


Children's social care review – Case for Change – a step towards consensus?

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There are few more important questions than how a society looks after its children, and there are few that raise such deep and heartfelt interests. When is it right to remove a child from their family to protect them? When the state does intervene, how should it look after children, so they can thrive? How do we recognise the great things social workers do, and how do we react when things go wrong?

In embarking on the review Josh MacAlister and his Experts by Experience have taken on the challenge of answering all these questions, and many more. It's not surprising that views on the review are mixed. However, the [Case for Change](#) published on 17 June could be a starting off point to build consensus for change.

A key line in the report is "we are good at describing the challenges in the system but progress improving the system has been slow". In particular, the report recognises that successive attempts to address concerns of the day by a gradual accretion of legal duties and process, assuming a 'one size fits all' approach will work, has too often created a straitjacket, rather than a foundation for best practice.

Past approaches to 'bottom up' change may have been locally effective, but attempts to then scale an initiative to other areas have not been universally successful. The report puts this down to the overwhelming impact of system constraints, and it might also be added that these initiatives too rarely receive sustainable funding. Perhaps more importantly a 'lift and drop' approach may fail to respect the importance of place, of 'ownership' on the part of professionals, and of engagement with local communities. These will often have been key to the success of a project in its original location.

The report also recognises the extent to which factors outside the social care system impact on families and outcomes. Poverty, housing, addiction, health, domestic abuse and crime are all referenced. British Association of Social Workers (BASW), responding to the paper, are clear in their view that austerity policies and poverty are linked to increases in demands on children's services. The report does make it clear that whether or not services are reformed, more funding will be required.

What the report does not do is attempt to point the finger of blame, and it has come in for some criticism for this. However, if we are looking to make sustainable positive change, then what we need to know is what has not worked, not who was responsible. If we are to build consensus between Government, service leaders, professionals and communities then we need to start building collaboration and consensus now.

What does the future hold? The Case for Change is an interim document, which invites responses on the topics it raises. The Review will continue to collect evidence through engagement events and focused work examining initiatives at a local level. Therefore we are some way from seeing final recommendations. However, this document, and consideration of reform in the wider health and care system, offers significant clues to what might follow.

We can expect recommendations for a paring back of statutory duties on local authorities, and perhaps an emphasis on a legislative framework which will provide the essential tools for effective working in their place. The importance of system working is a clear message, though there may be a case to move away from a 'one system' approach to think about a number of local systems, in line with the ICS reforms. In connection with this it is likely that we will see proposals which recognise the importance of place as the viewpoint from which to understand what needs to be done and to deliver, with community engagement and empowerment a key part of place-based working.

The report is right in saying that in the past it has been easier to identify problems than to fix them, and past experience may lead some to question whether the review will lead to long term change. However, with change in the air, and reforms to health and care already moving apace it may also be right that this could become a once in a generation opportunity to effect positive change, if we let it.

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