

Children are Suffering

Written by Chris Robertshaw

Wednesday, 17 November 2010 12:09 - Last Updated Thursday, 18 November 2010 21:00

Speech made by Chris Robertshaw during the debate on Child Care Tuesday November 16th 2010



Thank you Mr President. It goes without saying but I will say it anyway. I am absolutely sure that there is not one single member of this honourable court who does not care enormously about our children. To suggest otherwise would be a heinous thing to do and I do not do it.

Perhaps it is because we all care so much that we find this a truly difficult subject. Perhaps the most difficult.

You will therefore understand that I do not bring this motion before you lightly and not before I have carried out a considerable investigation. I am deeply sorry that I find it necessary to bring this before you but I speak now for those who have no voice and I would respectfully ask you to listen to what I have to say – to what they have to say. If you listen to nothing else I have to say - please listen to this with a truly open heart and an open mind. It is late and honourable members are tired but I would beg your attention.

Whilst canvassing last May I came across a couple of instances where I was told the most troubling stories about dealings with the Children and Families section of Social Services. I found it most difficult to believe what I was hearing but resolved that if I was elected I would follow the matter up and this I have duly done.

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I went back to those concerned after the election, sat down and listened again to their stories. I still found them difficult to believe not because I thought they were lying – simply that I did not want to believe them.

I did not want it to be true.

In order to establish the veracity of what I was hearing I cross checked what I was being told. I spoke to QCs and Advocates, Social workers and Doctors and listened to the stories of further cases that had become subject to the system and I was still hearing the same thing.

So what is it that's so terribly wrong? The truth is that the section of the Department of Social Care that deals with children and families is troubled. This does not mean that I do not believe there are some good people in their doing their best – it does not mean that I do not believe that there are some good outcomes. It means that that section is not running in an acceptable manner and these results in the lives of children being damaged by the very system which is supposed to protect them. It does not mean that I have some deep seated irrational dislike of social workers – my younger sister is a senior social worker in this very area across and I am in awe of much of what they do as a profession. It is a difficult and demanding job.

Once I had established in my own mind, and to my complete satisfaction that there was a serious problem I went to speak to the Chief Executive of the new Department of Social Care about my concerns. Here I should add that I may be at odds with the Chief Minister on many things but this is not one of them – I congratulate him for creating this new and very necessary division of responsibilities between social services and health. I accept that prior to its division it was too big a beast and this was actually part of the problem.

I do not doubt the CEO's commitment and professionalism for one moment but it should be borne in mind that this is a new department trying to find its feet and there is a huge amount that needs to be done in a number of areas. He listened carefully to my concerns and was kind enough to arrange for me to see a Mr Geoff Gildersleeve and this I did on Thursday September 23rd at 2.30pm at Hilary House. As I recall we must have spoken together for more than an one and a half hours.

I should point out that Mr Gildersleeve has been called in by the Department of Social Care to

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conduct an internal review of social services. I concur with the Minister of Social Care in part of his answer to me at the October Tynwald when he said he has every confidence in Mr Gildersleeve and that he came to this role highly commended with some 30 years experience as a social worker. I was very fortunate in the timing of my meeting with him in that he was coming right to the end of his review and had obviously developed a deep understanding of the section he was reviewing.

As I say we spoke at length and during this conversation I took him through the serious concerns that had been raised in my meeting with the cases I had looked at but in particular those issues which were common to them all.

Here I would ask Hon members to really think about what was said between us.

I told him that most of the cases I had looked at related to the period between 2005 and 2009 and that, from what I had established, there was a deep unwillingness on the part of the section to look back again at cases they had mishandled. I said I did not think they could bring themselves to look back on their own errors. I asked what chance these families had of getting a redress of grievance through the department and his reply was that he did not think there was a chance and that their only recourse would be through the courts.

Mr President Hon Members will understand how incredibly difficult, expensive and long winded that process would be and how few advocates would be remotely interested in picking up such cases.

This leaves those people in a cruel trap without a voice

I then went on to tell Mr Gildersleeve that I felt the section was in fact a law unto itself and that it was desperately in need of being subject to recommendation number four of Mark Overall QCs commission of inquiry in the care of young people. Namely the external examination of the social care section. A recommendation which had remained outstanding since 2006.

When considering his reply to me Mr President I would ask Honourable Members to please bear

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in mind Mr Gildersleeve's now considerable understanding of the situation, his long experience and the standing in which he is rightly held.

He told me that if such an examination took place now in his view there was a very serious possibility that that section of the Department would implode. He did not think it would be capable of sustaining an inspection for a further year. Please ask yourself from this reply what confidence you think Mr Gildersleeve has in the section himself?

Please think on that.

This was deeply worrying because it not only showed that there was a deep unwillingness to look back at uncomfortable cases but also that the section was still deeply troubled. That cases could still be being badly handled and that as a consequence the lives of children could still be being damaged.

Following that meeting I continued with my focus on the subject in an effort to understand what else the Isle of Man is trying to do in this area. As a result of this I met with Mrs Barbara Trevanion of the Safeguarding Children Board which sits inside the Department of Home Affairs. We met on the afternoon of Thursday 12th October 2010 at 4pm. Mrs Trevanion's role is that of a highly experienced external advisor from the UK – she is not resident here but is in effect a visiting advisor. As with Mr Gildersleeve I was encouraged by what appeared to me to be her competence and genuine commitment to the post. We had a helpful, frank and meaningful meeting which again went on for about an hour and a half.

During that meeting I went through some of the issues that I had discussed with Mr Gildersleeve and we again came to the matter of the possibility of an external examination. Mrs Trevanion was even more robust in her response when she said she did not think that the section would be capable of sustaining an examination until into 2012.

I should point out at this stage that these examinations are standard in England – my sister for example is subject to two types of external inspections – a ten day pre notice inspection and a three day no notice spot check examination. There is nothing strange or extraordinary about them. Sadly in the view of competent professionals our service is not up to being subject to such routine examination.

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Up to the time I met with Mr Gildersleeve I was unaware of how serious the current situation remains as the cases I had looked at up to that time were of a few years standing and I had assumed that matters were by then coming to some semblance of order. That it was a question of helping those who had suffered previously. I was soon to find out how wrong I had been.

I am going to trace for you the experience of just one family who have been subject to the ministrations of social workers in the children and families division. This is a very recent case and I tell you their story with their permission as they feel they have no one else they can now turn to. I put this before honourable members by way of an example.

The couple in question had been together successfully and happily for almost two years and were expecting a baby. There were some questions surrounding the couple and quite rightly and correctly they were subject to a pre-birth child protection conference which took place a number of weeks before the baby was due. This was well attended by a range of professionals as well the couple themselves and both the fathers' grandparents.

It was confirmed that the couple would keep the baby once born and that, he or she, could go home with the parents. It was also agreed that the core group would meet to discuss the pre birth plan, the child protection plan and that plans were to be put in place to allow the baby to return home with the parents from hospital and finally that an adequate ongoing assessment should be put in place..

So far so good.

However the weeks went by and nothing happened so after the baby was born the grandmother contacted social services to find out how things were progressing.

Soon thereafter a new social worker, unknown to the family arrived on the scene and announced that, and here I quote the social worker, ' there had been one almighty cock up' (this was said in front of witnesses) and that effectively the baby would be taken into care because no assessment had been carried out of the parents. This was because the case had only just been handed to the social worker, that no plans had been formulated and there was no place at

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the children's centre for a parental assessment to take place. The family were obviously deeply shocked and upset by this but the social worker admitted that she had not even seen the file and had not read the minutes of the child protection conference report. The grandmother then made a copy of those minutes available to the social worker.

The grandmother asked how long a parental assessment would take and was advised 12 weeks so the baby would have to go into care. The grandmother then asked could it be done in a shorter period of time to which the social worker said the shortest she had known was 8 days but that would mean bringing someone over from the UK and there was no funding for this. The grandmother got no response to her offer that she would pay for it herself if it would help.

The social worker then advised the family that as the baby would have to go straight into care from hospital that following Monday the matter had to be cleared up by the Friday previous because all three available social workers would be in court the following week and there was only one other new social worker available who had just arrived from the UK. In other words the interest of the department were put ahead of the interests of the child and family.

The grandparents then ask could the baby not come home to them, the parents stay with them and the family be put under ongoing assessment as originally agreed by the child protection conference. The grandmother (who has a responsible job in the health service) was bluntly told no because she worked and the grandfather was told he was too old. I have met the grandfather and he is fit and capable.

The baby was put into care and the parents returned to their home. They were visited by two social workers who said the couple would be sent to the UK for a 12 week period of assessment and told if they did not co-operate with social services there would be no alternative but to put the child up for adoption. These were cruel, wrong and bullying tactics. The couple agreed but I need to point out that they had not been obstructive or difficult in any way. They were compliant because they were frightened of losing their baby.

A further visit from two social workers took place in order that the couple could sign the papers required in order to arrange the UK assessment. During this visit the rather loud social worker managed to set the fire alarm off in their flat because he wanted more light. He pressed the wrong button which emptied the whole apartment block whereupon the social worker announced to all and sundry that he was a social worker and they were not to worry, This embarrassed the couple deeply because not only did the neighbours know they had not got

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their baby home but that they were now under the scrutiny of social workers.

The grandparents were excluded because according to social services they were 'not known to them'. This despite the fact that they were both fully engaged and totally supportive and had attended the original child protection conference. They were in fact very well known.

I will not detail here what went on between the social workers and the couple over the following weeks but suffice to say that they have been bullied, misled and confused in a whole variety of appalling ways over a period of weeks. They were going to England very soon, no they were not, they were being sent to Devon, no they were not, they were going very soon no they were not, this has cost a lot of money to set up and you should be grateful and so on.....

At one stage, one of the social workers involved was diagnosed as unfit to carry out his professional duties and was dismissed.

They couple have been pushed about from pillar to post, they have still not had the assessment, they have still not got their baby back that was born in August and they are now on their fifth social worker. The family is in complete despair.

This is just one example.

This troubled body is playing with people lives in an unacceptable fashion.

They are damaging the life chances of children in an wholly distressing way.

I first raised this matter in this honourable court in the form of three questions last month and what happened? The Minster simply read a flat bland reply from his book of ministerial answers and sat down. I am sure he means well but it did not come over that to me that way.

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Soon after I was interviewed on Manx Radio on the subject whereupon the departmental member responsible came back with a reply saying everyone should leave the social workers alone – that they are getting it right 99.9% of the time - that we are fine and that every time something goes wrong over in the UK it impacts upon us here. I was deeply disappointed by this. I understand his desire to support his department – it is to his credit – but we cannot and must not allow ourselves to be in denial

I say now to the honourable member – everything is not fine – but don't listen just to me listen to your own advisors – we have a very serious problem here and children are suffering.

The question before honourable members is a simple one. What matters here most? - the department or those families who are being mistreated now by the department. Are you simply going to allow these children and families to be considered as collateral damage until the department in its own good time has put its house in order or are you going to send a clear message out from this court today that every child really does matter?

Mr President I beg to move.