families that may need more intensive help, and, when necessary, drawing attention to child protection.

10. Volunteer Social Workers

Running parallel to our health visitor programme we would like to encourage more volunteer social work. The original Commission enquiry took evidence from Community Service Volunteers (CSV) about their volunteer social worker project. Findings from the pilot project in Bromley have now been evaluated and show very encouraging results.¹⁹ Cases involving volunteer social workers working alongside professionals initially have resulted in children coming off the at-risk register earlier and staying off for longer. The costs of running such a scheme are relatively small compared to the costs of maintaining children on the register and the response from professional social workers has been very positive. Other councils are now looking to adopt the scheme and we will encourage other authorities look at assessing its possible adoption.

¹⁹ <http://www.csv.org.uk/volunteering/mentoring-befriending/child-protection;>
[http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/dec/17/child.protection.volunteers.](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/dec/17/child.protection.volunteers)