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BRIEFING

FRAMEWORK FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN IN NEED AND THEIR FAMILIES – THE LILAC BOOK

The date for implementation of the Lilac Book is approaching. The guidance is at the heart of government initiatives to achieve improvements in children's social services and has been heavily trailed and promoted by the government. There is now a great deal of expectation that trained social workers will be delivering 'research and evidence' based social work assessments within the timescales set out in the guidance from April of this year.

The assessment framework is aimed at all children in need but is also obviously of central relevance to the court process in protecting and planning for children suffering from significant harm. Court related work has a high profile and it is here that the work of social workers with children and families comes under the most intense scrutiny. Judges and other professionals involved in proceedings are intensely interested in the preparations of social departments to implement the lilac book framework. Locally they are fully aware of the fact that Birmingham has stated that training has been in progress and that be Lilac Book assessments will undertaken from April 2001. In absence of any statements to the contrary that is the current expectation. What then are the prospects for social services departments being able to meet the targets being set for them?

The Lilac Book

The guidance contained in the Lilac Book is a combination of the aspirations of

Government for children's social services alongside a description of the assessment framework and the process of delivery of assessment.

The book is set out in 6 chapters with 7 appendices. The book also refers to other important publications, knowledge which is crucial for social workers carrying out assessments. The bibliography at appendix G is an important source of information. It is difficult to see how social workers would be able to reach decisions and conclusions without access to many of the publications mentioned there. A good example is "Children's Needs-Parenting Capacity: The impact parental mental illness, problem alcohol and drug use, and domestic violence on children's development".

Knowledge of this companion to the Lilac Book is essential in carrying out assessments and reaching conclusions where any of these issues are prevalent within a family which of course is the case in very many cases.

The six chapters in the book are:

- Children in Need
- □ Framework for the assessment of children in need
- The process of assessing children in need
- Analysis judgement and decision making
- Roles and responsibilities in inter agency assessment of children in need

 Organisational arrangements to support effective assessment of children in need.

Before looking at the individual chapters it's worth mentioning the preface. This sets out the rationale of the guidance. It quotes the central duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need. The critical task of ascertaining whether a child is in need and how the child and family might best be helped. It states that the effectiveness of assessment is key to the effectiveness of other actions and outcomes for the child.

The preface states that the guidance is issued under S7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. It must be complied with unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons why not.

The preface clarifies that the guidance is **not** a practice manual and begins to refer to all the other publications that are available to keep practitioners abreast of the latest knowledge from research and practice.

Finally, the preface stresses the importance of all agencies involved in working with children and families being aware of the guidance and what it will mean for them, it outlines the contents of the chapters to come and states that this guidance supersedes the 'Orange book', stressing concern that that guidance had been used too 'mechanistically', that services sometimes were pending the outcome of assessments and pointing out the different approach of the new guidance.

Chapter 1: Children in Need

The chapter starts by identifying the extent of Children in Need and extolling the virtues of a broader based approach to helping Children in Need. The outcome of this approach is that more children are dealt with under S17 of the Children Act with families receiving support and less under S47 child protection investigations with resulting benefits to families and staff.

The chapter goes on to usefully restate the definition of Children in Need, and the various powers and duties to assess, investigate and provide services. Those looking for some practical guidance on how to carry out assessments will be drawn to Paragraphs 1.23 and 1.24 which set out some of the ground rules for those undertaking assessments.

The chapter ends by setting out ten principles, "underpinning the assessment framework". Much is obvious however they do usefully set out the scale of the task facing social workers. There is a restating of the importance that each social worker carrying out assessment work must have a thorough understanding of child development. The importance of equal opportunities and working in partnership is stated.

The chapter ends by underlining the importance of research and evidence.

There is an expectation that practice and supervision are grounded in the most up to date **knowledge** and use resources including:

- Relevant research
- Statistics
- SSI Inspectorate standards
- Inspection audit and performance assessment reports
- Lessons learned from enquiries and case reviews.

"evidence based practice, grounded in knowledge with finely balanced professional judgement is the foundation for effective practice with children and families".

Chapter 2: The Framework.

Having criticised the Orange Book for being used too mechanistically and as a checklist the Lilac Book itself now provides a checklist of the areas to be covered.

There is an extensive list in each of three "domains" with the child at the centre. I am sure everyone is now familiar with the "triangle" used to illustrate the framework. There is a major task of evidence gathering if all the information in all the domains is to be gathered. On the parental side the heading "ensuring

safety" is where harm issues are to be addressed. On the child's side important questions around attachments and development will be dealt with under the heading "emotional and behavioural development".

Various Family Packs of Questionnaires and Scales have been published to assist in the process of information gathering.

The extent of the task is set out for all to see. In future, assessments, which are set up to concentrate on parenting capacity but ignore the child's needs, will be challenged. It will be necessary to plan to assess each domain from the outset.

<u>Chapter 3: The Process of assessing</u> <u>Children in Need</u>

The time-scales for the carrying out of the various stages of the assessment process are set out in this chapter.

Initial referrals are to be dealt with in one day with decisions and reasons given. Initial assessments are to be carried out in seven days to include the interviewing of relevant people and the pulling together of information from files and other agencies. If at that point a child is identified as in need or a S47 investigation is seen as necessary a further core assessment must be carried out in 35 days. The 35 days can be extended if there is the need for specialist assessment.

Again those looking for practical guidance will be drawn to paras 3.37 and 3.38 and Appendix D which give guidance on how to plan an assessment and how to set out the final report. Appendix D envisages that reports will be signed at team manager level.

An important principle is stated at Para 3.39:

"The nature of concerns about a child's needs will determine how the process is carried out and the detail collected. The greater the concern the greater the need for specificity, for use of specialist knowledge and judgement in the process..."

<u>Chapter 4 : Analysis Judgement and Decision Making</u>

This chapter very much opens out the level of specialist knowledge a social worker is expected to attain in order to be able to make judgements and come to conclusions. The chapter can be read together with the companion to the Lilac book entitled "Practice Guidance."

Social workers are expected to be widely read and to have access to the latest research in reaching their conclusions. Many of the publications referred to in this chapter are to be found in the Bibliography at Appendix G.

For me the publications that stand out as very important are:

Adcock etc.: Significant Harm, its Management and Outcome

Bentovim etc.: Prognosis for Rehabilitation after Abuse

Cleaver etc.: Children's needs, Parenting Capacity

Department of Health publications generally

Howarth J: The Child's World, Assessing Children in Need

Jones (in Significant Harm and Howarth)

Jones and Ramchandani: Child Sexual Abuse Informing Practice from Research

The chapter sets out the importance of being able to measure the evidence against research criteria. To look at the indicators in research that tend to indicate poor outcomes or where there are better prospects for achieving good outcomes and to analyse the evidence available against this research in reaching conclusions and planning for children.

Once judgements have been made it will then be necessary to plan for the child. The guidance states that plans for Children in Need should be reviewed regularly in the same way as care plans and plans for Children looked after.

Chapter 5: Roles and Responsibilities in Inter Agency Assessment of Children In Need

This chapter sets out the principle of inter agency co-operation and the need for each local authority to have a corporate approach to provision. Key issues for agencies are addressed here. The guidance is clearly linked to "Working Together to Safeguard Children".

Chapter 6: Organisational Arrangements to Support Effective Assessment of Children in Need.

Here the guidance places the assessment framework in the context of the government's wider objectives for social services. Outcomes for children are to be measured against published performance indicators based on the Best Value regime.

The responsibilities of elected members and the Chief Executive are mentioned as well as good practice in the organisation of social services departments and working across agencies.

There is brief advice on the commissioning of specialist assessments.

Once again the guidance stresses the importance of staff having the skills and knowledge to deliver the framework. There must be sufficient staff with the knowledge confidence to skills and undertake They will need to be assessments. competently supervised, members of a organisation and learning constantly undergoing training. Training materials commissioned by the DOH are specifically mentioned. There should be a training strategy team in each authority to keep training under review.

The Adoption White Paper

The feelings of professionals involved in court related assessment work are that there is a wide gap between current assessment performance and that envisaged by the guidance. There are many areas where performance is weak or

non-existent. In the crucial area of research, social workers have not had the confidence or knowledge to quote research nor have the courts taken a consistent approach to attempts to do so. Major change in attitudes will be required if this goal is to be met.

In considering it's strategy for increasing the number of looked after children adopted the government has identified that there are delays inherent in the court process partly due to poor social work training on assessment. The plans to tackle the problem include, extra money to train existing social work staff to train and qualify as social workers, changes to the basic training of social workers on Dip SW courses to ensure more emphasis on child development and the research basis for judgements and a large increase in the number social workers taking the Post Qualifying Award in child care.

The problem with all these initiatives is that they will take time to work. At the same time as making these proposals the government also proposes to strengthen the case management of cases before the courts so that delay is minimised in care cases. New guidance for the courts is to be issued later this year, which will undoubtedly be aimed at making sure that assessments are delivered on the correct issues and on time.

Conclusions

This article is written from the perspective of local experience with some limited contact with lawyers in other authorities. It is certainly the local experience that there is a long way to go before social workers will routinely be able to complete the type of assessments envisaged without seeking specialist help. If change is to take place it is likely to be over a period of time as training and new procedures take effect.

What is clear is that there will be far more monitoring of the position than was the case with Orange Book assessments. The government through its Best Value Performance Indicators, the audit of best value service improvement plans and the continuous involvement of the Social

Services Inspectorate, clearly wishes to see local authority social services departments delivering its objectives.

Among the objectives are:

- ensuring that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of childhood, and;
- to ensure that children are protected from emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect

The government has also set targets for an increase in the number of looked after children being adopted (40/50% increase by 2004/2005). There are also targets in respect of the time Looked After Children spend in care before adoption.

Unless local authority social services departments are delivering research and evidence based assessments with sound judgements and conclusions it will be difficult to meet these objectives and targets.

Local authorities who are not performing will be open to sanctions imposed by the government including the possibility of losing the particular area of work to another authority or agency.

It is important that all those involved in child protection and assessment, not just social workers, have a working knowledge of the guidance and a realistic and patient approach to ensuring that these great expectations of change and improvement in practice are delivered.

There is however a danger that as with the 'Orange Book' training will not be given in sufficient depth to social workers to enable them to reach the high standards necessary. If that is the case, the weight of expectation and the power of the courts to order assessments is likely to lead to a process of attrition. Social workers will become discouraged and the field of assessment work will remain largely in the hands of 'experts' and specialist independent assessment agencies.

For advice on the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families contact Jerome O'Ryan on:-

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