



London Borough of Hackney Children's Social Care

Reclaim Social Work - November 2008

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In April 2006 we launched The Way We Want To Do Things Here. This set out what we wished to achieve through our child care strategy and expectations of practitioners and managers within Children's Social Care (CSC). It also outlined what support staff could expect from the organisation and the performance management arrangements in place. These key messages have not changed.
- 1.2 By 2007 a series of factors existed which required us to rethink what we needed to do to take children's social care through to its next stage on this journey and in May of that year we launched a consultation period with staff and partners. In November 2007 we published the details of our extensive change programme in Hackney and by this stage we were calling this programme "Reclaiming Social Work" (RSW). This is now a well known brand and one which represents a fundamental and whole systems change for social work intervention with vulnerable families. This document sets out the reasons why we did this, the model itself, how far we have come to date and what we think there is still left to do.
- 1.3 We are committed to providing high quality services to children and their families. We recognise that the job of social work is a challenging one requiring a range of complex skills and a sound knowledge base from which to practice. This includes the skills and knowledge to carry out effective assessments, implement intervention methodologies with families, understand both the physical and emotional development of children and young people, the ability to make positive relationships with families and other professionals, strong report writing skills and other good communication skills. Practitioners also need to be confident, articulate, professional and have stamina and determination. In short to provide an effective social work service is a difficult job. We have set high expectations of ourselves to support good social

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work practice and also expect staff to perform at a consistently high standard.

- 1.4 Children's social care in Hackney is in the middle of its journey towards excellence. In recent years there has been substantial improvement in meeting and in exceeding many national performance targets. Many new systems and operational procedures are now in place and new performance management arrangements are developing. All reflect our ambition to make sure that the system that supports social work practice is essentially intelligent by being expedient, flexible and supportive.
- 1.5 This paper is written primarily for staff, but we recognise that our audience is now much wider. We warmly welcome all the interest generated by Reclaiming Social Work and have no doubt that the contributions made by so many have helped refine our thinking. Whomever the reader, we need your friendly engagement with this process and we value your views. This is new ground for children's social care in this country and some of what we describe is a significant departure from how things have historically operated.
- 1.6 We know what we are doing charges the organisation to effectively manage significant change in how we conceptualise our role, function and attitude. It is not tenable to attempt such wholesale change without significant political support. The Mayor, lead member for children, Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services are not only interested in what we are doing but are most supportive and committed. They all continue to challenge our thinking and have raised many questions to which we have responded. Amongst these challenges and questions are:
 - What will we actually change?
 - Will outcomes be improved from the perspective of families?
 - Will life opportunities for children and families be widened?
- 1.7 The London School of Economics and Political Science is leading the evaluation of Reclaiming Social Work and this will help us answer these questions, with the first interim report expected in Spring 2009. However, there is every indication that the model we have implemented has already had a profound and positive impact on the lives of many families we work with.

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2. The Families We Support

- 2.1 Hackney is an exciting place to work. It is a diverse Borough where many different communities live and thrive. Its cultural richness is one of the many positive aspects of working in Hackney. The challenge for social work is to effect positive change in children's lives within the poverty and deprivation that many families live and the discrimination that many families face on a day to day basis. Race and class impact on every aspect of people's lives.
- 2.2 We know that the needs of the families we support are hugely diverse and that our responses must be tailored to individual need and family circumstances. However, there are clearly some very striking and frequently presenting features of our casework. Adult health and behaviours are central to understanding parenting capacity which is limited often, and to a greater or lesser extent, by parental mental ill health, learning difficulties, drug and alcohol misuse and domestic violence. These behaviours often lead to dysfunctional and chaotic family circumstances which result in children's needs not being met.
- 2.3 We need to develop our response in particular to these circumstances. This needs to reflect the multi professional skill mix within the local workforce and in particular a robust and tested methodological approach.
- 2.4 With some families support must be long term. The level of need within the families who come to our attention is often very entrenched and quick fix solutions will not work. We need to stabilise a family's situation and then consider how best to approach long term change that is consistent with the welfare of the children. Sometimes we need to make a decision that the best we can do is provide continued support to maintain children and young people within the community. We need to ensure that the resources within the service match the level of need.
- 2.5 Critical to our assessment of children's needs is an understanding of the importance of emotional warmth, positive attachment and resilience and the role this plays in predictions of positive future outcome.
- 2.6 We also always need to remember that where we do need to bring children into the care system, the quicker they return, the higher the chance of successful reunification. We need to continue to strengthen our willingness and ability to manage risk rather than being risk averse. The latter often satisfies professional anxiety but frequently leaves children floundering in the care system when remaining within their family network would be better for them.

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- 2.7 Some adults present serious risk to children. The ability to accurately assess risk is crucial and the ability to act fast is vital. Protective factors and the strengths of families need to be emphasised in every instance but a child's welfare and safety is always paramount. Whilst we want to give a clear message that we are in the business of supporting families, child protection takes priority, every time.
- 2.8 Where there is evidence of significant harm and action to protect children is necessary we will always fully support taking appropriate steps to secure their safety. This may result in the removal of the adult or where that is not possible, the child, from the family.

3. The Way We Work With Families

- 3.1 We believe that to some extent in this country social work as a profession has lost its way, lacks confidence, expertise and gravitas, is over-bureaucratised and risk averse. Nationally, local authorities have to grapple with the consequences of this. It is important to state from the start that it is our intention to reclaim social work and change what it has become both here in Hackney and nationally as well. We believe that, whilst assessment should remain central to planning and decision making, more of our time must be spent on direct intervention with families to effect positive change. Strong professional development and clinical support is needed to achieve this. We are providing this in Hackney.
- 3.2 We are recruiting high quality practitioners who share our vision to radically improve the quality of social work we offer families. We are reducing changes of social worker and creating systems which allow us to respond holistically to families needs, and in such a way which ensures continuity of understanding and consistency in decision making. We are organising services so far as is possible in a way which supports the promotion of the concept of one family, one social worker but balance that with the advantages which specialisms can bring. Over time we will see whether the specialisms we have retained justify, in terms of quality of work and outcomes for children, the change of workers they create.
- 3.3 We need to continually expand our capacity to provide targeted family support to reduce the need for children to become looked after, supporting families with appropriate skilled interventions and practical support, both in response to crisis and for some families, as part of a long term support package. Where we do initiate care proceedings we ensure that pre proceedings' planning is of the highest calibre.

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- 3.4 We want to get better services delivered earlier and quicker to families. Our partnership with other professionals is critical. It is hard enough for families to have a number of different people with different professional perspectives impacting on their family life without the relationships between those professionals being fractious, competitive and mutually dismissive. Unfortunately in the past this kind of interaction would not be unusual. We are now demonstrating the utmost respect for the other professionals we work with, and resolve differences and tensions far away from our interactions with families. Well coordinated and thoroughly planned interventions whether additional or specialist support, are bringing with them great benefits for children and families.
- 3.5 Too often in the past it is possible to see how professional stories that are built around families and their children have lacked substance and have led to ill informed and sometimes harmful approaches and decisions. In the often stressful, high risk and highly active environment that is children's social care it is all too easy to lose sight of our purpose and our values. This is often illustrated by a tendency to behave in punitive, risk averse ways towards some of the most vulnerable children and families in our society. In our work with families we now stop, listen and think about what has been said and the meaning this has for the child's welfare. We are seeing staff take responsibility for their work by checking the facts and exploring the substance of allegations. Our staff have confidence in their ability to adopt a position, even if it is different from an historic professional stance and test their hypothesis in circumstances safe for the child. This is principally about learning to manage risk rather than remove it by removing the child from the family.
- 3.6 Whatever the circumstances, we are facilitating partnership with parents and showing empathy in our professional behaviours. This ensures the best chance for enhancing wellbeing, safety and life chances of the families we work with.
- 3.7 Families and children want consistency and we have a responsibility to make sure that we achieve this where ever possible. This requires units to be flexible and responsive in the roles and tasks they undertake. The driver for decisions on who does what within the units and across the organisation is the interests of children and families and not procedural and/or service specifications. The latter are there to guide us and not to bind us.
- 3.8 We have expanded significantly our capacity to provide targeted family support to reduce the need for children to become looked after, supporting families with appropriate skilled interventions and

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practical support in times of crisis and for some families, long term support. Everyone needs to be very familiar with the menu of services on offer and how to access them. The role of the Joint Allocation Resource Panel is pivotal to providing a holistic response to families needs. This is your gateway to additional support for families – additional to the direct work you undertake with families and includes both in house provision and those services we commission through the community and voluntary sectors.

Separating Children from their Families

- 3.9 Using family support services alongside a focussed social work intervention, short or long term, in order to keep families together will, in many circumstances, be in the best interests of children.
- 3.10 Separating children from their families either through voluntary agreement with parents or through care proceedings is such a monumental decision in a child's life we think that despite our wish to devolve what we can through the organisation this is one decision which should be made using the collective wisdom of a range of people. The weekly Resource Panel, usually chaired by the Assistant Director and attended by consultants, Heads of Service and Principal Lawyer, can also help to ensure that where there is a significant chance that, with a coordinated care plan, children can safely remain with their parents or extended networks, the resources required to do this are properly mobilised. In essence the Panel shares an informed responsibility for separating families and shares the risk when decisions are made to keep children with families or extended family.
- 3.11 For the last 18 months the Resource Panel has operated to scrutinise particularly our initiation of care proceedings. The Panel is presented with a case following all preparation work for removal. The new Public Law Outline now being piloted in London sets out very clear guidance on what that preparation should be. The Resource Panel in Hackney has been using very similar standards for many months. Cases are better prepared, there is consensus between all senior managers and the Principal Lawyer that care proceedings is in the child's interests and that all alternatives have been properly explored.
- 3.12 Through various mechanisms our reputation in Court has improved dramatically. We have moved from a position where calls from Judges for Hackney's senior management to attend Court were a frequent event to that now being very rare. In addition through better scrutiny of applications for proceedings and the extensive family support services on offer the number of children in Court proceedings has significantly decreased. This is having a very positive effect as it means that time is

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not spent constantly juggling the many demands of court cases but rather the focus is on keeping families together safely.

Children in Care

- 3.13 Some children will inevitably end up in care despite our very best efforts to avoid this. When this happens our absolute priority should be to return them home as quickly as possible wherever it is safe to do so. Inevitably for a small group of children it will be our responsibility to find permanent alternative care for them and sometimes that will mean staying in our care until they become adults. This is a huge commitment to children and one we need to execute with determination and warmth.
- 3.14 Wherever there is drift this will be robustly challenged, whether within CSC or across the Children's Partnership. When working with babies or very young children work needs to be accelerated towards permanency. When we are in court and we believe any prognosis for rehabilitation with birth parents is poor we argue for adoption without delay. Where this is the child's best chance we mustn't ignore it because of the competing interests that the Courts must consider. It is not our job to balance the interests of all parties. Ours is to promote and protect the interests of the child. We mustn't allow our professional opinion to be sidetracked by our concern for others' responses. If we believe permanency is the best option then we should pursue it, even when this is at the early stages of proceedings.
- 3.15 Everyone when considering plans for children in care should be asking the question what this child wants to happen next? This is not because their wishes will be always and necessarily be met but they must be considered. In care planning the wishes and feelings of children will tell you a lot about the chances of those plans being successful. Most importantly, listen to children and keep on listening. We must not be afraid of children's emotional lives. The loss and change that children in care experience can be very painful and it's sometimes easier for professionals to ignore it. This can add to a child's sense of isolation and rejection. Make sure you don't add to that. One of the best ways to do direct work with children in care is through life story work. There are some excellent tools that can be used and we have workers within Adoption and Fostering services that can help you think through how you may want to use these. Children often love this kind of engagement and it is a great way of showing your interest and care as well as enabling them to think through their story and make better sense of it.

4. How We Organise Our Services

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- 4.1 In previous sections we have emphasised some of the key principles upon which we organise our services. We don't need to repeat that other than to say we want to provide families with the least intrusive intervention possible which will protect children and sustain long term change and secure the best outcomes for children where permanence has been established outside of the family network.

Social Work Units

- 4.2 For most of the Children's Social Care service the professional operational arrangements are based on the Social Work Unit (SWU). This includes a qualified social worker, a children's practitioner (see below), a unit coordinator and clinician time. The unit is always headed by a Consultant Social Worker (CSW).
- 4.3 The CSW has full responsibility for all cases allocated to their unit. Each family, child and young person is known to each member of the SWU. Each SWU meets weekly to agree the tasks needed to be undertaken that week. The tasks are allocated to members of the SWU according to availability, skill, and knowledge of and relationship to the family. Direct work is undertaken by everyone as appropriate (including the CSW). Additional support is commissioned from tier 2 services (including our voluntary sector partners) the Contact Service, the Parenting Support Service and Rapid Response Service. The unit coordinator ensures that everyone's diaries are well planned, that all meetings are appropriately scheduled and organised and that information management systems are in place and data is provided as necessary. The SWU is given a high degree of autonomy and is expected to take responsibility for the decisions made and the actions taken.
- 4.4 The SWU operates as a whole. The CSW line manages the social worker and children's practitioner. The Clinician receives clinical supervision and line management from the Supervising Clinicians within Family Support. The unit coordinators are line managed by Administration Managers within each service area.
- 4.5 We recognise that in London in particular there is a shortage of social workers with the right skill mix to meet the demands of the work but we still need to have the capacity to do the work. To manage this dichotomy part of our strategy is to create a new role as part of the social work unit, the Children's Practitioner. This post does not require a social work qualification but does require a level of skill and ability to complete many of the tasks currently undertaken by social workers. The post holder must have a good first degree. To

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date these posts have attracted, amongst others newly qualified social workers, teachers and assistant psychologists.

- 4.6 The Children's Practitioners have opportunities to progress their careers via the MA social work qualification.

Checks and Balances

- 4.7 The new system is requiring us all to stop using middle and senior managers for tasks which should clearly be within the skill set of practitioners. We have placed appropriate responsibilities within appropriate roles and salary grades and want to encourage a much stronger sense of ownership of casework amongst those who best know the children and families we work with.

- 4.8 What we are creating is intended to be a new paradigm for social work. The social work units need to have both a good understanding of evidence based interventions and at the same time and all the time understand and be able to manage risk and be able to conceptualise significant harm within all the work they do with families. We must never lose sight of the need to protect children from significant harm.

- 4.9 We are committed to creating a culture where good social work thrives. This means reducing the bureaucratic burdens on units and creating a new relationship between CSW and managers. This is a challenge for the organisation and for managers and we are committed to helping managers manage differently.

- 4.10 This does not mean a complete free reign on major decisions, for example, whether to commence care proceedings or use of residential care. There is a clear set of decisions which will be made within the system. This is called our matrix of responsibility. We are giving consultant social workers a lot more responsibility as well as flexibility about their day to day case work and how staff manage their work time and personal commitments.

- 4.11 In order for the units to be able to spend more time with children and their families, involved in constructive and well thought through interventions, they need to be released as much as possible from the day to day business of keeping an organisation running effectively. This means that Group Managers need to be supporting units by doing that which would otherwise reduce direct work with families. For example:

- Sickness monitoring, return to work interviews;
- Occupational health matters;
- Health and safety

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- Recruitment processes
- Capability and disciplinary matters
- Budget monitoring and planning
- Case Audits
- Developing procedures and recording formats
- Corporate engagement
- Strategic management.

4.12 Group managers need to create the optimal conditions for enabling SWUs to flourish. Of course Group Managers will be available to discuss complex cases and provide supervision but in general they should be far less involved on a day to day basis in case work and much more involved in creating an infrastructure which supports and develops the units and other staff in the organisation.

4.13 Unit co-ordinators also have a critical role in making life as easy as possible for the units. They need to be very proactive, thinking ahead of the game and finding solutions before the others in the Unit even know there is a problem. They lead on:

- Diary management
- ICT Solutions
- Organising statutory reviews and conferences
- Organising meetings – venues, invites etc
- Setting up children's medicals, dental appointments and holiday activities
- Making sure the right papers are available in the right format at the right time
- Recording case decisions taken in the unit meetings direct onto children's files
- Being available to sort out basic things for children, young people and families
- Devising and supporting systems which enable the Unit to track timescales for statutory visits, reviews, Court Directions etc.

5. The Work We Do With Families – Our Methodology

5.1 Through our own professional experience backed up by research evidence¹ and advice from our academic mentors we are very clear about the methodologies we want to use in our work with families.

<http://www.hackney.gov.uk/reclaiming-clinical-manual.doc>

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- 5.2 We are the first social care service in the country to state clearly the methodological approach we expect our staff to take. Our view is that we should use a systemic approach in all our practice, management and leadership and that our interventions with families should be designed using social learning theory as the key way to create change. The detail of our methodological approach is contained in our clinical manual which should be read in conjunction with this paper. Not only does it describe this but also describes the journey we have taken over the last three to four years in bringing different clinical expertise into social work case work.
- 5.3 We expect each consultant social work unit to become familiar with systemic practice and with a range of behavioural interventions and their application to work with families. Support will be given to staff to develop their interests and we are currently working with a range of academic partners to enable learning of these techniques and methodologies to become a central part of the development programme for staff.
- 5.4 It therefore follows that we will not support the use of interventions and other methods that are outside these parameters.
- 5.5 Any intervention undertaken must always be implemented within current departmental policy and procedure. This includes the London Child Protection procedures and the revised Working Together 2006.

6. Our Partnerships

- 6.1 More and more we will see the joining together of skill, expertise and resources as we move towards a fully integrated Children's Services. For example, we have excellent working relationships with CAMHS and much of the work already undertaken in the last 2 years lays the foundation for further collaboration. In general we have a clear expectation of everyone working within CSC to take a much stronger and influential position within the local Children's Services Partnership. We recognise that perhaps the right mechanisms for staff to do this haven't to date been present and this needs to change.
- 6.2 Senior and middle managers will have a critical role in particular for nurturing good relationships with partners and ensuring that the reputation of Children's Social Care is enhanced across the partnership. This includes openness to always exploring new ways of bringing resources together to reduce duplication, create innovation and enhance knowledge and skill and improve outcomes for children and families.

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7. Our Social Work Offer

- 7.1 All staff will eventually work to new job descriptions that embrace the vision of Reclaiming Social Work.
- 7.2 Recruitment arrangements are now much more systematic to ensure consistent decision making is taking place and the right level of skill and ability is being brought into the Service. We have introduced a rigorous testing process as a gateway to interview. To date all posts are recruited to with a Head of Service on the Interview Panel. All those applying for social worker roles and management roles are interviewed by panels chaired by either the Assistant Director or the Deputy Director.
- 7.3 Staff are appointed to the service and to a role and will be expected with consultation to move within the service. This will help us meet service requirements as necessary but also enhance professional development. This will offer staff an opportunity to refresh their knowledge and perspective of different demands as well as bring into the units their expertise and skill to share with staff.
- 7.4 We have described the new role of Children's Practitioner. This will be our key mechanism for traineeships for practitioners in social work. There will need to be a phased cycle of programmes to offer staff this qualifying opportunity as quickly as possible but without destabilising services. The posts will be offered as a career grade offering trainees the opportunity to train and then remain within the Service to come in as a qualified professional from other disciplines e.g. clinical psychologists, teachers, youth workers, offering them the opportunity to bring their expertise into a social care context.

Post Qualifications in Social Work

- 7.5 The post qualification framework has been reviewed by the GSCC. The new framework has been offered by Universities from September 2007. We are talking to academic partners about the possibilities of providing a post qualification within which we can influence the curriculum to meet our strategic direction. Once these arrangements are in place, we will place greater emphasis on supporting people through this process and review our arrangements for successful completion.

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New Ways of Working

- 7.6 Flexible working is an important part of attracting staff to work and remain working with the Council. We want each SWU to determine their work patterns according to the needs of families. However, we want to be as flexible as we can be within this, to meet the personal commitments of practitioners.
- 7.7 For instance, in roles where it is judged feasible, the directorate offers the option to work term time only. These can also include options to work weekends and evenings or early start and late finish. This kind of flexibility is much more likely to be feasible with the SWU structure, where tasks are allocated across a group of workers who all know the case and its priorities. We are considering how and if we should pilot home working and hot desking, and encouraging staff to come to work without cars. From December 08 pool cars will be available for use.

Skills and Knowledge Development

- 7.8 The existing core programme will continue. We now have our first cohorts of staff undertaking over the next 12 months the Foundation in Systemic Family Therapy (provided by the Institute of Family Therapy) and Social Learning Theory (provided by De Montfort University). In addition to this De Montfort is also providing a series of 6 day courses in Social Learning Theory. The whole management group across Children's Social Care have started the 1 year Systemic Management and Leadership course (provided by the Tavistock). There is a 1 week induction programme for everyone working in a social work unit and the Directorate and Council induction programmes continue. The spot purchasing arrangements for service wide training is still available through the Training Board. Attendance at conferences deemed to be of high quality and in line with our strategic direction will be encouraged.

Academic Teaching, Research and Training

- 7.9 We will aim to develop opportunities for senior staff to teach on social work courses. As part of this we are seeking closer links with high quality academic partners.
- 7.10 We also intend to develop the opportunity for those who already hold a Masters to obtain a Doctorate in Social work (The academic standard is equivalent to a conventional PhD).

Bursary Scheme

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- 7.11 This will continue. Employees with 2 years service will be able to bid to the Training Board for financial support for further study. The aim of the bursary will be to support staff to develop their skills for the benefit of local children and young people.

8. Our Management of Change

- 8.1 We are undertaking a wholesale shift in the way we do things. This is resulting in significant change and with this comes a range of risks which we recognise. We have to keep operations running despite significant change and ensure that the process is adequately supported to minimise delay. Over the last 9 months we have launched half of the units to date. We think it will take us at least another 12 months before we recruit to all 48 units but make no apology for this; bringing in people who believe in the principles which underpin Reclaiming Social Work and who have the right skill set is critical if we are to make RSW a success.
- 8.2 We have a Change Team who give 100% of their time to the task. The team has project management capacity, human resource and communications support. The senior management team meet weekly to ensure that operations are running smoothly. There is a Project Board which oversees implementation.
- 8.3 Despite there being many examples of impressive case work and management, there are a series of systems difficulties which continue to block potentially excellent case work. This is one of our biggest challenges and we have to find ways of stopping over bureaucratic processes strangling good social work practice. We have set up a Systems Change Board, chaired by the Assistant Director, which meets frequently and uses real case examples of processes which cause major frustrations amongst practitioners, so we can find ways of improving systems and importantly so we stop repeating the same mistakes.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 We hope that this paper has clearly set out the current position and gives a consistent message about our direction of travel. We do not underestimate the complexity of the task in hand and we depend on staff at all levels to have the resilience necessary to stay with us through this period. We do it for no other reason than to continue to improve our response to families in need.
- 9.2 We do not have all the answers and want to encourage debate and explore other ideas. We are very willing to continue to engage with staff

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at every level to help us to refine our vision and there are numerous opportunities for staff to do this. We ask that you engage with us fully and very much become part of the solutions we seek to find.

- 9.3 We have been greatly encouraged by the commitment, vision and support of so many of you in the last year. Your practice is bringing RSW alive and making the difference. We are humbled to be in the presence of so many gifted practitioners and nervous and excited about the journey yet to be travelled. We've come a long way but we know there is much more to do and we look forward to working with you all in the coming period.

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