

# England: Two reports reveal the crisis in social care

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The interim report of the British government's Social Work Task Force (SWTF) highlights the chronic problems in social care provision in England, which paves the way for the neglect, abuse and even death of the most vulnerable.

The SWTF was set up by the government earlier this year to comprehensively review frontline social work practice and to make recommendations for improvement and reform of the profession. Its creation followed the appointment of child protection expert, Lord Laming, to report on the progress being made across the country to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children.

Both Laming's appointment and the creation of the SWTF are attempts by the Labour government to appease public outrage over the death of 17-month-old toddler "Baby Peter" and the apparent inability of the authorities to prevent such tragedies reoccurring, despite similar cases in the past.

The Laming and the SWTF reports are indictments of the Labour government and the capitalist system as a whole. They also contradict the media campaign over cases of fatal abuse like that of Baby Peter, which let the government and its policies off the hook for the dire inadequacies in social care and put the blame on individuals and social care workers.

The SWTF description of the state of social care work in England is damning. It states, "Widespread staffing shortages mean that social work is struggling to hold its own as a durable, attractive public sector profession, compromising its ability to deliver consistent quality on the frontline.

"There is no robust, standing system for collecting information on local and national levels of vacancies, turnover and sickness, and for forecasting future supply and demand. Local authorities are finding it hard to

identify effective methods for managing the workloads of frontline staff. Staff shortages and financial pressures are making these challenges harder still."

Laming also strongly criticises social services departments, which he says suffer from "low staff morale, poor supervision, high caseloads, under-resourcing and inadequate training."

The public sector union UNISON, which has 40,000 social workers amongst its membership, says vacancies in social work are at "danger level," running at an average of 12 percent across the UK. In addition, social workers are increasingly over-stretched because of the public's heightened sensitivity regarding possible child abuse cases.

Latest figures indicate there are also 5,000 unfilled health visitor jobs, a profession which provides continuous assessment of children under five years old and support to vulnerable families. This, and the fact that they are already compelled to manage their clients for longer than they should as a result of a shortage of social workers, means health visitors are handling case loads well above government recommendations.

Laming's report, published in March this year, also draws attention to "significant levels of concern that current practice, and in particular the pressure of high case-loads for children's social workers and health visitors, has meant that staff often do not have the time needed to maintain effective contact with children, young people and their families in order to achieve positive outcomes."

Social workers complain that they do not have modern technological equipment for data recording and other purposes, which means they spend 80 percent of their time on paperwork and only 20 percent with their clients. The SWTF report states, "The current mix of practical and professional support to frontline social

workers is inconsistent and sometimes inadequate. To be effective, social workers need appropriate technology and equipment, secure access to supervision, and robust sources of research and information—and enough time to make good use of all of these resources.”

Both Laming and the SWTF criticise the training that social workers receive. The SWTF writes, “Current arrangements for education and training are not producing enough social workers fully suited to the challenges of frontline practice.”

Laming calls for social workers to be far more rigorously trained in child protection, pointing out that, “A social worker could complete a degree without ever coming into contact with a child and inherit an entire caseload on the first day in the job.”

According to the SWTF report, frontline social workers think that their time and skills are too often deployed in order to meet targets and performance indicators and not to provide a “high quality service, tailored to the true needs and circumstances of service users.”

Laming also recommends the abolition of court fees, which impact on local authorities and their decisions to move children out of danger. A steep rise in fees for care proceedings was introduced by Justice Secretary Jack Straw, which led to a reduction in the number of orders taking vulnerable children into care.

It would be a mistake to assume that the government will use the new findings to improve the situation. Instead of implementing the lengthy list of recommendations in the Laming and SWTF reports, social care provision will be targeted for spending cuts by whichever government wins the general election next year.

Few need reminding that the Labour government has failed to implement Laming’s previous recommendations resulting from his investigation into the death of Victoria Climbié, an eight-year-old girl who died after constant abuse, nine years ago.

According to Laming it is estimated at least 200,000 children live in households where there is a known high risk of domestic abuse and violence. An estimated 250,000 to 350,000 children have parents who are problematic drug users and around 1.3 million children live with parents who are thought to misuse alcohol.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

Children claims that reported suspected cases of child abuses has risen by more than a third since Baby Peter’s death. Its helpline has passed on 11,243 such cases to police or social care services in the 12 months up to March 2009.

Staggering levels of unemployment, poverty and homelessness under the profit system further aggravate the risk of abuse, neglect and other social problems while the social and health care system is being eroded. Recent figures show that that 3.3 million households in the UK—one in six of the total—are without an adult working, and child poverty has risen sharply as a result.



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