

'Good enough parenting' when government is 'the parent'

Michael Clare

This paper reviews the introduction of the UK Looking After Children practice and management materials in a number of Australian States and Territories against the background of a comparative analysis of UK central government systems to prescribe standards of service and to monitor outcomes for children in care. The writer argues that the UK Labour government commitment to a 'whole of government' interventionist set of activities and processes is significantly more successful in driving child welfare initiatives than the more fragmented and secretive systems in Australian States. Finally, the writer reflects on the central influence of commissioned research in informing needs and service outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Sharyn Low and ACWA for inviting me to give a paper at the Face to Face conference in Sydney, 2001, about the Looking After Children system in child and family welfare, on which this article was initially based.

SETTING THE SCENE: SIMILAR GOALS, DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

The aim of this paper is to reflect on key differences between the child welfare systems of Australia and the United Kingdom, particularly in relation to the nature of accountabilities to the needs and rights of the child in care. The paper explores the different patterns of commissioning, disseminating and integrating research studies about policies and outcomes in child protection and child welfare between the two national systems. It argues that the Australian child welfare system is unhelpfully fragmented at legislative, budgetary, standard-setting and audit levels, and advocates for an integrated national research strategy to inform and evaluate service standards, staff workloads and client outcomes. There will also be consideration of the relevance for Australian child welfare of the UK concept of 'the corporate parent' and, in particular, of the applicability in an Australian context of the Looking After Children assessment and planning tools.

The current emphasis in child placement in the UK can be traced back to a watershed publication (Department of Health and Social Security [DHSS] 1985) which summarised evidence of child placement practices and outcomes in that country. The findings of drift, pessimism and professional inertia presented in the summary of nine studies of foster care processes and outcomes prompted a national review of child placement practices. The powerful impact of the 1985 research summary report of these studies also encouraged a continuing Government-led policy of promoting research-informed practice. One significant outcome of this partnership between research, policy and practice has been the development of the Looking After Children (LAC) Project (Parker et al 1991; Ward 1995), a major strength of which is its explicit focus on research-led practice.

A second critical element of the LAC planning and review system is the recognition of the responsibilities of 'government as parent'. The UK 1989 Children Act places a practice premium on partnership with parents and consultation with children in out-of-home care, and the Looking After Children tools challenge 'custom and practice' when these norms are not in place. An underlying premise of this approach is that visibility and transparency in

*Associate Professor Michael Clare
Discipline of Social Work & Social Policy
The University of Western Australia
Nedlands, WA 6009
Email: mclare@cylle.uwa.edu.au*

practice are likely to increase with more public processes of partnership and consultation.

A key responsibility of the LAC tools is to operationalise 'good enough standards' for the care of vulnerable children – and to manage the collection and dissemination of evidence of agency performance against those standards. Key national government Ministers are *in loco parentis* in this scrutiny of child welfare outcomes. This explicit emphasis on the State as parent is reflected in the UK utilisation of the term 'Looked After' for children placed in the care of the State under a legal order. The Australian term 'Ward' has a more distancing and objectifying connotation.

A key responsibility of the LAC tools is to operationalise 'good enough standards' for the care of vulnerable children – and to manage the collection and dissemination of evidence of agency performance against those standards.

THE UK GOVERNMENT: MECHANISMS FOR SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT

An integrated, systematic, whole-of-government effort has been harnessed to implement the Looking After Children Project in the UK. The first mechanism for government as systems manager is the relevant child welfare legislation – the 1989 Children Act and the Children (Leaving Care) Act, 2000. The UK government recently responded to the evidence of poor life chances for young people in and leaving care by placing a duty on local authorities to maintain services for care leavers until the age of twenty-one years (House of Commons 1998).

Of key significance for systems management is the impact of a second mechanism – an integrated government strategy to commission research studies to inform legislation, policy guidance and practice. Significant government publications include the review of the evidence from nine research studies and the implications for practice and supervision in out-of-home care (DHSS 1985); a review of literature on admission and placement processes (Department of Health [DoH] 1991); a summary analysis of seventeen commissioned studies of child protection and family support practice (DoH 1995); an overview of practice principles to enhance the protection and wellbeing of children in the care system (Utting 1997); and, most recently, a review of research studies of residential care of older children and young people (DoH 1998a).

There are many audiences for the messages from these research studies, including practitioners, carers, managers, policy-makers and elected representatives. Another related key mechanism is the involvement of researchers, senior public servants, managers and practitioners in the ongoing peer review of the research projects and strategies for the implementation of their key findings for practice.

An example of this integrated and developmental process by which research impacts on policy and practice is the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH 2000). In her report on an Australian trial of the UK risk assessment framework, Wise (2001) notes that the seven Developmental Dimensions from the Looking After Children tools have been incorporated as one of the three elements of the assessment and intervention model by which the needs of children and families, including child protection interventions, are informed; the other two elements being *Parenting Capacity* and *Family and Environmental Factors*.

This integration of research, policy and practice is consolidated by required systems to maintain 'joined-up thinking' across government departments (DoH 1999b). Not only is the government prescribing benchmark standards for child wellbeing, child protection and out-of-home care; performance is regularly monitored through annual reporting by local government agencies to the Department of Health and the publication of comparative evidence of processes and outcomes.

BEYOND GOOD IDEAS: MECHANISMS FOR MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

These systems management mechanisms are complemented by a number of government-led quality assurance initiatives to enhance the quality of child and family welfare – including the deployment of the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) with responsibility for auditing the quality of local authority services (DoH 1998b; DoH 1999a; DoH 1999b; DoH 2000).

Examples of the use of central government guidance to shape local government (State) level policy include *Writing Child Care Policy* (SSI 1994); *Children's Services Planning for Children in Need* (DoH/Department for Education and Employment 1996); *Me, Survive Out There? New arrangements for young people living in and leaving care* (DoH 1999c). This guidance is designed to inform policy and planning and to frame written submissions of Children's Services Plans for review by the Social Services Inspectorate. There is a cycle of data gathering, visits by advisors, audits and inspections leading to written reports from the Social Services Inspectorate to the Chief Officer and the Leader of the Council.

COMPARING BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA

All of this is in marked contrast to the national research, policy development and evaluation across Australian States and Territories. Cross-cultural comparisons should be undertaken with caution, and attempts at cross-cultural policy and practice activities similarly require a warning sign (Scott 1993). Different traditions of social policy and legislative and public policy cultures impact on any international policy transplant. Even when two countries share many common historical strands, as is the case with Australia and Britain, caution must be adopted when seeking to transfer policy initiatives. The British policy tradition illustrates a potent mix of humanitarian concern, public fear – for example ensuring clean water and immunisations following cholera and tuberculosis – and fear of litigation. Despite its colonial heritage, Australian social policy development reveals a greater 'reluctant collectivism' (George & Wilding 1976) than in Britain. Also, the Australian States-led child welfare system also contrasts markedly with the highly centralised UK system.

A clustering of core conceptual differences between the two systems as a framework for the rest of the paper is summarised and presented below.

AUSTRALIAN STATES	UNITED KINGDOM
Fragmented policies	Integrated policies
Single issue services	Multiple issue services
Parallel competitive services	Collaborative partnership services
Reactive to enquiry and crisis	Proactive research/development
Diversity and difference in policy	Directed and uniform in policy
Advisory/consultative central direction	Inspectorial central direction
Focus on inputs and numbers	Focus on outcomes and impact

Specific examples of these differences include:

- The fragmented and partial sector implementation of the Looking After Children system in Australian States and Territories – with the exception of the important developmental work of Barnardos Australia (Dixon 2001) in their services in New South Wales and their consultancy work with the ACT government department. There are signs of moves by other States (Victoria and Tasmania) considering implementation of the system and strengthening the potential of a national framework for practice standards.
- A recent WA project identified important policy and practice differences across jurisdictions in relation to the reporting of child abuse allegations (Harries & Clare 2002). This document highlights the absence of a

cohesive national approach to the development of care and protection intervention strategies and policy development, making national data collection and outcome analysis problematic.

- The CREATE Foundation (2002a) presented their *Report Card, Australian Children and Young People in Care – Education*, but with uneven States' participation. In contrast, evidence of the educational achievements of UK children in care was presented by the Social Services Inspectorate and the Office for Standards in Education (1995). Since then, a number of measures have been introduced to address educational disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit 1998).
- Over the same time frame, a significant body of research into Young People Leaving Care was funded in the UK (Clare 2001). In WA, funding was secured for a literature review and a Life Skills Workshop and Peer Mentoring Project (Clare & Murphy 2000). Similar projects were also undertaken in other States (O'Brien 1997; Green & Jones 1999; Mendes & Goddard 2000; Owen et al 2000). These were independent studies and did not harness the potential for inter-State collaboration.

However, there are encouraging signs of change with a range and variety of recent publications about out-of-home care policy and practice sufficient to suggest that colleagues across Australian States and Territories have identified this watershed moment in policy, research and practice direction. Eight recent important publications have been arranged into three clusters.

Even when two countries share many common historical strands, as is the case with Australia and Britain, caution must be adopted when seeking to transfer policy initiatives.

Firstly, there are three recent publications reviewing foster care and out-of-home care policies and practice in Australian States and Territories. Barber and Gilbertson (2001) review national and international research on foster care, the problematic issue of standards in foster care and leaving care, before outlining the objectives and findings of their South Australian study. Carter (2002) presents a detailed national and international literature review of the role and risks of foster care and presents a framework of principles and goals of an improved foster care service. Finally Sultmann and Testro (2001) present evidence of the placement trends in out-of-home care including the increased complexity of needs of children and the growing

reliance on family-based care, including kinship care, rather than residential care provision. All three publications provide detailed bibliographies for further reading.

Then, there are the publications reviewing research and practice in three important specialist aspects of out-of-home care – namely the CREATE Foundation's (2002b) audit of the educational achievement of children in care across States and Territories with its action research strategy to review progress; the important study by Mason and colleagues (2002), *Understanding Kinship Care*, which presents the arguments for and against this model of out-of-home family/kinship care; and the publication by McHugh (2002), *The Costs of Caring: A Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate Out-of-Home Care in Australia*, which reviews the State and international data on funding levels for foster carers.

The final cluster of publications addresses the importance and timeliness of a national policy and research agenda with the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWAA) Policy Paper (2002), *A Time to Invest in Australia's Most Disadvantaged Children, Young People and their Families*, outlining a detailed analysis of relevant literature and making the case for an integrated Commonwealth and State government policy process with leadership from the federal minister with responsibility for children and families. The second important publication is the Special Edition of *Children Australia* which included the paper by Cashmore and Ainsworth (2003) arguing for an integrated research agenda to inform and evaluate out-of-home care policies and practice.

Without an accepted political definition of minimum standards in child welfare, State agencies are vulnerable to operating in an environment of inadequate resources, reactive decision-making and inability to meet their 'corporate parental' responsibilities.

Clearly the move to gathering national data by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, outlined by Johnstone (2003), is very welcome. However, Bath (1997) and Cashmore and Ainsworth (2003) have reflected thoughtfully on the absence of agreed definitions and different counting practices across the States and Territories which impede scope for gathering more complex national research data. Also, alongside the publications listed earlier, are important contributions by an increasing number of research colleagues to national and international policy development,

leadership, practice and research across Australian States and Territories (Ainsworth and colleagues 1998a; 1998b; 2001; Barber & Gilbertson 2001; Cashmore & Paxman 1996; Delfabbro, Barber & Cooper 2002). However, in comparison to the UK, there remains a very different national political attitude to funding research, to gathering data for planning services and to integrating their findings in a national policy framework – a very different articulation of 'parental responsibilities'.

When we compare the fragmented and uncoordinated management of data collection on child welfare needs, services and outcomes in Australian States with the systemic political and policy supports for child and family services in the UK, we need to be realistic about goal-setting in our local efforts. Two major challenges must be addressed:

- the development of a shared language and common definitions – of need, placement processes and outcomes for children in care;
- the introduction of national practice standards and methods of data collection.

Any move towards systems integration will require Federal Government leadership to establish a national research agenda across Australian States and Territories. The Looking After Children tools could become the internationally recognised framework for these national standards (Wise 2003). Without an accepted political definition of minimum standards in child welfare, State agencies are vulnerable to operating in an environment of inadequate resources, reactive decision-making and inability to meet their 'corporate parental' responsibilities.

In the Australian context, competitive tendering arrangements in some States have damaged inter-agency cooperation and partnership. The fragmented nature of government agencies' responses to children in care is a systems deficiency with Health, Education, Disability, Housing and Justice Departments as key providers of services for vulnerable children and young people, alongside the State Child and Family Welfare Department. This Departmental network of 'the government as parent' became sharply obvious when draft standards were drawn up for Leaving Care Services in Western Australia (Clare 1999).

Finally, the LAC Assessment and Action Records are being revised to incorporate data from audits and from international practice research and development. Professor Bob Flynn and his Canadian colleagues (Flynn & Ghazal 2002) are incorporating other psychological measures to strengthen the LAC tools, and are looking at a comparative Children Canada longitudinal cohort study to measure and compare the outcomes for their sample of children in care. There is scope for an equivalent Australian study with a sufficient sample size to include indigenous, CALD and 'country' children.

CONCLUSION

Roger Bullock and his colleagues at the Dartington Social Research Unit in the UK have been involved in the Looking After Children Project – and with many other aspects of child and family welfare and juvenile justice research studies over the past twenty years. In an important publication, *Research in Practice – Experiments in Development and Information Design* (Bullock et al 1998), they reflect on the complex relationship between researchers and practitioners in child and family welfare policy and practice; they point to the capacity for separate developments rather than the essential integration of practice, research, law and policy – and assert:

One might say, with the benefits of hindsight that finding out how people obtain and use knowledge or applying the lessons already learned in other fields should have been a first consideration for this activity, but sometimes researchers choose to remain as ignorant of research as the professionals they seek to influence (Bullock et al 1998:2).

The arguments for building an 'open learning system' of key stakeholders with Federal Government leadership in the formation of national standards in child and family welfare, in the establishment of a consistent national database of the needs and outcomes of State services and a national research agenda have been presented. 'Joined-up thinking' and 'whole-of-government' analysis of needs and responsibilities demands a systemic appreciation of essential 'inclusive' and integrated services for vulnerable children and families. If it takes a village to bring up a child, it clearly requires a 'whole of government' approach when the 'government is parent' for that child. If we can do it for cricket, let's do it for child and family welfare. □

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, F. & Maluccio, A. (1998a) 'The Policy and Practice of Family Reunification', *Australian Social Work*, 51(1), 3-7.
- Ainsworth F. & Maluccio, A (1998b) 'Kinship Care: False Dawn or New Hope?', *Australian Social Work*, 51(4), 3-8.
- Ainsworth, F. & Summers, A (2001) *Family Reunification and Drug Use by Parents*, Final Report of Research for the Care for Children Advisory Committee, Department of Family and Children's Services, Perth, Western Australia.
- Barber, J. & Gilbertson, R. (2001) *Foster Care: The State of the Art*, Australian Centre for Community Services Research, Adelaide.
- Bath, H. (1997) 'Recent Trends in the Out-of-Home Care of Children in Australia', *Children Australia*, 22(2), 4-8.
- Bullock, R., Gooch, D., Little, M. & Mount, K. (1998) *Research in Practice – Experiments in Development and Information Design*, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Carter, J. (2002) *Towards Better Foster Care: Reducing the Risks in Caring for Other People's Children*, The Children's Foundation, Melbourne.
- Cashmore, J. & Paxman, M. (1996) *Leaving Care - A Longitudinal Study*, Department of Community Services (NSW).
- Cashmore, J. & Ainsworth, F. (2003) 'Out-of-Home Care: Building a Research Agenda', *Children Australia*, 28(2), 5-13.
- Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (2002) *A Time to Invest in Australia's Most Disadvantaged Children, Young People and Their Families*, CAFWAA, Sydney.
- Clare, M. (1999) *Draft Standards for Services for Young People Leaving Care for In(ter?)dependent Living*, UWA/ANZ/WAAYPIC Reference Group, Perth.
- Clare, M. & Murphy, P. (2000) *Peer Mentors as Partners in the Leaving Care Process: Evaluation of a Western Australian Initiative*, Report of the Australia and New Zealand Bank Leaving Care Project, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia.
- Clare, M. (2001) *Leaving Care for In(ter)dependent Living – Issues of Equity and Access*, unpublished paper presented at the AASW (WA Branch) Conference, Perth.
- CREATE Foundation (2002a) *Australian Children and Young People in Care – Education Report Card*, Create Foundation, Brisbane.
- CREATE Foundation (2002b) *Australian Children and Young People in Care – Report Card – December 2002*, The Create Foundation, Brisbane.
- Delfabbro, P., Barber, J. & Cooper, L. (2002) 'Children Entering Out-of-Home Care in South Australia: Baseline Analyses for a 3-Year Longitudinal Study', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(12), 917-932.
- Department of Health and Social Security (1985) *Social Work Decisions in Child Care: Recent Research Finding and their Implications*, HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1991) *Patterns and Outcomes in Child Placement*, HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1995) *Child Protection – Messages from Research*, HMSO, London.
- Department of Health/Department for Education and Employment (1996) *Children's Services Planning: Guidance for Children in Need*, HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1998a) *Caring for Children Away from Home – Messages from Research*, Wiley and Sons, Chichester.
- Department of Health (1998b) *Quality Protects – Framework for Action*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Department of Health (1999a) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A Guide to Inter-Agency Working to Safeguard and Promote the Welfare of Children*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Department of Health (1999b) *The Personal Social Services Performance Assessment Framework*, HMSO, London.
- Department of Health (1999c) *'Me, Survive, Out There?': New Arrangements for Young People Living in and Leaving Care*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Department of Health (2000) *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Department of Health (2001) *Quality Protects Work Programme – Leaving Care*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Dixon, D. (2001) 'Looking After Children in Barnados Australia: A Study of the Early Stages of Implementation', *Children Australia*, 26(3), 27-32.
- Flynn, B. & Ghazal, H. (2002) *Use of Population-Based Measures and Norms to Identify Resilient Outcomes Among Looked After Children in Ontario*, unpublished paper presented at the 5th International Looking After Children Conference, Worcester College, Oxford.
- George, V. & Wilding, P. (1976) *The Ideology of Public Welfare*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Green, S. & Jones, A. (1999) 'Improving Outcomes for Young People Leaving Care: Which Way Forward?', *Children Australia*, 24(4), 64-68.

