



The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report — A Child-Centred System: A Review and Commentary

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In June 2010 the Secretary of State for Education in England asked Professor Eileen Munro, Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, to conduct an independent review of child protection in England. As Professor Munro says in her third and final report, she: 'sets out recommendations that taken together, will help to reform the child protection system from being over bureaucratized and concerned with compliance to one that keeps a focus on children, checking whether they are being effectively helped, and adapting when problems are identified.' This article, which is a selective review of the final report, firstly cites the principles of an effective child protection system and then the principles to guide 'risk-sensible' decision-making as put forward in the report. It concludes with the 15 major recommendations of the Munro report and makes some comment and comparisons with recent Australian state- and territory-based reviews of child protection services.

■ **Keywords:** service principles, risk, professional expertise, learning, developing expertise, organisational context

In the preface to the third of her reports Professor Munro (Munro, 2010, 2011a, 2010b) makes clear that what she is aiming for is a new English child protection system and 'a move from a compliance to a learning culture [that] will require those working in child protection to be given more scope to exercise professional judgment in deciding how best to help children and their families' (Munro, 2011a, p. 5). Her aim is to design a system that is not 'over-bureaucratized and concerned with compliance to one that keeps the focus on children, checking whether they are being effectively helped, and adapting when problems are identified' (Munro, 2011a, p. 5).

What has Driven the System

In Chapter 1, Munro (2011a), citing from her first report titled 'A System Analysis' published in October 2010 (Munro, 2010), notes the four key drivers that have shaped the current English child protection system. In full these are:

- The importance of the safety and welfare of children and young people and the understandable strong reaction when a child is killed or seriously harmed;
- A commonly held belief that the complexity and associated uncertainty of child protection work can be eradicated;
- A readiness, in high profile public inquiries into the death of a child, to focus on professional error without looking deeply enough into its causes; and
- The undue importance given to performance indicators and targets which provide only part of the picture of practice, and which have skewed attention to process over the quality and effectiveness of help given. (Munro, 2011c, p. 6)

The discussion of these factors is comprehensive, sophisticated and emphasises how these factors have led to the current strangled and dysfunctional child protection system.

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Question and Comment

Do these drivers sound familiar? They should be. Similar drivers have shaped the Australian child protection system in all states and territories across the last decade or more.

A Set of Principles

Wisely, Munro then enunciates a set of principles for an effective child protection system (Chapter 2). The eight principles are as follows.

1. The system should be child-centred: everyone involved in child protection should pursue child-centred working and recognise children and young people as individuals with rights, including their right to participate in decisions about them in line with their age and maturity.
2. The family is usually the best place for bringing up children and young people, but difficult judgments are sometimes needed in balancing the rights of a child to be with their birth family with their right to protection from abuse and neglect.
3. Helping children and families involves working with them and therefore the quality of the relationship between the child and family and professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given.
4. Early help is better for children: it minimises the period of adverse experiences and improves outcomes for children.
5. Children's needs and circumstances are varied so the system needs to offer equal variety in its responses.
6. Good professional practice is informed by knowledge of the latest theory and research.
7. Uncertainty and risk are features of child protection work: risk management can only reduce risks, not eliminate them.
8. The measure of the success of child protection systems, both local and national, is whether children are receiving effective help. (Munro, 2011a, p. 23)

Question

Does your state or territory child protection system hold true to these principles? Most fail at least part of the principles test, especially with regard to working with families using a relationship-based model of practice (point 3).

Taking Account of Risk

In addition, in Chapter 3 after an important discussion of risk sensible decision-making, a useful set of 10 principles to cover risk decisions are offered. These are:

Principle 1. The willingness to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty (i.e. risk-taking) is a core professional requirement for all those working in child protection

Principle 2. Maintaining or achieving the safety, security and wellbeing of individuals and communities is a primary consideration in risk decision-making.

Principle 3. Risk-taking involves judgment and balance, with decision-makers required to consider the value and likeli-

hood of the possible benefits of a particular decision against the seriousness and likelihood of the possible harms.

Principle 4. Harm can never be totally prevented. Risk decisions should, therefore, be judged by the quality of the decision-making, and not by the outcome.

Principle 5. Taking risk decisions, and reviewing others' risk decisions, is difficult so account should be taken of whether they involved dilemmas, emergencies, were part of a sequence of decisions or might appropriately be taken by other agencies. If the decision is shared, then the risk is shared too and the error of risk reduced.

Principle 6. The standard expected and required of those working in child protection is that their risk decisions should be consistent with those that would have been made in the same circumstances by professionals of similar specialism or experience.

Principle 7. Whether to record a decision is a risk decision in itself which should, to a large extent, be left to professional judgment. The decision whether or not to make a record, however, and the extent of the record, should be made after considering the likelihood of harm occurring and its seriousness.

Principle 8. To reduce risk aversion and improve decision-making, child protection needs a culture that learns from successes as well as failures. Good risk-taking should be identified, celebrated and shared in a regular review of significant events.

Principle 9. Since good risk-taking depends upon quality information, those working in child protection should work with partner agencies and others to share relevant information about people who pose a risk of harm to others or people who are vulnerable to the risk of being harmed.

Principle 10. Those working in child protection who make decisions consistent with these principles should receive the encouragement, approval and support of their organisation. (Munro, 2011a, pp. 43–44)

As Munro states 'There is no option of being risk adverse since there is absolutely no safe option' (Munro, 2011a, p. 43).

Recommendations and Questions

In Chapter 3 and in subsequent chapters there are 15 recommendations.

Chapter 3: A System That Values Professional Expertise

Recommendation 1. The government should revise both the statutory guidance, Working Together to Safeguard Children and The Framework for the Assessment of Children In Need and their Families and their associated policies to:

- Distinguish the rules that are essential for effective working together, from guidance that informs professional judgment.
- Set out the key principles underpinning the guidance.
- Remove the distinction between initial and core assessments and the associated time scales in respect of these assessments, replacing them with the decisions that are

required to be made by qualified social workers when developing an understanding of children's needs and making and implementing a plan to safeguard and promote their welfare.

- Require local attention is given to:
 - timeliness in the identification of children's needs and provision of help
 - the quality of the assessment to inform next steps to safeguard and promote children's welfare
 - the effectiveness of the help provided.
- Give local areas the responsibility to draw on research and theoretical models of practice to inform local practice.
- Remove constraints to local innovation and professional judgment that are created by prescribing and endorsing particular approaches, for example, nationally designed assessment forms, national performance indicators associated with assessment or nationally prescribed approaches to IT systems. (Munro, 2011a, p. 10).

Question

At the present time the Australian Commonwealth government is promoting a National Framework for Protecting Australia Children and commissioned the Allen Consulting group and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2010) to develop a Common Approach to Assessment, Referral and Support (CAARS) (<http://www.aracy.org.au>). Is such a development likely to lead to further bureaucratisation and concern with compliance by child protection systems in Australia? Or, on the other hand, perhaps it could lead to effective national research about the outcomes, not outputs, achieved in current child protection practice.

Recommendation 2. The inspection framework should examine effectiveness of the contributions of all local services, including health, education, police, probation and the justice system to the protection of children. (Munro, 2011a, p. 11)

Comment

This recommendation is in keeping with the Department of Community Services response 'Keeping Them Safe' (2009) response to the Wood report (2008) in New South Wales (NSW), which identified that child protection required a shared approach to child wellbeing.

Recommendation 3. The new inspection framework should examine the child's journey from needing to receiving help, explore how the rights, wishes, feelings and experience of children and young people inform and shape the provision of services, and look at the effectiveness of the help provided to children, young people and their families. (Munro, 2011a, p. 11)

Question

Is this approach appropriate in the Australian context? Does it exist in some states or territories already?

Recommendation 4. Local authorities and their partners should use a combination of nationally collected and locally

published performance information to help benchmark performance, facilitate improvement and promote accountability. It is critical that performance information is not treated as an unambiguous measure of good or bad performance as performance indicators tend to be. (Munro, 2011a, p. 11)

Question

Is this what happens in your state or territory and if not why not?

Chapter 4: Clarifying Accountability And Improving Learning

Recommendation 5. The existing statutory requirements for each local authority Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) to produce and publish an annual report for the Children's Trust Board should be amended, to require its submission, instead to the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council, and, subject to the passage of legislation, to the local Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chair of the health and wellbeing board. (Munro, 2011a, p. 11)

Question

As there is no equivalent in Australia of the English LSCBs or Children's Trust Boards, is it worthwhile researching these entities to see if they are useful and if similar mechanisms might be of benefit to Australia?

Recommendation 6. The statutory guidance, Working Together to Safeguard Children, should be amended to state that when monitoring and evaluating local arrangements, LSCBs should, taking account of local needs, include an assessment of the effectiveness of the help being provided to children and families (including the effectiveness and value for money of early help services, including early years provision), and the effectiveness of multiagency training to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. (Munro, 2011a, p. 11)

Question

Is the effectiveness of help being provided to children and families being evaluated in this way in your state and territory?

Recommendation 7. Local authorities should give due consideration to protecting the discrete roles and responsibilities of a Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children Services before allocating any additional functions to individuals occupying such roles. The importance, as envisaged in the *Children Act 2004*, of appointing individuals to positions where they have specific responsibilities for children's services, should not be undermined. The Government should amend the statutory guidance issued in relation to such roles and establish the principle that, given the importance of individuals in senior positions being responsible for children's services, it should not be considered appropriate to give additional functions (that do not relate to children's services) to Directors of Children's Services and Lead members for Children's Services unless exceptional circumstances arise. (Munro, 2011a, p. 11)

Question

Does the child protection authority in your state or territory carry functions that are not directly about protecting children (i.e., disaster relief)?

Recommendation 8. The government should work collaboratively with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, The Royal College of General Practitioners, local authorities and others to research the impact of health reorganisation on effective partnership arrangements and the ability to provide effective help for children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. (Munro, 2011a, p. 12)

Question

Are these types of collaboration in place and what is the impact of Commonwealth proposed health reorganisation likely to be on the ability to provide effective help for children in your state or territory?

Recommendation 9. The Government should require LSCBs to use systems methodology when undertaking Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) and over the coming year, work with the sector to develop national resources to:

- provide accredited, skilled and independent reviewers to jointly work with LSCBs on each SCR
- promote the development of a variety of system-based methodologies to learn from practice
- initiate development of a typology of the problems that contribute to adverse outcomes to facilitate national learning
- disseminate learning nationally to improve practice and inform the work of the Chief Social Worker (see Chapter Seven).

In the meantime the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (www.ofsted.gov.au) evaluation of SCRs should end. (Munro, 2011a, p. 12).

Question

In Australia, state- and territory- based Ombudsmen carry the responsibility for SCRs (NSW Ombudsman, 2009a, 2009b). Does this different approach facilitate local and national learning from practice?

Chapter 5. Sharing The Responsibility For Early Care

Recommendation 10. The Government should place a duty on local authorities and statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help 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 their 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 likely to suffer significant harm. Including the availability of social work expertise to all professionals working with children, young people and their families who are not being supported by children's social

care services and specify the training available locally to support professional working at the front line of universal services

- set out the local resourcing of the early help services for children, young people and their 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. (Munro, 2011a, p. 12)

Question

To what extent are these standards followed in Australian states and territories?

Chapter 6. Developing Social Work Expertise

Recommendation 11. The Social Work Reform Board's Professional Capabilities Framework should incorporate capabilities necessary for child and family social work. This framework should explicitly inform social work qualifications training, postgraduate professional development and performance appraisal. (Munro, 2011a, p. 12)

Question

Does the child protection workforce in your state or territory have the 'capabilities necessary for child and family social work'?

Recommendation 12. Employer and higher education institution (HEIs) should work together so that social work students are prepared for the challenges of child protection work. In particular, the review considers that HEIs and employing agencies should work together so that:

- practice placements are of the highest quality and — in time — only in designated Approved Practice Setting
- employers are able to apply for special 'teaching organisation status' awarded by the College of Social Work
- the merits of 'student units' which are headed by a senior social worker are considered and
- placements are of sufficiently high quality, and both employers and HEIs consider the relationship is working well. (Munro, 2011a, p. 13)

Question

Is there a place in Australia for a scheme of 'Approved Practice Settings' and for some agencies to be awarded 'teaching organisation status'?

Chapter 7. The Organisational Context: Supporting Effective Social Work Practice.

Recommendation 13. Local authorities and their partners should start an ongoing process to review and redesign the ways in which child and family social work is delivered, drawing on evidence of effectiveness of helping methods where appropriate practice of helping methods and supporting practice that can implement evidence-based ways of working with children and families. (Munro, 2011a, p. 13)

Question

Are any such reviews and service redesign to take account of evidence of effectiveness of helping taking place in any Australian state or territory?

Recommendation 14. Local authorities should designate a Principal Family Social Worker, who is a senior manager with lead responsibility for practice in the local authority and who is still actively involved in front-line practice and who can report views and experience of the front line to managers. (Munro, 2011a, p. 13)

Question

Who is the Principal Family Social Worker (or their equivalent) in your state and territory who is still actively involved in front-line practice, or does no such person exist?

Recommendation 15. A Chief Social Worker should be created in Government whose duties include advising the Government on social work practice and informing the Secretary of State's annual report to Parliament on the working of the Children's Act 1989. (Munro, 2011a, p. 13)

Question

Who in the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) — given the Commonwealth's increasing involvement in child protection issues (FaCSIA, 2009) — might be called the Chief Social Worker (or their equivalent), or does no such person exist?

In Contrast

In the last decade there have been many inquiries or reviews into Australian state and territory child protection services (Baillieu, 2011; Bath, 2010; Ford, 2007; Jacob & Fanning, 2006; Layton, 2003; NSW Ombudsman, 2009a, 2009b; Victorian Ombudsman, 2009; Wood, 2008). One of these reports, the Wood report, was the subject of review and commentary in *Children Australia* in 2009 (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009). It can usefully be read as a way of establishing the different tenor of the Munro report in England and at least one Australian report. The Wood report, in turn, is very similar to other Australian reports that have presented recommendations for changes in child protection law and practice.

Finally, this report confirms the wisdom of appointing a Professor of Social Policy to review child protection systems as the depth of knowledge the report displays is immensely rewarding. All too often Australian reviews have been presided over by a member of the judiciary, with the result that what has been delivered is a vast number of proposals to amend legislation (*Children Legislation Amendment [Wood Inquiry Recommendations] Act 2009*) which, when enacted, has little impact on front-line child protection practice with children and families still being offered poor quality services staffed by less-than-adequately skilled practitioners.

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