

## **Do No Harm**

### **11 September 2018 House of Commons**

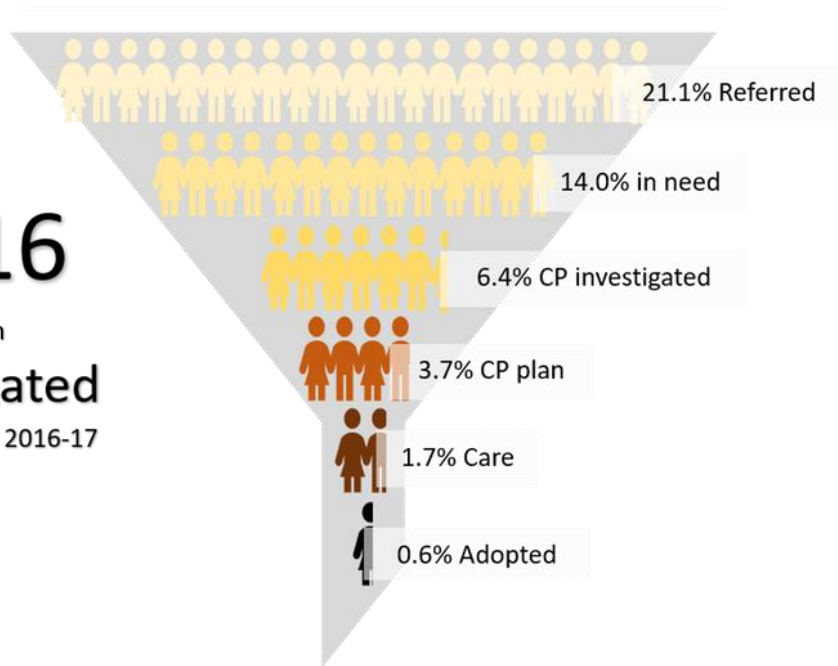
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Ok, how do you follow that? That's such a telling picture of what's happening at the moment in child protection and what I want to talk to you about today is that it doesn't have to be like that. But first of all, I'm going to tell you a little bit about my new research. I'm not going to apologise for telling you about numbers because if you're campaigning to make a difference, you need to know what's happening in the system. So this research gives you a picture of what's happening in the system. I'll briefly tell you about that and then tell you about my practice, when we reduced the numbers of children in care, in a local authority in Scotland by 70%.

First of all, on this paper (see below) I've given out what you'll see is a graph with an arrow on it. What that shows you is what was happening to two groups of five-year olds. What I looked at, using freedom of information request, was all children who were born in a particular year, and what happened to them before they were five. One group were five last year in 2017 and the other group were five, five years earlier. So you can start to see what has changed in just that five years between those two sets of children being born. The graph shows you that there's been a 16% increase in being referred but in addition, there's been a 52% increase in the number of children being adopted. There's also a 51% increase in the number of children having been investigated for abuse. The numbers who were put on a child protection plan following investigation didn't go up as much. What that means is that there are more investigations that don't lead to a child protection plan. It's gone from 50% of all investigations leading to a child protection plan, to only 36% over the last few years. So there are huge changes in what's happening. What that means is that last year, every four minutes and forty seconds, an investigation started that didn't find anything. Every four minutes and forty seconds day and night, 120,000 investigations, that found nothing. And this number is going up. It's been going up every year since 2008. This increase is not about increases in physical or sexual abuse. There was a total increase of 22,100 in the number of child protection plans between 2010 and 2017. Neglect and emotional harm plans went up by 22,030 whilst all other categories rose by only 70. Whilst a small number of cases of neglect and emotional harm are very serious many more are about people struggling to get by when faced with the awful effects of the growing tide of poverty. Also when I looked at this recently there are major differences in this change in findings of emotional abuse between local authorities and those that had the biggest increases had sudden sharp increases. This seems unlikely to be because of a sudden epidemic of emotional abuse in these authorities – rather there is a sudden change in the response to families in difficulty. So that's the first part of this story.

## Children involved in social care before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2016-17

**1 in 16**  
of all children  
**CP investigated**  
before 5<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2016-17



### Change in 5 years

- +5% Referred
- +20% In Need
- +35% CP Investigated
- +22% CP Plan
- +7% Care
- +36% Adopted



Increase in rate of children involved in CSC before 5<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2011-12 vs 2016-17



Notes: Figures are from a freedom of information request with between 65 and 88 English local authorities responding to each question. Counts include children who had experienced a service at least once before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. Percentages are of mid 2016 population of 5-year-olds. CP investigated is children who have had a section 47 inquiry; CP plan is those who had a child protection plan; and care is those with any period looked after before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. Placement order is those in care on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 and on a placement order. CSC is children's social care.

The second is, well what does that mean? How many children are actually involved in the child protection system? There's a picture with a funnel on it and that shows what percentage of all children who were five in 2017 have reached all these different stages of the child protection system. This was a study that looked at more than half of all local authorities in the country. It found that 1 in 5 children were referred, 1 in 7 children were found to be in need - that's legally saying, that they need a service to achieve a reasonable level of health or well-being. 1 in 16 of all children were investigated for child abuse. This is massive. This is more than children with serious disabilities. This is just before they're five. That proportion of children can only go up, it can only go up because more of those children who were born in that year will be investigated, more of those children born in that year will be on child protection plans before they reach the age of 18. So that's what that funnel tells you.

Finally, what I've also found was that there was, what I call a postcode lottery. What happens to you depends on what local authority you live in. Some local authorities are far more active, take far more children into care and adopt more children than others. In fact, there's a 12-fold difference in the numbers of children who are adopted before they're 5, between those local authorities that take the fewest children for adoption and those that take the most. That isn't accounted for by differences in things like poverty or deprivation. Those differences are mostly about activity, about what people are doing. The study found that nearly 2% of all children in Southampton had been adopted or been placed on an order, waiting for adoption by the age of 5.

So you need to know these figures. On my website which is down the bottom of the page, you've got all these studies and other studies I've done where I've looked at adoption and shown that, for example, the number of children on any one day who are adopted or in special guardianship is now more than the number of children who are in care and will continue to rise for at least another ten years if the adoption rate stays at the 2017 level.

So that's the facts and figures. What it shows is a huge change in what is happening in Social Work. I think we've totally lost the guiding idea that social work is about partnership and support. It's become something that's about investigation and blame. What drives that is a culture of rescue. When you try to rescue somebody from something, there's something that you've rescued them from, something that's threatening. I think it is parents that are increasingly seen as the threatening thing that we're trying to rescue them from.

So does it have to be like this? Do we have to work in this way? When I started working in Fife and this is a long time ago, before I worked internationally advising governments on how to reduce orphanage care and how to develop social work that could support families. When I worked in Fife, I was responsible for all the research and development and was eventually a senior manager, an Assistant Director of social work for the department. In just 3 years we reduced the number of children in care by 70%.

A lot of that wasn't about massive increases in resources. One of the things we did was to make some cash available to frontline workers who were working with families. They could spend it on helping families. In Scotland there was legislation that allowed you to give money to spend on support to prevent children coming into care. We gave each of our seven area offices the equivalent of the cost of one child in care for a year. We also helped social workers and front line managers to think about what they wanted to achieve in their work with children and families. The numbers of children in care went down by almost 250. So we gave out the cost of seven children in care for a year and we got a reduction of 250 children. It's huge. We put a lot of it back into the system. We invented new forms of support for children and families. We also spent a lot of it on older people because we wanted to help everybody and we stopped spending and wasting money on very expensive solutions like residential care for children. You can spend money on other types of solutions. So that's one example.

We hear a lot about the need to deal with the financial crash. I recently went and spent some time doing some work in Malta. Malta have taken a different approach, in how they responded to the crash. They decided to put more money into supporting the poorest in society. They put in work with people in local communities, they put in helpers. So that when somebody was planning for a job, if they couldn't get a job, they could have a mentor to get them into work. They could have somebody to actually work with them to help them get into work.

They put in more money into family support. So they did things like, they made free childcare for children under 5. What happened? Well, Malta's economy is thriving. It was the fastest growing economy last year. I'm going out there again in a few weeks, so I'll report back. The numbers of children being taken into care is falling. The numbers of people in poverty is falling. We can do these things. We just have to do something different. We have to stop believing this mad idea; that we're all in it together. We're not. The poorest in society are not in it together.

All this research is on my website. Thank you, Anne, for inviting me here today and if you've got any questions or thoughts I'll be around afterwards.