

# THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Despite unsung daily successes, children's services suffer high vacancy rates, low morale and public criticism. **Maggie Siviter**, a social worker in children's services for a quarter of a century, puts her head above the parapet to give a straight-talking personal account of what she believes is going wrong – and what needs to be done to fix it

**A**s an individual I try very hard in my profession to stand up for children and what is right. I wish I could tell you my working environment is supportive of doing that but it isn't always.

I qualified in 1992 and I like to think I was taught how to challenge and question my managers about why they make the decisions they do.

We now work in a culture where that is wholly and deeply unwelcome. So when a social worker asks 'why are we doing it this way?' we are usually met with defensiveness. I sometimes find it very hard to speak up in an environment that seems determined not to see its own failings.

I have felt like the boy in the story with the emperor's clothes. Social work has been believing that every fresh policy, every fresh review of our services is going to magically give us the clothes we are looking for.

Social work suffers from society's attitude towards failure. We instinctively look for scapegoats when something goes wrong. We look for the original ground zero decision maker. The person who made the decision from which we can see it all went horribly wrong.

Because we are so willing to find blame, we expend energy concealing our own faults. The net effect is that it obliterates openness and spawns cover-ups.

There is good and excellent social work out there, but good practice is too readily used to distract from our worst practices.

It is not good practice that has brought us to this, it's the poor practice that has.

The death of a child is a tragic loss which reverberates through our collective hearts causing much remorse and self-doubt.

But I want to draw attention to the other tragedies, the more everyday losses. Their frequency only adds to the tragedy.

These are the losses which occur when a family loses a child to adoption who they could have cared for had they been better supported.

The loss of innocence when a child is left in a harmful situation that hasn't been properly assessed and they haven't been listened to.

A child who is stateless and parentless because the legal safeguards they need haven't been placed around them.

A child for whom the care system only exacerbates their trauma with frequent moves and further rejection.

It's these more frequent and overlooked failings that our profession contributes to and ones many of you will have come across.

Continued overleaf



## feature

Like soldiers under fire in the trenches, anyone who draws attention to our plight is shouted down.

We were having these same conversations ten and 15 years ago when I was part of the training service that trotted out the integrated children's system: the electronic record system we currently have to use which we all know was implemented as a means to monitor what we do and how quickly we can do it. This is all about timescales, not needs.

Ultimately, in my view, that was to provide politicians with numbers they could trot out when they were being challenged.

Recent research showed one in five children were referred to social services in England before they reached the age of five. That's a phenomenal number. We over-focus on risk. We work through a whole checklist of things we know that potentially can cause harm to children and bundle them together and say this is a big risk.

But we are overlooking the very things that are placing children at harm. If we are busy risk assessing one in five children, where are our conversations? Where is the social worker that jumps into the hole and walks that family out alongside them?

The elephant in the room, the one that government, Isabelle Trowler [Chief Social Worker for Children and Families in England], senior managers, all of us collectively are overlooking and which I believe is one of the greatest risks to our children and our professionalism, is the rising culture of managerialism.

It seems to have gripped social work for as long as I have been a social worker. Managerialism values abstract statistical data. We know we are being counted, we are being deadlines, we are being tested. No one looks at the quality of the work we do and we are set unrealistic deadlines to achieve them.

It focuses on outcomes rather than experiences. We ignore the data that lies outside of our small circle of experience. We have no idea what happens to children after we work with them. We don't follow them up. We don't look and see why they have not come back. Yet we are measured on the children who do come back, who do need help, and that is seen as a failing.

We have become so worried about failure that we have created goals so vague that nobody can point the finger at us when we fail to achieve them.

They are fudging the real issue which is we don't get enough time and spread ourselves too thinly.

We do a dip sample of risk rather than

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identifying struggling families and working with and alongside them to support them out of the hole they have fallen into.

As social workers, we have had to develop some highly questionable coping strategies to work with the massive cognitive dissonance permeating our day-to-day encounters within our own organisations.

This increases the risk posed to children because we are too busy working defensively rather than proactively to safeguard.

We work in a management world that is too often oppressive, narcissistic, defensive, over-ambitious and has too narrow a perspective. It finds it difficult to predict failure and is blind to its own contribution when that failure does occur.

Many social workers find it difficult to challenge this managerial culture which places disproportionately greater emphasis on the decisions made by those furthest away from the situation requiring the decision.

I endorse the use of those tools that have helped other high-risk professions such as aviation and medicine develop a truly learning culture.

I would like to see our work underpinned by transparency, honesty and openness.

So how do we challenge ourselves to learn from our failings in a world of blame? How do we move to a culture of avoidable harm rather than our current state of culpable harm?

The harder we try to address where there might be more errors, where we act as those second and third eyes, the more defensive the practice becomes. The energy seems to be transferred into blame especially, perversely, onto the faultfinder.

My colleagues and I prefer a better way to ensure children get what they need. We see our managers as our second opinion providers, but very often the manager's decision-making is part of the problem. We don't go to a trusted older, wiser colleague and ask for their opinion. We don't take them with us on our visits. Medicine does that all the time, yet we are left to hold the situation by ourselves.

Medicine has no qualms about asking for a second opinion, patients have no qualms asking for a second opinion. In social work,

the stakes are equally as high. Why aren't we learning from those professions?

Getting it wrong is expensive. There is a huge human cost attached to it, but we find ourselves in an environment that doesn't always value that human cost.

The trouble is often the cost is deferred for such a long time it becomes invisible. The cost will be the adults who were looked after 20 and 30 years ago and the adversity they now face because of their experience.

Likewise, the cost will be about children who could have been brought up by their families but weren't or those left in their families that shouldn't have been.

We have structured our services to provide generic workers when the rest of the world relies on specialists. Why? We are the only profession that thinks a generic practitioner can answer every question. We can't.

I don't know enough about adoption to be able to walk into an adoption case tomorrow. Yet I am expected to be able to because of my qualification, irrespective of my experience or my 'expertise'. We expect social work to be a generic subject working in the complex world of adults and children and then across every particular need for that child. It's massive and it's asking too much.

The paradox of success is it is built upon failure. If we learned from our failures we should be one of the most successful professions around. Why aren't we?

I have seen more bodies buried in serious case reviews (SCRs) than there should be. In the structure around which SCRs take place there are too many vested interests in glossing over the failings. We need an open reporting culture. We need to recognise our near misses. We need to understand where we may have got it wrong both in the past and in the future.

We need to be able to talk to ourselves like the fallible human beings we are and treated with respect and compassion. Instead, we are over-regulated and over-controlled and not allowed to explore, reflect and think about what we are doing.

Social work needs to be organic, dynamic, evolving and responsive. How did we get in this box where we can't move, we can't breathe, we can't decide, we can't do anything, we can't create? We need great leadership to help us out of it.

*The above is an edited version of a talk given at a conference on the child protection system organised by The Transparency Project in June. The full version is available on BASW's website*