



Isabelle Trowler says social work needs to be 'kinder'

## Too many children wrongly taken into care, admits chief social worker Isabelle Trowler

Emily Dugan, Social Affairs Correspondent

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Babies and children are still being removed from families unnecessarily, according to the chief social worker for children and families in England.

Isabelle Trowler, 53, said social work needed “a reset” because it was “devastating” for families to have a child taken into care when they did not need to be. She branded as “an injustice” the practice under which some authorities take away babies who could be safely supported at home.

In an interview Trowler said that dire warnings of a dramatic surge in children suffering neglect and being taken into care

after the first lockdown had not come to pass. Instead there had been a shift to “kinder” social work, which supported families rather than taking away their children. The aftermath of the pandemic provided a chance to recalibrate how the state protects children.

The number of families subjected to a formal child protection investigation in which no further action was taken more than tripled from 43,400 in 2010 to 134,620 last year.

It is widely accepted that social work became more risk averse following the death in 2007 of Peter Connelly, [known as Baby P](#), who died after suffering more than 50 injuries over an eight-month period, during which he was seen by social workers.

Trowler said: “If such a high number of investigations are ending in no further action you have to accept that means we [social workers] are intervening when we didn’t need to.”

She said the practice of removing children unnecessarily needed to stop “because it’s an injustice”.

The Sunday Times February 21, 2021

INVESTIGATION

## I found one bruise – and they took my baby away



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Being  
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workers,  
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tortured

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## Children are being removed from innocent parents for months on end by councils that launch abuse investigations based on a single unexplained mark

### EXCLUSIVE

Emily Dugan  
Social Affairs Correspondent

Holly Kobayashi was in bed, breastfeeding her eight-day-old son, when she noticed a little bruise on his left arm. It was tiny, around the size of a 5p piece, but it was about to change their lives. That was the last night in four months that she was allowed to sleep under the same roof as her baby.

In the sleep-deprived fog of early motherhood, she could think of no reason for the bruise, and feared it might be a sign of illness. Even look at

plausible, but without a definitive answer the bruise was defined as medically unexplained. Social services said Adventure would have to be put into care while the case was investigated, and when Holly refused, the police were called. She remembers the social worker and police arguing – the police were more sympathetic – then being told to go home and leave her baby behind, only returning to deliver pumped breast milk.

“That moment of being made to leave, by the law, the police, the social workers, was like being tortured,” Holly said.

After interviewing Holly and her friends and family, police found insufficient evidence to support a prosecution. Holly hoped the decision would help, but it appeared to



Holly Kobayashi with her son Adventure and, below left, during her pregnancy. She still suffers flashbacks to the moment he was taken from her by child services

ing that “any explanation that any injury, deprived areas about this – people will be

The Sunday Times revealed last month that badly written policies were prompting babies to be taken into care over a single bruise

“I’ve watched lots of families go through that process, and it is absolutely terrifying,” she said.

“I can only imagine that if you absolutely know that you have not harmed your child – and there are a number of professionals around you that are suggesting that you have – it’s just absolutely devastating.

“It’s a desperate situation to be in. And that’s why we need to be really crystal clear about the rationale for why we are taking that kind of action and that we’ve got very, very strong arguments and good evidence for it.”

Her words come after a judgment published last week showed two teenagers in West Sussex were put in long-term foster care because of concern about their weight. The judge said it was “a loving family” and that many of their basic needs were met, but that their parents had not allowed them to live healthily.

While Trowler would not comment on the case, she said she would “not support an application to remove a child solely on

the grounds that the child is (even very) overweight. I would support an application to remove a child from their parents' care if remaining there was going to cause them to die or be seriously harmed, ie physical or emotional injury with life threatening, life changing and long-term consequences, and all efforts to avert that trajectory had been exhausted.”

Trowler said that a focus on early intervention in many places meant that too often social workers were acting on the assumption “that things are going to go badly wrong, when actually, you’ve got no idea whether or not they will”. While it was often possible to build a reasonable case for why a child should go into care, Trowler said “the critical question is: ‘Is it necessary?’”

The Sunday Times revealed last month that badly written policies were prompting babies to be [taken into care over a single bruise](#). One mother had her newborn baby taken away for four months in North Tyneside after she showed midwives a bruise the size of a 5p piece.

North Tyneside is one of eight local authorities with a policy that triggers a formal child protection investigation whenever an unexplained bruise is found on a baby that is not yet crawling. It is reviewing its policy.

Trowler said that the government’s child safeguarding practice review panel would be looking again at how advice on bruising is interpreted by local authorities. She cautioned against writing a national policy on bruising.

Trowler is credited with transforming social work in Hackney, east London, where she was assistant director of children’s services until 2011. She helped pioneer what became known as “the Hackney model”, where small teams were supported by an experienced leader, as well as full-time administrators and therapists. The approach reduced costs and led to a 40 per cent cut in the number of children taken into care.

A year-long independent review of children’s social care began this month. Trowler said it was an opportunity to focus “not just on children in care, but families who have received services, who have been subject to state scrutiny, and to listen properly to that experience, and how we might be able to do things differently”.

The pandemic has had catastrophic consequences for a small number of the most vulnerable. The number of children killed or suffering serious injuries as a result of abuse or neglect rose in the first lockdown. The child safeguarding panel received 285 serious incident notifications from April to September, up 27 per cent on the previous year.

But Trowler believes it is important to be wary of removing children without good reason. “We’ve got to keep a balance between welfare and protection. The children that need protecting are very, very small in number compared with the families that need support.”

Trowler said the aftermath of the pandemic offered an opportunity to “reset” the way social work is done so it was kinder to families.

“Someone used the example of a social worker going to the family home, and instead of looking in the fridge and saying, ‘Oh my goodness, how terrible you haven’t got any food,’ saying, ‘Oh, my goodness, how terrible. How can I help you get some food?’”

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