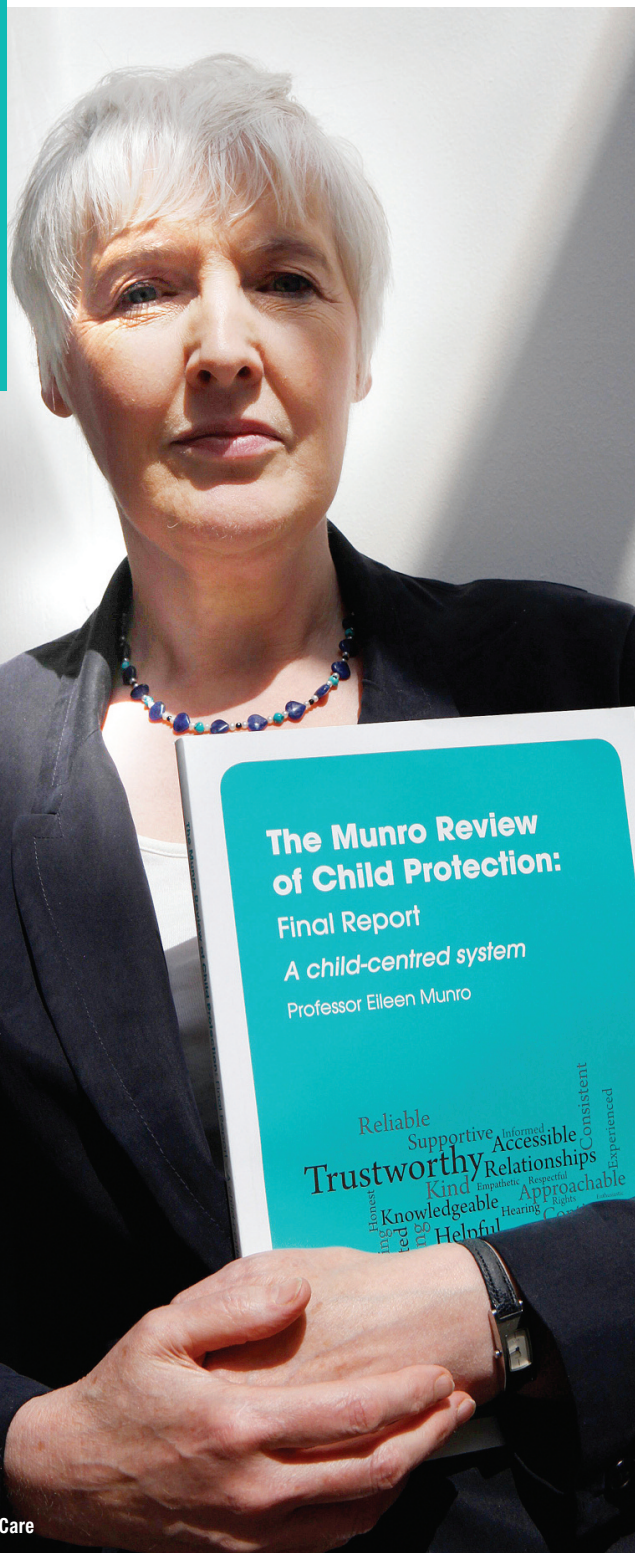


THE MUNRO EFFECT?

Six years on from her landmark review of child protection, Professor Eileen Munro talks to **Andy McNicoll** about its impact on social work



It is a report that galvanised front line social workers like few before it. Professor Eileen Munro's 2011 review of child protection in England urged ministers to back a set of reforms designed to cut bureaucracy and place more trust in professionals.

Munro argued services needed to be freed from the grip of managerialism. A “targets and terror” culture, which Munro feels dominated public services under New Labour, left social workers and directors obsessing over performance indicators and paperwork, not what really mattered – work with families.

“We had been destroying professional social work by mistake. In trying to improve it in the wrong kinds of ways for so long, we ended up taking away that focus on one human being creating a relationship with another human being in order to help them,” Munro tells *PSW*.

The amount of time social workers spent at computers disturbed her, as did the way some talked about families in a “completely bureaucratic way”. She was also alarmed that Ofsted used computer records alone to judge the quality of care.

“They had no evidence on whether children were actually benefitting. I suspect a lot of families at that time were not only not helped, but they were possibly even harmed, by a rather indifferent social work contact that scared them and made them reluctant to ask for help.”

Munro's blueprint for a “child-centred system” had 15 recommendations. Ministers accepted most of them unconditionally. Six years on there are signs of the impact, particularly on national policies.

For example, Working Together guidance on safeguarding children was cut from more than 300 pages to 109. Ofsted inspections were overhauled to focus more on direct work and outcomes. And while Munro called for the introduction of a chief social worker, the Westminster government appointed two – one based in the Department for Education and one in the Department of Health.

Munro feels that move was “pragmatic” given the way children's and adult's social work had been increasingly separated, but she remains “deeply disappointed we don't have a more integrated profession”.

The impact of Munro's review at local level has been patchier. Many social workers feel a long way from her vision. Responding to a recent article mentioning Munro's report, one social worker claimed her senior managers remained “wed-locked” to “tick box processes”. Social workers, she claimed,

feature

were “drowning” in bureaucracy.

When Munro delivered her report she warned it was not a “quick fix”. She also consciously avoided ushering in “targets and terror” of her own (services talking about “Munro compliance” totally miss the point, she says). Instead she wanted to outline an ethos for services and some practical steps to help make it happen.

She believes around a third of English councils are making “fantastic progress” in re-focusing social work on families, not paperwork, and hopes others follow suit.

“You hear those social workers talking about the work that they are doing and they are proud of it, as are their directors. I feel we’re slowly getting more and more like that and I’m hoping we’ll reach a tipping point where it starts to move even faster.”

Having a strong Principal Child and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) in post can help, says Munro. Her review created the role – a social worker at senior level who would remain active in some front line work – and recommended every council appoint one.

“I felt it was important that someone who was still, even on a small scale, involved in direct work should be in management meetings because they can bring the current reality of that work into discussions.

“I still occasionally try and join a home visit because it reminds me of how clean and tidy it looks when you’re not involved in it. When you’re actually there you remember how skilled it is to be able to get into a conversation with someone in chaotic circumstances. I wanted to break the idea that you could either be a manager or a practitioner.”

Most councils have a PCFSW but there are fears the role is often treated as an add on to management. Munro recognises those concerns and feels some councils “struggled to understand” what she was recommending.

She points to Cornwall as an authority that’s used the role well, “in a really creative way”. Last year Ofsted rated the council ‘good’ after inspectors found its working environment helped social workers “flourish”.

“Some PCFSWs have been fantastic at really bringing in the voice of practice into everything. Their organisations have built from that rather than thinking ‘let’s get the perfect paperwork system and go from there’. But unfortunately, some have been given very little space to actually do the job.”

That space is vital to all social workers, not just PCFSWs, as one thing any good social work needs is time, says Munro. So while she’s buoyed by improvements to practice in

some areas, she feels there’s “no question” the “external threats” of austerity and rising referrals pose risks.

Funding for councils fell by an average of 40 per cent since 2010, according to a recent report by The Association of Directors of Children’s Services. Over the same period child protection plans increased 29 per cent. The Local Government Association estimates by 2020 children’s services will be £2 billion short of the funding they need to cope.

In the scramble for savings, more councils are using hotdesking in child protection.

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Hotdesking robs social workers of invaluable support and places them at higher risk of burnout

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Research published by *Community Care* last year found more than half (56 per cent) of English authorities now work this way.

Munro has called for hotdesking to be scrapped and remains deeply concerned by its prevalence. She says it robs social workers of vital support and places them at higher risk of burnout. She also fears it reflects a wider trend of councils “forgetting that teams have a function within the profession”.

“They are not just an administrative arrangement. There have been a number of studies of what happens in social work offices. When somebody comes back from a visit they will talk to the person at the next desk. In the process they are making sense of what they saw, they are reflecting on it, and considering if they may have missed something. It’s an incredibly important intellectual process.

“Supervision cannot do it all. When I worked, my colleagues were at least as important as my supervisor. They give you a kind of emotional support that helps you process things, particularly distressing visits, and not carry them home with you. Dismissing the value of that worries me.”

Munro feels practitioners’ frustrations at working environments partly explain the backlash against the Westminster government’s plans to introduce accreditation tests for children’s social workers.

The Department for Education (DfE) has claimed the tests will boost public confidence in social workers and improve practice. But sector bodies have been highly critical, with surveys by both BASW and Unison finding

most social workers do not support the plans.

Munro feels the idea that social workers in the “incredibly important area of severe family crisis” should have an additional specialist qualification is “reasonable” in principle.

“If you go and see a gastroenterologist, you would expect him or her to have passed some additional exams besides their basic medical training wouldn’t you? So additional qualifications for very specialist areas of social work isn’t an issue in and of itself.”

However, she’s unsure that any accreditation should be as broad as the DfE planned (ministers wanted every children’s social worker accredited by 2020 but that deadline has since been dropped). She also feels more fundamental issues with working conditions need to be addressed first.

“I just think we’re not in a place where people won’t see it [accreditation] as punitive. I think the reaction in the sector indicates how many people think they could do a much better job if they had a better work environment, and they don’t want to be punished for being in a bad working environment.

“I suspect an awful lot of people are just aware of rising workloads and financial cuts and that’s what’s central to their attention.”

Munro feels both the DfE and Isabelle Trowler, the chief social worker for children, are “endeavouring” to build a stronger focus on social work practice in services.

She hasn’t agreed with all of the DfE reforms – Munro’s withdrawal of support for ‘exemption’ clauses in the Children and Social Work Bill contributed to them being scrapped. However, she feels that overall the system is becoming more child focused.

The DfE’s children’s social care innovation fund was an “adventurous move”, she says, because it backed people to trial new ways of working without tightly stipulating what had to be achieved or how. Munro is involved in several innovation fund projects with Signs of Safety, and says “lots of learning” is emerging.

“Another thing I’d say very strongly from my own experiences of that work is that there are a lot of excellent social workers out there - if you give them the chance to be professional social workers then they will grab it.

“I think there was a fantasy back in the early 2000s that if you had a big enough procedure manual anyone could pick it up and do social work. We had turned it into a technical job, rather than a human job.

“Now I think there is at least a full recognition that in fact you need an individual with real skills – let’s keep giving them more opportunities to use them.”