

**Safeguarding children conference: child protection today and tomorrow**

**Hosted by Bath Spa University and David Niven Associates**

**Monday 27 June**

Thank you to Bath Spa University for hosting this conference, to examine one of the most important challenges we face in society. It's a great pleasure to be here.

And I'd like also to thank David Niven Associates, along with the university, for joining forces to offer a new qualification in child protection. It's a great example of private and public sector partnership, and I'm grateful to you for your respective work in the field of professional development.

I'd like to start by saying we should not forget that the vast majority of our children do enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

However, there are still – even now – too many who do not. Some of their names are sadly familiar to us - like Victoria Climbié, Peter Connelly and Khyra Ishaq - many more of them are not. But whether we hear about a case in the media or it goes unnoticed by the public, there is always an individual tragedy at its centre...

And it is those same individual tragedies that have so often been the triggers for different reviews and inquiries to be conducted into child protection over the years.

Every one of those reviews has resulted in calls for action. In response, legislation has been passed; rulebooks have expanded; more procedures and processes have been introduced, structures have been restructured.

But the fundamental problems have not gone away. Despite the very best of intentions, our hard-working, dedicated social workers, foster carers and other frontline professionals are too often still not able to make the difference they want to for vulnerable children and families. Day in day out they are up against a system that simply doesn't help them to do their best for children.

## **A different approach**

So, from the start, we wanted the Munro Review of Child Protection to be different.

That is why, unlike its predecessors, it was not commissioned as a knee jerk response to a specific

crisis’.

That is why it is recommending that regulation and prescription are reduced rather than increased.

And – most importantly of all – that is why it was focussed on the child, rather than the system.

The final report from Professor Munro called ‘*A child centred-system*’ is wide-ranging. It looks not just at the problems, but the underlying environment that allows – indeed sometimes inadvertently encourages - such problems to occur. The review takes a holistic approach to child protection, and bases its proposals on evidence and experience.

The report has been welcomed by

- the College of Social Work as: ‘A huge step forward’
- Nushra Mansuri at the British Association of Social Workers as: ‘Music to the profession’s ears’; and by
- the Children’s Commissioner for its emphasis on the child’s right to protection.

I am delighted that it has been welcomed as a breath of

fresh air for all of those hard working professionals involved in child protection.

And for that success, I have first and foremost to thank Professor Munro for her expert insight and analysis and the open, collaborative approach she has taken to her review over the past 11 months.

Her report builds on previous reforms and the work of eminent experts like Lord Laming and I want to pay tribute to the enormous contribution he has made in this area in the past too. Because this really is not about criticising previous well-intentioned efforts to improve the system. It's about making the time and space to understand why those efforts did not always work and learning from that to bring about long term sustainable reform in the future.

More than 11 years after the death of Victoria Climbié, I find myself asking the question: 'Have the ever more complex systems that were created, actually made children safer now than they were then?'

Has the enormous additional amount of legislation, regulation and guidance made that much of a difference where it really matters?...

The answer, I fear, may in fact be, no.

And that's why it is now a matter of the utmost importance that we restore public confidence in child protection, and restore confidence in the social worker profession.

The Munro Review report seeks to do exactly that. Its fundamental analysis is that the system has become too focused on compliance and procedures and has lost its focus on the needs and experience of children themselves.

Professor Munro makes 15 recommendations for reform. These need to be looked at in the round: they are inter-related and impact on the system as a whole and I should like to go briefly through them. But I start by saying that I think this is an excellent report in which I find little to disagree with.

First, she recommends revising the statutory guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* to distinguish the rules that are essential from guidance that informs professional judgment.

Second, she wants the inspection framework to examine the effectiveness of the contributions of all local services, including health, education, police, probation and the justice system to the protection of children.

3. She also recommends that the inspection framework should examine the child's journey from needing to receiving help, explore how the rights, wishes, feelings and experiences of children and young people inform and shape the provision of services, and look at the effectiveness of the help provided to children, young people and their families.

4. Local authorities and their partners should use a combination of nationally collected and locally published performance information to help benchmark performance,

facilitate improvement and promote accountability.

Professor Munro says it is crucial that performance information is not treated as an unambiguous measure of good or bad performance as performance indicators tend to be.

5. The existing statutory requirements for each Local Safeguarding Children Board to produce and publish an annual report for the Children's Trust Board should be amended, to require its submission instead to the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council, and, subject to the passage of legislation, to the local Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chair of the health and wellbeing board.

6. The statutory guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, should be amended to state that when monitoring and evaluating local arrangements, LSCBs should, taking account of local need, include an assessment of the effectiveness of the help being provided to children and families and the effectiveness of multi-agency training to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people.

7. Local authorities should give due consideration to protecting the discrete roles and responsibilities of a Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services before allocating any additional functions to individuals occupying such roles.

8. The Government should work collaboratively with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of General Practitioners, local authorities and others to research the impact of health reorganisation on effective partnership arrangements and the ability to provide effective help for children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

9. Local Safeguarding Children Boards should use systems methodology when undertaking serious case reviews with accredited, skilled and independent reviewers and a stronger focus on disseminating learning nationally. Ofsted's evaluation of Serious Case Reviews should end.

10. The Government should place a duty on local

authorities and statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young people and families.

11. The Social Work Reform Board's Professional Capabilities Framework should incorporate capabilities necessary for child and family social work. This framework should explicitly inform social work qualification training, postgraduate professional development and performance appraisal.

12. Employers and higher education institutions should work together so that social work students are prepared for the challenges of child protection work (including through better quality placements).

13. Local authorities and their partners should start an ongoing process to review and redesign the ways in which child and family social work is delivered.

14. Local authorities should designate a Principal Child and Family Social Worker who can report the views and experiences of the front line to all levels of management.

15. A Chief Social Worker should be created to advise Government and bring the voice of the profession to policy and of course this has been discussed recently in the Health and Social Care Bill.

These are Professor Munro's recommendations for reform.

Rightly, they address every aspect of the system.

Rightly, they place the child at the centre.

And rightly, they have as a basic principle the importance of placing trust in skilled professionals at the front line.

I recognize that it is vital that sensible policy is backed up by proper investment. The Government has already announced some funding to support workforce development, but the real cost is the cost of failure.

The current system needs fixing. Because it needs fixing huge amounts of resource are wasted. One local authority, that has been working with the Professor Munro and the review team, calculated that around 50 per cent of their children's social care workers time is wasted through

nugatory activity which they are now starting to recoup. A resounding endorsement for the need to eliminate unnecessary red tape if ever there were one.

Sadly, we need to recognise that, despite Government reforms and the hard work of professionals, tragedies will still happen. There are individuals who will harm children. We cannot eliminate that risk, but we can all work to help reduce and manage that risk.

Society is right to expect professionals to take responsibility and to make the best judgments they can in the best interests of children.

This Government believes we need to move towards a child protection system with less central prescription and interference, where we place greater trust and responsibility in skilled professionals at the front line.

Professor Munro has provided us with a thorough analysis of the issues. It is now for the Government, working with the sector, to help bring about sustainable reform.

I have established an Implementation Working Group –

drawing in expertise from local authority children's services, the social work profession, education, police and the health service – to work with Government to develop a response to Professor Munro's recommendations later this summer.