

Final draft

SPA conference paper

Family policy, children's services and social work: the dynamics and legacy of the New Labour 'welfare settlement'.

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Abstract

This paper discusses New Labour family policy and public service reform with particular reference to the contradictory effects on the dynamics of the practice relationship with parents and children produced by the refocusing of the professional role in children's services. Using a conjunctural analysis it seeks to demonstrate how the trade-off of contrasting political interests and social values necessitated by the original 'third way' project produced an 'active welfare' policy settlement that was inherently ambiguous in its expectation and authorisation of the new relationships of welfare production required of the newly designated 'consumer-citizen' and the new type of public service professional. The paper briefly describes the political challenge New Labour set itself at the outset and outlines the dimensions of the welfare settlement that was engineered, focusing in particular on the nature and implications of the re-definition of the public interest in childhood required to ensure political legitimacy and policy success. This involved a reconfiguration of the respective rights and responsibilities of children, parents and the state and an extension and intensification of relationships between public service professionals and family members. The paper discusses the effects of the paradoxical nature of the reconstituted practice relationships in children's services that have resulted and considers the New Labour legacy in this policy field.

Introduction

Social work in children's services is facing something of a crisis at the moment and the debate has been renewed about the nature of its professional role and status and its capacity to operate effectively. In this paper the effect of the New Labour 'welfare settlement' and its policy expectations on children's services professionals including social workers is explored. In particular an analysis is developed of the logic and limitations of what is described here as a policy of reciprocal welfare activation in which parents and professionals are brought together in personalised encounters of child welfare co-production. The dynamics of this approach to the establishment of what were expected to be self-sustaining and mutually reinforcing service relationships are set in the first part of the paper. The re-designation of the focus of family policy and children's services reform is then described before the impact on social work is briefly described and the wider significance of the approach considered.

A New Labour 'welfare settlement'

The ambition of 'New Labour' governments to re-negotiate the parameters of 'the new settlement on welfare for the new age' (Blair 1995, cited in Driver and Martell 2006, p.93) in Britain can hardly be doubted and neither can the scale of its ambition. It will be possible in due course to consider the extent to which this local political project confirms or confounds contrasting perspectives on its wider significance. The attempt may prove to have been indicative either of the capacity for institutional continuity (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002), hybridisation (Lister 2004, Wincott 2006) or paradigm change in prevailing 'welfare regimes' (Jenson 2007). Equally the experience of the 'New Labour' period may help test the extent to which neo-liberalism, whether understood as a political economy or as a mode of governance (see Clarke et al. 2007 for a discussion), is now entrenched in contemporary capitalist societies. Meanwhile the 'New Labour' project for welfare change can be considered in its own highly self-conscious terms and in relation to the distinctive socio-economic and political conjuncture which gave rise to it (Clarke et al. 2007). The idea of a 'third way' (Blair 1998a, Giddens 1998, 2000) conveyed the vision at the outset and the concept remains relevant if the politics of New Labour are to be understood. In the event the attempt was made to put in place a settlement that sought to re-specify the objectives of welfare policy as a necessary response to changed national circumstances and reconfigure the distribution of responsibility between citizens and the state for the achievement of those objectives.

In order to do this reconciliation was required between contrasting social values and political principles and the competing but inadequate visions of the appropriate fiscal and public service role of the state in the achievement of national prosperity they had produced. On the one hand the commitment to social justice, understood as greater equality of welfare outcomes, had led to the 'old' Labour 'welfare state' solution. This had allowed collective responsibility for the achievement of social justice to eclipse personal responsibility and enterprise and the autonomy to act effectively in one's own and family interest. It could be shown that redistributive policies that used fiscal transfers to equalise income and directly provided public services to equalise welfare outcomes had both failed on their own terms and provided no remedy in the face of the new challenges of globalisation. On the other hand was the 'new' Right re-validation of individual responsibility and enterprise in pursuit of prosperity and welfare. Here the attempt to restore the 'residual' state to enable personal autonomy as the priority value had not only threatened social cohesion but also undermined the individual capacity to act freely and effectively by running down the strong public services needed to ensure both.

The New Labour strategy was not to 'split the difference' (Blair 1998a, p?) between the contrasting principles of social justice and personal freedom but to unite both objectives in a policy designed to mobilise collective and individual responsibility alike and to do so in a pragmatic way. This was to be achieved through establishing a newly designated 'strategic and enabling' role for the state (HM Government 2007a) within a radically changed political economy of welfare production, in which free market and public service principles were allied to the pragmatic task of maximising opportunities and facilitating outcomes. This process was highly politically charged and prompted a continued debate inside the Labour Party and beyond about both the proper ends and means of welfare policy, that is

what these opportunities and outcomes should be and how they should be achieved. Nonetheless, on conclusion of the major policy review that took place between 2005 and 2007, the parameters of a conceptually coherent if politically ambiguous 'active welfare' settlement were established.

In effect a policy of reciprocal activation was engineered that brought the strong state and its active social investment role and the autonomous citizen and their personal aspirations together in a way that was intended to be equitable and effective and mutually reinforcing and self-sustaining in both cases.

Establishing reciprocal responsibility for welfare: the active citizen and the strategic and enabling state

This strategy sought to balance and re-align contrasting political demands and interests in order to achieve the common objectives of national prosperity and social cohesion. It was premised on the threats to that prosperity and cohesion posed by what have now become known as the 'new social risks' of post-industrial society (Jenson 2008). These included low pay and precarious employment generated by transformations in the global economy and exacerbated and reinforced in turn by major changes in the structure of family life and in the gender distribution of responsibilities for paid work and care. In these circumstances it was logical for social investment to be targeted at the development of skills and capabilities in adult citizens in order to enhance their flexibility and productivity as paid workers and their effectiveness as carers. Where it was children who were being cared for the investment would need to be in childhood as the formative period for the next generation of workers (and carers) and in parents as custodians of that social investment. New Labour supported a 'social investment state', as it was initially described (Giddens 1998, Lister 2003, 2004), and the responsibility of that state was still the re-distribution of public resources through fiscal transfers and public services. However, these resources now had to be designed less to compensate people for past disadvantage and to mitigate current economic and social risks and more to create opportunities for future success. Investment would need to ensure an improved social infrastructure and a greater diversity of service options on the one hand and additional support for the enhancement of personal skills and capabilities on the other. It would then be the responsibility of the individual citizen to take up the opportunities provided. In so doing that individual, acting as a 'citizen-consumer' (Giddens 2007, Clarke et al. 2007), would be enabled to exercise an increasing measure of personal choice and control in the process of meeting their aspirations as individuals and parents, achieving success for themselves as 'adult workers' (Lewis 2001) and for their children as 'citizen-workers of the future' (Lister 2003). The process would lead to the 'empowerment' of 'the aspirational individual, the active citizen, the responsible parent, the informed patient who will take more control over the decisions that affect their lives' (Brown 2006).

Through this reciprocal approach a politically defensible settlement of the debate about what counts as a fair and just distribution of rights, responsibilities and resources might be achieved. The state would be responsible for equalising opportunity through an equitable or 'fair' distribution of resources within new public spending parameters. The citizen would be responsible for maximising the advantages gained from the enhanced personal and service capability provided and

thereby for achieving their own potential. The role of the state in protecting 'citizen-consumer' rights to autonomy and choice would be confirmed but only to the extent that people exercised those rights responsibly, that is in ways consistent with the new definition of the public interest in the promotion of active and entrepreneurial citizenship. In this way rights themselves, whether to justice or autonomy, would be largely conditional in that they would be realised primarily through the performance of responsibilities rather than by the claiming of entitlements.

Policy ambiguity and personalization: the inadequacy of resources and uncertainty about authority in mutual activation

The reciprocal distribution of responsibilities for activating welfare was not only expected to provide a settlement of the contrasting political demands of social justice and individual autonomy and enterprise it was also intended to institute a mutually reinforcing process of self-improvement and performance management (Luckock 2008). The hope here was that the continuous improvement needed to ensure the cost-effectiveness of public services in the face of renewed economic constraints and rising public expectations would become increasingly self-sustaining. The inherent dynamics of this virtuous circle can be simply stated. By providing opportunities through fiscal policies and public services in a way that would encourage their active uptake these policies and services would in turn be put under pressure to improve over time as citizens empowered in this way made increased demands upon them. Earlier 'top-down' measures of 'command and control' designed to kick-start more effective 'delivery' in public services by 'flogging the system', in the impatient Blairite phrase (Barber 2007, p331), had already been widely employed in line with the now customary 'new public' managerial solutions to improving public service performance (Clarke and Newman 1997). However, attention to the demand side of the service and performance cycle increasingly came to dominate policy interventions. Consumer choice and service contestability and competition had become the preferred drivers of performance by the time of the 2007 policy review (HM Government 2007a, b, see also Le Grand 2002, 2007). And in this way it became possible for central government to step back from direct intervention and take up a more indirect role in orchestrating the service relationships that were created once individual citizens were given the lead role in driving change and professionals required to enter into a 'conversation' with them 'often resulting in joint design of the service, sometimes even collaboration in the delivery of the service itself' (HM Government 2007a, Para 4.1). In effect the method of improving services was being personalised along with the services themselves. Personalisation would enhance both the cost-effectiveness of public services and the autonomy of 'the aspirational individual, the active citizen, the responsible parent, the informed patient who will take more control over the decisions that affect their lives' (Brown 2006). And the principle of 'progressive universalism', which determined the equitable distribution of opportunities by 'giving everyone a stake in the system while offering more help to those who need it most' (HM Treasury 2002a, Para 5.5), would ensure a more extended reach for professionals through the intensification of these 'conversations' and collaborations and their wider proliferation in pursuit of the right and best service solution in each case at the earliest possible opportunity. Targets and other measures such as capacity building through workforce reforms would be complementary not determinative drivers.

However, despite the elegance of its formulation the inherently ambiguous nature of the expectations of the new personalised relationships of welfare activation and of their authorisation are likely to be difficult to manage satisfactorily in practice. This is especially the case where resource constraints exacerbate the intrinsic uncertainty about who has the authority to act at any point in this mutually reinforcing process. For whilst the authority of the state had been confirmed in the fiscal policy shift from supporting welfare rights to making welfare conditional on the proper exercise of responsibilities the professional task itself had to combine empowerment with regulation. In order to empower the autonomous citizen it was necessary to enhance their authority at the same time as enforcing their responsibility to act. The model itself assumed a sliding scale of authorization in the individual case whereby the more the citizen was active in taking up their responsibilities and thereby confirming their rights to empowerment and autonomy the less was the need for the exercise of professional authority over them. In this way the professional role was intended to become increasingly facilitative, for example through information-giving, advice and advocacy and service mobilization and co-ordination as necessary. However, the wider policy context also required that the professional must act on behalf of the collective public interest to make judgements about what behavior did count as responsible in each case in order to authorize any support or sanction.

This applied as much in those situations where the citizen was being active as it did in those where behavior was avoidant, neglectful or harmful. For example, the active citizen intent on maximizing their own welfare and that of family members might be expected to make increasingly insistent claims on services consistent with their new consumer rights to choice and control and thereby activate in turn the most effective professional response. Nonetheless, that professional in turn would have to ensure the claims of the citizen in question were fairly balanced with those of others, acting equally responsibly in their own interests, to ensure the fair distribution of supportive resources across all citizens. Professional responsibility would simultaneously involve facilitating the empowerment and constraining the choice of the citizen, both reinforcing and curtailing their authority in the process. Where the behavior of the citizen was avoidant of their responsibility to act appropriately in their own interests and those of family members, and was thereby more directly 'anti-social', professional authority was similarly required for that judgement to be made.

In this way personalisation was a process as much to do with intensifying negotiations about the uncertain distribution of authority to act as it was about collaborating in the co-construction of services. The burden of managing this paradoxical expectation was further exacerbated where there were disputes about the distribution of responsibility for tackling the problem in each case and about what resources could and should be deployed to support the process of solving them. And these situations were multiplied once the citizen was expected not only to account for their behavior in respect of a minimum legal requirement, for example as an 'active citizen' looking for and securing paid work or as a 'responsible parent' sending a child to school, but also for aspirational attitudes and behavior now defined in a much more open-ended way and unlimited way.

Finally, the universalising of the citizen as a de-gendered worker and/or carer and the individualizing of the responsibility of the consumer-citizen to act reasonably in their own interest assumed in the model adds to the core problem. In particular it

raises further questions about the legitimacy of imposing standard norms irrespective of the social-cultural context that gives meaning to decisions and standard expectations of motivation and behavior without reference to the socio-economic circumstances of personal and family life. The corresponding de-contextualisation of professional performance is also concerning. For whilst the 'lived' experience of people acting in context, and the conflicts and ambivalence provoked, are almost never a consideration in policy it is precisely the appreciation of this experience and its effects that counts most in practice that is so determinedly personal. It was certainly the case, as others have suggested, that responsibility for risk was being transferred to the individual citizen in lieu of adequate social investment elsewhere (Ferguson 2007). But from the perspective of practice this was also a policy that delegated political and social anxiety about the persistence of poverty and inequality, in effect institutionalising ambivalence about motivation and capacity for change in the new personalised relationships of welfare co-production.

In the second part of the paper these concerns about the legitimacy and effectiveness of this process will be explored in relation to New Labour family policy and children's services reform and the resulting dilemmas for social work practice.

Redefining the public interest in childhood and parenting: investing in children through an active family policy

Family policy and children's services reform were critical to the success of an 'active welfare' policy based on social investment to support individual enterprise in a competitive global market-place. The motivation and behaviour of parents was of particular importance. Responsibility for active consumer-citizenship applied to them both in their role as workers in the contemporary labour market and as carers who needed to activate in their children the aspiration and attainment necessary to ensure they were properly equipped for labour market participation in the future. Hence the political objective of constructing a policy that reconciled a commitment to equalising opportunities with one of enhancing individual rights to autonomy applied just as much to the family as it did to society in general. Indeed the challenge of intruding the new principles of active welfare into the home raised particular political anxieties, representing as it did the need for an historic shift in the policy stance towards childhood, parenting and family life itself.

Traditionally law and policy had been concerned primarily with the normative status of the family, understood as a unit or structure, with heterosexual marriage and a gendered division of paid work and family care being privileged. State intervention in relation to parental behaviour had been largely reactive in nature within this normative frame. Parental responsibility had been defined strongly by reference to parental rights to autonomy over matters of paid work and care and childhood itself was only a matter of public concern when things went fairly seriously wrong. To this end thresholds for targeted professional intervention were set very high (Luckock 2008, Reece 2006). The new expectations of active citizenship required this normative and reactive approach to family life and parenting to be challenged in three ways.

First, the perennial debate about what should count as the most appropriate form of family life and parenting arrangement had to be settled. This provoked political

anxiety in New Labour ranks despite the significant social and cultural shift towards a new family landscape. Although family life was increasingly understood as something to be 'practiced' rather than prescribed in line with any normative template (Morgan 1996, Silva and Smart 1999), and the evidential case for prioritising marriage for public investment remained heavily contested, considerable caution was shown in moving to a more pragmatic stance. The extended national debate about who could legitimately form a legal partnership and adopt a child indicated the extent of the residual resistance to change (Luckock and Hart 2005, Luckock 2008). Second, political support was needed for far more intrusive policy incursions into family life and parenting practices to activate labour market participation. This was more straightforward. Transformations in the economy had already led increasingly to the demise of the 'male bread-winner model' of family income that had underpinned the traditional normative and reactive approaches in this policy sphere (Lewis 2001). In the face of the far more precarious post-industrial labour market the 'paradigm change' in policies needed in order to equalise the responsibility of parents for paid work and family care and activate participation in each case had already been signaled (Jenson 2007, 2008). Fiscal and other policies designed to support a sustainable balance between work and family responsibilities could be expected to attract widespread support so long as the deployment of the carrots and sticks was seen to be fair. The substantial public investment in child care was intended to contribute on this front (Wincott 2006). Finally, and most crucial of all, the need to intensify state intervention at the level of family relationships also required legitimation because it challenged the fundamental principle of parental responsibility, which was that in matters of child upbringing parents only became personally accountable to professionals for the conduct of their family relationships if it could be demonstrated that the child was being harmed. In this case it was respect for both the liberty of the parent as an individual and the particularity of the cultural and social context in which parenting was conducted that was being put into question by the conditionality and individualisation of the New Labour approach as applied to the family. As a result libertarian criticisms about the 'nationalisation of the family by the 'nanny state' (Kirby 2006), the extension of the concept of 'risk' to all areas of life in a strategy of 'surveillance' (Beck 1992, Parton 2006) or the threats posed by the dominance of professional expertise (Furedi 2001/2008) all had to be confronted.

In the event the shift from a normative to a pragmatic or 'bias free' (Johnson 2007) policy stance on family and parental status and the case for far more active and personalised professional intervention in parenting practices and family relationships was achieved in the now customary way. Political legitimacy for policy change was sought by redefining the public interest in childhood and parenting in far more utilitarian and instrumental terms. The need to activate citizen aspiration and achievement in the labour market meant that the conduct of childhood was of direct public concern because children were the 'citizen-workers of the future' (Lister 2003). Parenting was matter of public interest because parents held the primary responsibility not only for keeping their children safe and well, and keeping society safe from them, but also for activating in them the ambition and aspiration needed to ensure their future success and productivity as adults themselves in the future. Research evidence was unequivocal about the determining influence of parental behaviour on child outcomes (HM Treasury/DfES 2007a). It also showed that it was the strength of the parental and wider family relationships and the income and

education levels in the household rather than the 'family type' that mattered most in raising aspirations in children and facilitating the desired outcomes (HM Government 2007c). As Alan Johnson, the Secretary of State at the time, made clear in relation to family type, "It's the parenting, stupid". It's not who or what the parents are, it's what they do' (2007, cited in Luckock 2008, p14).

The case for an 'active family policy' (HM Government 2007a) was the same then as the case for the active welfare settlement. Increases in social investment in the form of child care, parental leave, tax-credits and so on supported parents as workers in the present as well as in their role as carers of their children, who were the next generation of active labour market participants. Underpinned by further public spending in what became known as 'children's services' (DfES 2004) including education in particular, this half of the policy would also meet the political requirement of equity or fairness by promoting 'opportunity for all' in order to maximise potential, increase individual social mobility, reduce poverty and mitigate social inequality over the long term. In return parents were responsible because of their unique and critical role for realising the return on the investment on behalf of all of us. Their motivation and behaviour in this expanded task was a matter of public interest. The state on behalf of the public good had responsibility for alleviating child poverty but this required policies and services that addressed the 'poverty of aspiration' as well as the 'poverty of income' (Murphy 2007).

The principles of conditionality and individualisation, and the reasonable behaviour they demanded, meant that policy largely ignored the implications of the lived experience of parenting as a woman or a man, black or white, gay or heterosexual and so on. It also ignored the impact on parental aspirations of family lives led in quite different class and cultural contexts where the differential nature of the opportunities and constraints provided demonstrably affected normative understanding of reasonable and responsible behaviour in the circumstances (Duncan 2005, Gillies 2008). Furthermore under the 'social investment' strategy for childhood the rights of children were even more marginalised. This applied whether those rights were understood in conventional legal terms, as for example in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or by reference to a fuller and more dynamic articulation of children's citizenship understood as 'a socio-political practice' (Lister 2007a, p.695). So, for example, in the first case the parental right to 'smack' their child trumped the child's Convention rights to protection from violence and in the second concern to secure future adult citizenship obligations overrode any formal policy or legal recognition of the status of children as increasingly active citizens in their own right during childhood. Finally very little official priority was given, certainly at first, to the validation of the unique subjective experience of childhood as a cultural 'space' (Moss and Petrie 2003, Lister 2006) in its own right.

Children's services and personalisation: the extension and intensification of practice relationships

The re-definition of the public interest in childhood and family life in functional and utilitarian terms required the reform of those services responsible for working jointly

and equitably with parents to activate the achievement of the outcomes specified for children (Luckock 2009). Once the focal concern became the progress of the individual child rather than the status and integrity of the family as a whole and parents were expected to become active partners with public service professionals to that end it was necessary to re-organise services accordingly. Hence their re-designation as 'children's services' and the establishment of what became known as the 'children's workforce' and occasionally the 'parenting workforce' which were now required to operate under the auspices of 'Children's Trusts'. The strategy of investing in individual children as future 'worker-citizens' rather than in family life for itself turned policy attention away from an interest in general with the quality of the child's experience of growing up towards a concern in particular with the efficacy of the child's trajectory through childhood in ensuring the ultimate goal of effective citizenship in adulthood. Navigational metaphors were applied in this new functional formulation. The primary task for parents and professionals was to enable children to start off on the 'right track' and then stay on 'the path to success' (DCSF 2007, p12). The concept of 'resilience' was adopted from developmental psychology to describe the process that services were intended to facilitate as children steered their course through childhood transitions and adversities (HM Treasury/DfES 2007b, Schoon 2006).

Progress on the journey could be determined by reference to a set of practice outcomes that combined old and new collective responsibilities for children. Specified in law in the Children Act 2004 and in agency performance protocols the five outcomes chosen embodied the new extended expectation that the state would be responsible for ensuring parenting that was not just safe and stable but also aspirational on behalf of children and their own attainment and ambition. In this case 'personalisation' involved a 'conversation' and a collaboration between parents and professionals that was designed proactively, thereby 'unlocking the potential' (DCSF 2007, p.12) of the child rather than simply and reactively to protect them from harm. In line with the overall distribution of rights and responsibilities in the 'active family policy', the role of the child in this process was expected to be consistent primarily with the outcomes expected of them whilst appropriately respectful of any prior legal entitlement. As 'making a positive contribution' was one of the five outcomes the expectation was certainly that children would be as fully involved as possible in deliberations about their future because by helping to shape it they would be learning how to become active and responsible citizens as they went. So far as their rights were concerned the law only required child participation in decision-making to the extent that their 'wishes and feelings' had to be 'ascertained' and 'taken into consideration' and this was only in that small minority of situations where a social worker had to be involved because the development of the child in question was judged to be at particular risk.

If personalised interventions and the relationships and resources they mobilised on behalf of children were to produce the prescribed outcomes in the most cost-effective and equitable way public services and professional practices would need to be better integrated and more carefully targeted. The commitment to service integration was placed at the heart of what became commonly known as the 'Every Child Matters agenda' following the publication of the Green Paper of that name in 2003 (DfES 2003). Here the primary intention was to extend and intensify active state intervention into family life and parenting by introducing personalised support

earlier in both the life of the child and the stage of any emerging problem in order that the desired developmental trajectory would be effectively established and maintained (HM Treasury 2002b). The death of Victoria Climbié at the hands of her family carers despite having been in contact with numerous professionals in various agencies then prompted the demand that the earlier Blairite injunction to seek 'joined up solutions to joined up problems' (Blair 1998b) now be applied urgently to children's services as whole (Luckock 2007, 2009). Between 2004 when a new 'whole systems' reform of services was instigated under the auspices of the 'change for children' project (DfES 2004, Luckock 2009) and early 2009 when further legal powers were sought to enforce individual agency compliance with Children's Trust arrangements a new apparatus of inter-agency governance and integrated strategy, processes and front-line working was gradually put into place across England (Audit Commission 2009).

Within the newly integrated service structures the targeting of integrated intervention on the principle of 'progressive universalism' called for the development of a service model that would enable individual children to be situated, according to their needs at any one time, at the most suitable point on a continuum of need and response. At one end of this continuum, where the large majority of children would be placed during most of their childhood, personalisation would be achieved by making fairly standard adjustments to the provision of universal services and expecting individual practitioners to be more proactive in undertaking their primary task. For example, health visitors would discuss with parents how best to make use of the expanding local day care and children's centre services to support the optimal development of their child as well as to enable their own return to paid work. Early years professionals in those centres and teachers in schools would similarly discuss with parents the design of the most suitable learning strategies for their individual children and what their own role was to be in supporting them. The objective here was to promote resilience by preventing problems from the start and setting children out on an optimal developmental pathway.

At the other end of the continuum the complex and often chronic needs of a relatively small minority of children would require a personalised approach that mobilised a much wider range of resources through a co-ordinated inter-professional plan of action. It would be at this end of the service spectrum that social work would need to be situated. The primary objective here was ameliorative and restorative, helping children to recover a resilient stance and start to get back on track. Prevention in this case would involve the pre-empting of any further harm to the child and the halting of the 'cycle of low achievement' in the family as a whole (HM Treasury/DfES 2007b). Here the exhortation was for agencies and professionals to 'think family' (Cabinet Office 2008) once again (Parton 2009) but only as a way of even further intensifying intervention. Occupying the space in between would be those children with 'additional needs' who required an enhancement of the personalised response already provided by the universal services they received through the mobilisation of additional professional support in the form of what became widely known as a 'team around the child' (TAC). In the language of resilience additional needs would be precipitated where the risks inherent in any life-event or transition point in childhood out-weighed the capacity of the child and their family and social relationships to be sufficiently protective to weather the crisis and move successfully on. The service objective here was to identify this dynamic as early as possible and increase support in order to de-

escalate the problem and prevent any subsequent divergence of the child from their optimal developmental pathway.

This service model depended for its success on the effective use of the new practice procedures and tools introduced under the 'change for children' project (DfES 2004). These included ContactPoint, an online directory of basic information on all children in the country enabling their details to be more readily checked by authorised professionals when concerns arise and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) through the use of which additional needs could be more uniformly logged and interpreted prior to any decision about enhanced intervention. A newly designated 'lead professional' role was also introduced to ensure services would be effectively co-ordinated in those cases where intervention needed to be intensified in order to de-escalate need. In these respects the customary methods of social workers, who remained in the lead role in those complex cases involving child protection interventions and the use of local authority care, were in effect being extended further across the service continuum.

As such these reforms have attracted significant criticism both for their further bureaucratisation of professional practice (Peckover et al. 2008a, 2008b, White et al. 2008, Broadhurst et al. 2009) and for the threat to civil liberties as well as effective practice posed by the extent and nature of the surveillance they are said to have instituted (Parton 2006). The argument here though is rather different focusing as it does on the effect on practice relationships of the uncertain distribution of authority and the limited access to resources that result from the ambiguous expectations of New Labour child welfare activation policy. The redistribution of (inter-) professional relationships and public service resources through the reform of children's services was intended to ensure the reciprocal activation of child welfare outcomes by parents and professionals in accordance with the New Labour vision. Services were expected to be provided in a timely, cost-effective and fair way in each case and become increasingly self-sustaining over the longer term. This could be expected because the combination of personalisation, earlier intervention and identification of additional needs and the progressive intensification of the integrated service response would pre-empt problems from developing, escalating and becoming entrenched as they had in the past. Over time this would allow resources to be steadily shifted back down the service continuum and the balance of responsibility for child outcomes restored to parents (and children as their potential was more fully realised) who would have been 'empowered' by the process to act with increasing capability and autonomy.

However, once again this made too many assumptions about the nature of the distribution of authority to act between parents and professionals and about access for both parties to the resources necessary to support change at each stage on the service continuum. This problem can be illustrated by briefly considering the impact of this model of child welfare activation and change on social work practice and its role within the reformed services.

The uncertain distribution of authority and resources: social work and inter-professional practice in children's services

The ambitious drive to create personalised, user-led and self-sustaining child welfare services has indeed resulted in the targeting of investment in universal services and their extension to ensure the earliest possible impact on the developmental trajectory of the child. Hence, for example, the Sure Start initiative and subsequent expansion of early childhood services and child care provision as well as the sustained emphasis on making schooling more effective. It also has ensured that continued priority has been given to the early identification of additional need through investment in the new organisational and procedural arrangements designed to enhance inter-professional practice. Consistent with the commitment to prevention much less attention and resource was devoted, by contrast, to service enhancement at the other end of the continuum and to the largely reactive and remedial interventions characteristic of social work practice. Indeed, the clamour at the time about the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003), rather than leading to boosted investment in existing child protection services and in public care for children who were not safe at home resulted instead in the extension of 'safeguarding' responsibilities across the service system (Luckock 2007).

Whilst this approach was consistent with the policy logic of 'empowering' the responsible parent to take more control in support of their child's progress it also highlighted how difficult this was to achieve where resources and authority consistent with their new activating responsibilities were so uncertainly available to professionals at each stage of the service continuum to support this process. It also exposed the extent and pervasive nature of the problems children and parents were managing and the lack of capacity to respond to need of core services. The mismatch between responsibilities and resources in personalised children's services encounters and its initial effects are illuminated by the situation that social work found itself in as policy implementation took place with increasing intensity after 2004. The establishment of mutually reinforcing relationships of child welfare activation added to existing parenting and professional responsibilities at each stage of the service continuum raising persistent concerns that resources were inadequate to support the new expectations. And the intrinsic uncertainty about the distribution of authority to act at any one point was further accentuated by the new preventative expectations. These intensified the activation process by requiring parents and professionals to be more assertive sooner to ensure the timely and effective targeting of resources on child and problem trajectories. This attempt to pre-empt the development of problems, in effect de-escalating need by escalating activation at ever earlier stages in the service continuum, had contradictory effects.

At the level of universal services the customary distribution of authority was unsettled. Rather than just turn up at the health clinic with the baby and send the child to school as required by law parents now had to be far more insistent on behalf of their children in their expectations of the professional response. And rather than simply advising on health and teaching the curriculum those professionals in turn had to take responsibility themselves for identifying developmental needs and parenting shortfalls as early as possible. It was no longer enough to simply pass concerns on up the system when they became too pressing to contain. Instead CAF assessments had to be instigated and TAC meetings convened. More significantly, lead professional roles had to be taken up much earlier in the system than before and this required a more authoritative stance as well as extra time and effort not only in relationship to calling the parent and child to account for their performance but

also in mobilising the inter-professional interventions that were expected to follow. At that end of the service continuum where the social work role was re-confirmed in its focus on intervening decisively in emergencies and retrieving resilient trajectories for children in the face of chronic parenting problems the uncertainty about authority was equally problematic. The heightened preventive expectations of parents and social workers at this stage posed an even greater challenge. This was partly because of the difficulty for parents and professionals alike in activating change in the face of acute problems and chronic disadvantage and their impact on family relationships and partly because of the demonstrably high stakes of failure, as had been evidenced again by the public response to the deaths of Victoria Climbié and 'Baby P'.

However, and this is the main argument here, the decision to target resources and responsibilities for prevention earlier in the service continuum to pre-empt problems from arising in the first place rather than to increase resources available to children, parents and social workers in the chronic and more immediately risky cases not only exposed the mis-match of responsibility and authority inherent in the model but also worsened the situation of the most vulnerable children. The dysfunctional effects of the assumptions of this model on the relationships between professionals and family members and within the integrated and inter-professional service system as whole are discussed elsewhere (Luckock 2009). For social work and the families for whom it held lead responsibility the effect was particularly acute, the two sides being left stranded without the resources necessary to ensure safety for children. The balance struck in the New Labour social investment strategies still left the poorest families struggling with too much responsibility to manage the new economic and social risks, the scale of redistribution of resources being too little to match the extent of the structural inequality faced (Hills et al. 2009). It also left the profession with the most responsibility for tackling the outcomes for children in these cases with too few resources and too little authority to bring to the table. This is demonstrated most dramatically by the situation that developed in relation to the use of public care to support children and families and court proceedings to underpin effective protective intervention.

Rather than being widened, access to the resources of public care for children in the most harmful family situations was further restricted as pressure was put on local authorities to reduce costs at that end of the system and redirect spending earlier down the line (DfES 2006, House of Commons, 2009, Forrester 2008). Whilst the state had always been a 'reluctant parent' (Masson 2008) in the Anglo-American tradition (Thoburn 2007, Forrester et al. 2009) the New Labour concern to activate parental responsibility across the service continuum left social work with no more authority or resources to match their increased responsibilities for supporting the process in the most difficult cases. In fact access to the courts and their care and supervision orders was restricted rather than enhanced as legal charges in care proceedings were hugely increased and procedures for meeting the threshold for court action made far more demanding in order to deter applications (Gillen 2009). As result more children were put at risk of serious harm as the already uncertain authority and resources commanded by social work to activate the motivation for change in avoidant or desperate parents further gave way to anxious and defensive practice. By the time of the criminal trial of his mother and partner in late 2008, following the murder of 'Baby P', the morale of the social work profession was in

significant decline and the decision by the government in 2009 to set up a Taskforce to make proposals for its restoration came as no great surprise (DCSF 2008).

Conclusion

Some have argued that the New Labour children's services reforms have undermined the position of social work not by restricting its authority and access to resources in the more complex family situations but by failing to extend the reach of the profession further back down the service continuum in line with earlier policy aspirations for the profession (see for example Parton 2009). This is not the conclusion of the present analysis which points in a different direction, suggesting it would be more logical to strengthen the capacity of social workers to activate change in the most intractable cases rather than dissipate their impact further by extending the lead professional brief still further. The same would go for the exercise of professional roles at all stages of the service continuum where heightened and ambiguous expectations are insufficiently authorised and resourced. Currently this is seen to be a matter of overcoming cultural and historical barriers to better service integration and more effective inter-professional practice (Edwards et al. 2009, see also Luckock 2009). However, the policy logic points to service adaptations that clarify the distribution of authority to act at each stage of earlier, preventive intervention and across the service system as a whole and provide far more support for the personalisation process. Although the point has not been elaborated here, this crucially includes supervisory relationships that are sufficiently robust to contain the ethical dilemmas and emotions stirred up in service conversations in which responsibility for action and change is contested and political and social anxiety about child well-being and outcomes have been delegated to the family and service front-line.

In this way it might be possible for the new participative spaces opened up by the policy of reciprocal activation to be developed in order to contribute to the expansion rather than restriction of citizenship entitlements. For despite the intrinsic ambiguities produced by the conditionality and individualisation of the New Labour 'active welfare' settlement the personalisation model does offer a glimpse of a new kind of participative encounter for the negotiation of responsibilities and resources for child welfare. The main focus of attention on this front has been to emphasise consumer entitlements, initially to voice and choice (Giddens 2007) and now increasingly to agreed outcomes (2020 Public Services Trust 2009). But it is also possible to conceive of developments that would create what has been termed a 'deep citizen and professional involvement' (Griffiths et al. 2009, p12) in the negotiation of rights more generally defined. In this way, for example, the rights of children as citizens in themselves and not just as future workers could be actively considered in each case (Lister 2007a, b).

Of course it must now be rather more likely that the New Labour electoral strategy has run its course and in the face of the new fiscal crisis of the state a new kind of 'post-bureaucratic' politics will emerge in which a more traditional division of 'social responsibility' for welfare is restored between the family and the state (Cameron 2008).

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