

Written Ministerial Statement

Department for Education

LAUNCH OF THE MUNRO REVIEW ON BACK TO THE FRONTLINE FOR CHILD PROTECTION

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children & Families (Tim Loughton MP):

I informed the House on Monday 7 June 2010 that the Government had decided to commission Professor Eileen Munro of the London School of Economics to carry out an independent review to improve child protection. The Secretary of State for Education has written to Professor Munro today to set out the remit of this review and I would like to take this opportunity to provide the House with further details.

The reforms led by the previous administration were well-intentioned. The immense dedication and hard work of frontline professionals is an inspiration. But the child protection system in our country is not working as well as it should. It is the Government's view that we need a fundamental review of the system and to ask ourselves what will help professionals to make the best judgments they can to protect vulnerable children.

I firmly believe we need reform to frontline social work practice. I want to strengthen the profession so that social workers are in a better position to make sound judgments, based on first hand evidence, in the best interests of children, free from unnecessary bureaucracy and regulation. I want social workers to be clear about their responsibilities and to be accountable in the way they protect children. I particularly want social workers to have the confidence they need to challenge parents when they have concerns about the circumstances in which children are growing up, and to know they will be supported by the system in doing so.

The Secretary of State for Education and I have therefore asked Professor Munro to set out the obstacles preventing improvements and the steps required to bring about improved social work practice. This will include considering how effectively children's social workers and professionals in other agencies work together. As part of the review, we have asked Professor Munro to take account of emerging thinking from parallel reviews such as the Family Justice Review. We also want any review to be informed by the strongest systems of child protection in other countries.

This is complex territory and necessarily wide-ranging. We have given Professor Munro a broad remit, so that she is able to consider a wide range of issues. Three principles will underpin the Government's approach to reform of child protection: early intervention; trusting professionals and removing bureaucracy so they can spend more of their time on the frontline; and greater transparency and accountability. We have asked Professor Munro to produce her final report by April 2011 with an interim report in January 2011 and a first report in September 2010.

The Government is committed to implementing the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force, which provide a strong starting point for Professor Munro's

review. We look to the Social Work Reform Board to take forward those recommendations while the review is in progress.

To support further improvement on the front line, the DfE is confirming today that the £23m Local Social Work Improvement Fund will be available to local authority children's services in 2010-11.

The successful CWDC programmes to support recruitment and retention of social workers will also continue, subject to some efficiencies which have been achieved by reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and marketing and overlap with the work of the Social Work Reform Board.

We are also confirming the funding that will support the establishment of an independent College of Social Work and that pilots of Social Work Practices will continue. This confirmation relates to funding which has been protected in 2010-11. Funding for future years will need to be confirmed as part of the forthcoming comprehensive spending review.

I would also like to take this opportunity to confirm to the House the Government's commitment to ensuring that Serious Case Reviews, with identifying details removed, are published.

The key purpose of undertaking Serious Case Reviews is to enable lessons to be learned from cases where a child dies or is seriously harmed and abuse or neglect is known, or suspected, to be a factor. In order for these lessons to be learned as widely and thoroughly as possible, professionals need to be able to understand fully what happened in each case, and most importantly, what needs to change in order to reduce the risk of such tragedies happening in the future. Only by publishing Serious Case Reviews will this greater level of transparency and accountability be achieved. The Government's aim in publishing SCR overview reports is to restore public confidence and improve transparency in the child protection system, and to ensure that the context in which the events occurred is properly understood so relevant lessons are learned and applied as widely as possible.

That is why Ministers have today written to all Local Safeguarding Children Board Chairs and Directors of Children's Services to confirm that, with immediate effect, the overview report and the executive summary of all new Serious Case Reviews initiated from today should be published. Overview reports should be published together with the executive summaries unless there are compelling reasons relating to the welfare of any children directly concerned in the case for this not to happen. Both the overview report and the executive summary should be anonymised and should not contain identifying details. This means preparing SCR overview reports in a form suitable for publication, or redacting them appropriately before publication

The publication of Serious Case Reviews is a sensitive and complex matter. Serious Case Review overview reports contain personal information and it is vitally important that published Serious Case Reviews are appropriately redacted and anonymised to protect the privacy and welfare of vulnerable children and their families. There is an important balance to be struck between transparency and openness so that lessons can be learned, and the protection and welfare of individuals. We believe that publication to the extent that we are proposing is reasonable and in the greater public interest.

The tragic case of Peter Connelly, and other recent high profile cases such as those in Edlington, Birmingham and Kirklees, shocked the nation. They also prompted public concern that vital information needed to be made available so that agencies could be properly held to account and all the lessons properly learned. The Government is therefore confirming today its intention that the overview reports (together with the executive summary) of all these Serious Case Reviews will be published, appropriately redacted and anonymised, starting with the two Serious Case review overview reports on the case of Peter Connelly.

As part of her review, Professor Munro has also been asked to consider how Serious Case Reviews could be strengthened and whether there are alternative learning models that could be more effective and efficient.

Finally, I want to inform the House that the cross-Government National Safeguarding Delivery Unit will be disbanded with immediate effect and staff resource allocated to new priorities, including supporting the Munro Review. The Safeguarding Group within the Department for Education will retain lead responsibility for the Government's child protection policy and will continue to work closely with other Government Departments, in particular the Department of Health, the Home Office, and the Ministry of Justice.

I have placed a copy of the letters sent today to Professor Munro, and to all Chairs of Local Safeguarding Children Boards and Directors of Children's Services in the House Library.