

## Maximising support for families in a system under strain

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***The children social care sector needs urgent reform to support families and avoid crisis, writes Jo Porter.***

The Case for Change Review was published in June 2021 and comes closely on the heels of the Public Law Working Group report, published on 1st March 2021. A recurrent theme in both reports is the importance of pre-proceedings work for families, with the Case for Change review clearly concluding that the focus of children's social care services is on crisis management as opposed to the early help and support. How can professionals working within a system under strain ensure that support is provided to families in need to avoid crisis?

On 17th June, a BBC news article drew attention to an independent review of children's social care, 'The Case for Change'. The review draws from work undertaken with researchers, academics, professionals within the system and families. It identifies several issues within the children's social care system and invites feedback by 13th August 2021 for its next phase.

The Chair, Josh McAlister, describes the children's social care system as "a 30 year old Jenga tower held together with Sellotape: simultaneously rigid and yet shaky", an analogy that many working within the system will recognise.

The Public Law Working Group report makes recommendations and produces guidance following work conducted by the Judiciary and professionals from all sectors working on child protection cases. Whilst this report's focus is care proceedings, some recommendations and observations are relevant when considering the need for early help and support for families.

A local authority has a general duty under s17 Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area and to promote the upbringing of children by their families

To access risk and what support is required, initial assessment is key. Training, experience, and support of the social worker conducting the assessment is crucial. An example of an issue raised by the Case for Change review was a lack of awareness of some social workers regarding domestic abuse which then impacted upon the assessment of need and the ability to build a working relationship with the family. Care should be taken when considering initial assessments to ensure that the approach and understanding of the work is clear so that the assessment is a stable base from which to work with the family.

S17 support is very wide ranging with the lesser known Sch2 Part 1 of Children Act 1989 setting out the duties in more detail. Sch 2(8) makes provision for children living with their families, including home help and assistance to enable the child concerned and his family to have a holiday, this support being given when considered appropriate. Sch 2(10) also provides for assistance with maintenance of the family home, steps being taken where reasonably practicable. While discretionary, these provisions should be actively considered.

Additional pressures placed on families due to the pandemic, will clearly change the type of support required as well as the availability of the support. It does not however, change the duty to consider the support once again demonstrating how crucial the initial assessment is.

Furthermore, the Public Law Working Group considers that the appropriate use of s20 accommodation could assist a family to avoid crisis. The emphasis here is on the correct use of s20 accommodation with the necessary understanding and informed consent of the parents.

If matters do have to proceed to the pre-proceedings stage, the pre-proceedings letter should identify clearly what the issues for the family are so that parents understand the issues and what they can do to address them with the support offered. In addition, both The Case for Change review and the PLWG identify the importance of the support available from the extended family and the importance of family group conferences.

Professionals have little choice but to work within the current system with all of its challenges. Assessment and support is key in identifying risks and avoiding crisis. This may not always be possible, but the attempts themselves may prove key in discharging the duty placed on the local authority.

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