

# Taking a **NEW** APPROACH

**Stephanie Mathivet** considers the findings of the Munro review and the possible impacts of changes to safeguarding policy on early years settings...

**P**rofessor Eileen Munro and her team concluded their review of child protection systems in England in April this year. She's looking to make "long-term changes" to the system, reducing bureaucracy and enabling Local Authorities to move away from 'one size fits all' approaches, while developing local systems that are focused on the needs of the child. Many professionals working in social care reported being so weighed down by paperwork and targets that they've been forced to respond to the demands of the system rather than focus on children's needs. Many felt that too much of their time was being spent behind desks rather than working directly with children and families. It was also reported that too many referrals did not lead to a child protection investigation, and that the time and energy spent on processing these referrals took professional attention away from the cases that did need social work intervention. It was also felt that the Government's prime guidance document, 'Working Together to Safeguard Children', had grown to become a weighty tome that was difficult to navigate.



**Practitioners across the board need equal access to training in order to be effective in identifying and providing for those children in their communities who need extra support**



**STEPHANIE MATHIVET**

Munro's vision of a paper-light approach with clear guidance around what must be done, but with more emphasis on Local Authorities developing approaches to meet needs in their areas, will become reality in 2012. With it will come a new system for looking at referrals, so only those who require professional social work investigation and intervention will get through to social work teams – leaving social workers with more time to focus on complex cases. This will involve a triage-based approach where referrals are looked at by a panel, which will make a decision in terms of the thresholds concerned to direct the family towards the most appropriate services for their needs.

This concerns social work teams, rather than early years services, but Munro also devoted a whole section to the provision of 'early help'. This builds on the

Allen review and shares the basic message that the early years are critical in this respect. Certainly the findings from neuro-science have helped to focus all our gazes on the first five years as being crucial for child development. The high-importance of attachment and responsive care-giving for healthy brain development, that is linked to language and cognitive development, have helped to emphasise that helping parents who are having difficulties during their child's earliest years not only tackles problems now and prevents problems worsening later on, but is also cost-effective.

Early years services are vital in this agenda for preventative 'early help', as



## Registering concerns

To be effective, practitioners need to have systems in their settings or organisations that support procedures for what to do if they have concerns, supported by strong record-keeping systems that clearly detail what's necessary in order to build up the picture of concern about a child. The Plymouth Serious Case Review also spoke of the need for supervision of staff and managers by someone skilled in this aspect of staff management. Some Local Authorities have been developing systems to provide this level of non-managerial supervision of early years practitioners and managers to help develop reflective and critical dialogue on cases they are working on, as well as offer the emotional support that's sometimes needed. But questions remain about whether there is enough of it available at the time when it's needed, and whether it would be better that more training for managers and senior managers on this aspect of provision should be offered, while leaving Local Authorities empowered to provide in-depth supervision in the most extreme cases.





well as being important for picking up problems as they emerge and making timely referrals to social care. (Of course, 'early help' does not simply refer to help offered in the early years, but takes account of a range of services needed at whatever time of their lives that a child needs a service.)

## Refocusing Sure Start

The following sets out the elements of Munro's 'recommendation number ten':

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. The arrangements setting out how they will do this should:

- specify the range of professional help available to local children, young people and families, through statutory, voluntary and community services, against the local profile of need set out in the local Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA);
- specify how they will identify children who are suffering or who are likely to suffer significant harm, including the availability of

social work expertise to all professionals working with children, young people and families who are not being supported by children's social care services and specify the training available locally to support professionals working at the front line of universal services;

- set out the local resourcing of the early help services for children, young people and families; and, most importantly;
- lead to the identification of the early help that is needed by a particular child and their family, and to the provision of an "early help offer" where their needs do not meet the criteria for receiving children's social care services.

This suggests that the Government will retain a commitment on Sure Start programmes for the early years. While there is much evidence and support for these to be universal services, budget limitations are demanding a refocus of Sure Start offers towards intervention programmes and a reduction in universal services such as childcare. The duty of the Local Authority will be on securing sufficiency rather than directly

providing services, so providers from different sectors providing for children, young people and families are going to form the basis of this mixed economy of provision. This will entail Local Authorities deciding on priorities based on what's needed in their areas. This may have an impact on early years services as there will inevitably be competition for resources to provide services for children and families with more severely progressed difficulties and problems.

Most of us, from experience alone, support the premise that a universal range of services supporting children under five and their families is the greatest means of preventing later difficulties that arise from stressed parenting, the surest way of identifying the early onset of problems and the very best means of engaging parents in the social milieu of parenting where each learns from one another in supportive ways. However, what it also seems to be saying is that there needs to be a more community-based social work presence to support professionals, including those in early years settings, to work with families where children are 'in need', but who aren't receiving statutory social work support. We should welcome this in the sector as a great asset in being able to target 'early help' better, develop such services and be able to respond better to the various support needs families with young children have at various times.

## Better training

Munro is also recommending that there should be more training to support people like ourselves working, as she puts it, in the front line of universal services: those working with families on a daily basis, who are in strong positions to be able to identify problems and provide a more tailored input for that child and family. Training for early years practitioners has often begun and ended with identification of abuse and making a referral, but there's so much more to the role than that. Increasingly, early years practitioners are coming across parents whose situations reflect those 'factors affecting vulnerability' of the child – domestic violence, drug or alcohol problem use, mental health issues etc. Their training, whether as teachers or non-teaching practitioners, doesn't cover these issues, and very often initial sessions covering child abuse and child protection seem remote and ineffective later down the line when such problems are encountered for real. So, the call for training in this respect will receive a definitive "yes, please!" from practitioners in the sector, and perhaps a greater scope in Early Years Professional programmes to specialise in this area.

We also need to see the Munro recommendations in this respect along the same lines as the Tickell review of the Early Years Foundation Stage, which has placed greater emphasis on child protection in the proposed 'Safeguarding and Welfare Requirements', again strengthening the requirement of training for staff. However, our concerns must lie with how that training is to

## Able to act

Training enables practitioners to be confident and effective professionals, able to work within multi-disciplinary teams. Too often practitioners feel intimidated, and perhaps not always listened to in the way that they should, when making a referral or engaging in a child protection process. Sometimes they lack the skills if they're also unfamiliar with how the system works – it can be a very scary experience if you've never done it before.

As such, every designated person in

an early years setting must have the skills and knowledge to be able to lead their staff and help develop their confidence and skills in this aspect of their work, and there should be clearer guidelines on what skills and knowledge staff working in early years settings should be gaining from training. Individual access to away day training, even if it's of the highest quality, is less effective in bringing a whole team up to speed and establishing a team shared ethos, understanding and approach towards safeguarding children and protecting them from abuse.



be made available: many Local Authorities have had to cut back on providing this training – making it difficult for practitioners to get on courses – or may still provide it, but at a fee, which some settings may struggle to afford.

Providing services to better meet the needs of families in difficulty and ‘children in need’ requires much more than initial safeguarding training. Managers and designated persons need training that enables them to better supervise and support staff through the process of child protection investigations; and all staff need training to help them develop their skills as communicators to better engage parents in essential conversations about their child’s wellbeing, especially where concerns have to be expressed.

The early years sector should welcome the Munro Review of Child Protection, but we do need ‘to be in it to win it’ – to engage with Local Authorities on what training is needed and expected by the sector as well as the means of ensuring its accessibility and varied modes of delivery to meet different staff and setting needs. We already know the real difference we make in children’s lives in their early years, and how parents value what we do; the Munro recommendations should enable us to improve what we do regarding the most vulnerable of children and families and that can only be a good thing.

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