

Lord Laming: A timely and welcome review of the child protection services

Sue Berelowitz looks at the role of social workers and the tough decisions they face and argues that when mistakes are made they can lead to tragic circumstances which must be learnt from and not repeated.

England's current child protection system has solid foundations. We should remember that thousands of children are kept safe every day by the current laws, guidance and the sheer hard work, courage and determination of our social workers and other child care professionals on the frontline.

Most of us recognise that, despite a number of critical media reports about the profession, social workers are faced with tough decisions on a daily basis while carrying out an enormously valuable role. However, when mistakes are made they can lead to tragic consequences, like Baby P and Victoria Climbié and it is important we learn from them so they are not repeated.

The scale of the task faced by child protection services is huge.

Information from the Department for Children, Schools and Families

shows that on 31 March 2008, 37,000 children were the subjects of care orders and 29,000 were the

subject of a child protection plan. Home Office data reveals that in 2007/08, 55 children were killed by their parent or by someone known to the child.

It was right therefore that, following the tragic death of Baby P, the government acted decisively last year by asking Lord Laming to review the effectiveness of child protection procedures across the country. Lord Laming's report made 58 recommendations for improving and

strengthening child protection procedures. These range from the training and continuous professional development of social workers to a reassessment of court costs for care proceedings and also cover other professions and services such as health and legal services. However the overarching message was that the commitment through the Every Child Matters programme to support vulnerable children and young people in a holistic and integrated way should be maintained. This has been widely welcomed.

The government's new Social Work Taskforce will play a key role in strengthening and improving social work by reforming training,

especially by placing greater emphasis on practical work, by raising standards, by improving recruitment and retention and by supporting social work leaders.

Keeping children safe from harm requires the implementation of basic good practice – the

child must be seen and listened to, chronological records kept and agencies must share information.

I was delighted that Lord Laming placed the views of young people at the heart of his report, particularly those who have worked with us at 11 MILLION.

The young people we spoke to have told us how important it is to have a relationship with a trusted adult, someone, like their social worker, who will listen to their

views. They said that being asked for their opinion and giving feedback helped them to feel valued.

As one 15 year old girl said to us 'every child should be listened to, no matter how difficult they are to talk to'.

Professionals should be supported to exercise good judgment and focus on the views and best interests of children. Lord Laming's recommendations will certainly help them to attain this.

In direct response to Lord Laming's recommendation, the government will strengthen local safeguarding children boards to make them effective local watchdogs for the protection of children and hold the Children's Trust and local agencies to account.

A lot has been achieved to improve child protection in this country since Lord Laming's 2002 inquiry into child protection following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié.

Since 2002, I believe the implementation of the Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and the Children's Plan are significant steps in the right direction. We now need to redouble our efforts and Lord Laming himself has challenged us all to do more to ensure we have the best possible child protection services.

Everybody needs to constantly re-examine their practice to ensure that vulnerable children are listened to and protected and that no child dies or is seriously injured because of failures in the network.

We must never be complacent when it comes to child safety. ■

Sue Berelowitz is Deputy Children's Commissioner for England.

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