

Child protection referral: Parent too busy with work, neglects her children!

In England, if social services have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer harm, they conduct a 'section 47 enquiry' and hold a child protection conference to determine what needs to be done to protect the child. What would happen if a 'Section 47' enquiry examined the 'Top Corporate Parent' (the Prime Minister) in connection with her care of today's 'looked after children'?

This 'child protection referral' examines evidence in the public domain. The referral will consider if the 75,420 children currently in care in England, are safe. If the evidence presented shows neglect and is compelling, then a Child Protection Plan should consider removing the care of England's 'looked after children' from the Prime Minister and her Department of Education.

In her defence, the Prime Minister might claim that every ounce of her energy is directed towards Brexit. Additionally, she could argue that she has delegated responsibility for children to her Minister Nadhim Zahawi, and before him for a few months Robert Goodwill and his predecessor, Edward Timpson was appointed by Prime Minister David Cameron. However, when it comes to child protection, Theresa May can't pin the blame for her negligence on her three baby-sitting Minister's, the buck stops with her!

The Prime Minister could claim that prior to taking office in July 2016, the neglect was already well established. Indeed to use her own words from a speech which she made on 'looked after children' on the 12 July 2005:

".....if we are truly to "look after them" we must do more than resign them to a life that for many is without hope – where they are two-and-a-half times more likely to become teenage parents, where between a quarter and a third of people sleeping rough on the streets were in care as a child: where a quarter of those in our prisons were in care as children; we can and we must do better!" (my underlining)
Theresa May (2005) ¹

However, her own words are used here to condemn her, she clearly understands the problems but far from 'doing better' under her stewardship, life for looked after children is much worse.

There is an abundance of evidence to confirm the need for this 'child protection referral' however, to give the Prime Minister a fair hearing, this referral will avoid hearsay evidence and partisan point scoring, using evidence only from official enquiries and reports published since she came to office.

¹ Theresa May (2005) Speech given on the 12th July 2005 <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2005-speech-on-improving-lives-of-children-in-care/>

Copious evidence of neglect is provided in The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children enquiry which was published in March 2017, ‘No Good Options’² an example is presented here, a quotation from ex Children's Minister, Tim Loughton:

‘Unfortunately, the Inquiry heard that across the country, there is insufficient resource for universal services, early help for families, and even statutory support for children classified as “in need”. Strikingly, in a survey conducted for the Inquiry, 89 per cent of directors of children’s social services reported finding it increasingly challenging to fulfil their statutory duties under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989’

Loughton goes on to state:

‘.. there is a crucial role for central Government in tackling two major issues: First, it must act to address the funding crisis engulfing children’s social care, and in particular the lack of resource for preventative and early intervention services. Second, it must take steps to understand the cause of such significant variation in access to services and the impact on vulnerable children’s outcomes.’

Theresa May took no action to address the funding crisis which was clearly detailed in the all-party enquiry ‘No good options’. Indeed, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (October 2017)³ report a 40% funding reduction with a predicted £2 billion funding gap in children services with three in ten children in England, living in poverty.

One year on, in July 2018, a second enquiry by The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children, ‘Storing Up Trouble – a post code lottery of children’s social care’⁴ Loughton (still the chair of this all-party group) reports:

‘We uncovered compelling evidence that children face a postcode lottery of protection from children’s social care and issues such as self-harm, bullying and domestic violence are treated differently from one area to another. Alongside variations in access to services, our evidence also suggests it is getting harder for children and families to get support. 70 per cent of the 1,710 social workers surveyed for this Inquiry told us that the threshold for helping ‘children in need’ had risen in the last three years, while half said the point at which a child protection plan was triggered had gone up. Knowing the potentially devastating risks of leaving children without appropriate support, it is unconscionable that we are putting children’s safety at risk by allowing families to fall into crisis before stepping in to help’.

.... ‘This Inquiry presents further evidence that money is influencing decisions about whether to offer support to our most vulnerable children. This is unacceptable. The

² ‘No good option - Report of the Inquiry into Children’s Social Care in England’ (2017) The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children Published by the National Children’s Bureau March 2017. <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/No%20Good%20Options%20Report%20final.pdf>

³ ‘A Country that works for all children’(2017) Association of Directors of Children’s Services [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS A country that works for all children FINAL.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_A_country_that_works_for_all_children_FINAL.pdf)

⁴ ‘Storing Up Trouble – a post code lottery of children’s social care’ (2018) The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children Published by the National Children’s Bureau July 2018. <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/NCB%20Storing%20Up%20Trouble%20%5BAugust%20Update%5D.pdf>

Government must act now and use the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review to put in place a sustainable funding formula for children's services that accounts for local need and enables local authorities to invest in early help and preventative services.'

Perhaps the most damning evidence of neglect comes from an unexpected source, the report by the National Audit Office, in the report 'Pressures on children's social care'⁵ (18-01-19). Ironically the audit office known for pointing out excesses in public spending, clearly highlights the harm being caused to children's social care by the government's 'selective austerity'.

'In 2016 the Committee of Public Accounts concluded that the Department seemed worryingly complacent that nothing could be done to improve children's services more quickly, and that the Department lacked a credible plan for how and by when it would make a difference and ensure that local authorities were intervening effectively to make a difference to children's lives. Until recently, the Department has not seen it as a central part of its responsibilities to understand drivers in demand for children's social care across all local authorities. Unless adequate and effective children's social care is in place, children in need of help or protection will be exposed to neglect, abuse or harm.'

The 'Department' referred to in this quotation is the Department of Education.

Theresa May could argue that this is beyond her control, 'There is no money tree!' and that we are living in a time of austerity. But she was able to find £1 billion for the Democratic Unionist Party in order to stay in office and it seems that she managed to locate £80 million for Nissan in Sunderland to help facilitate a smooth Brexit. It is true that austerity was not introduced by her, that toxic gift for local government was brought in by her predecessor David Cameron in 2010, at the same time as his Chancellor George Osborne, give companies £16.5 billion a year in corporation tax cuts, a level which has been maintained every year since 2010 including since Theresa May took office in July 2016 (see Helen Miller's Institute of Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN206⁶ for details and to explain the reference to 'selective austerity').

Given this heavy body of evidence (each of the references provides the details) and the continuing 'selective austerity', this child protection referral rests its case. We now need a 'Child Protection Plan' which properly funds children's social care and empowers those working with these most vulnerable children in society to care for them with dignity and human kindness.

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⁵ 'Pressures on children's social care' (2019) National Audit Office <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Pressures-on-Childrens-Social-Care.pdf>

⁶ Helen Miller (2017) Institute of Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN206 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/bns/BN206.pdf>