

**A SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT FOR THE LONDON BOROUGH
OF ISLINGTON ON THE MANAGEMENT OF CHILD
CARE WITHIN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
SERVICES DEPARTMENT.**

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1. INTRODUCTION.

1.1 This is the concluding chapter in a series of reports commissioned by the London Borough of Islington following allegations published in the Evening Standard. Its primary purpose is to record what responses have been made to those allegations.

1.2 An Interim Report was published in February 1993, which dealt with the welfare of the young people identified from the articles and addressed the question of whether the children's homes were out of control.

1.3 In July 1993 an Independent Review considered management arrangements for child care within the Borough. This review reported on the broad managerial issues rather than a detailed examination of the allegations made by the Evening Standard and other individuals.

1.4 In discussion with the Department of Health, Islington Council agreed that the next phase (Phase 3) should include a range of further work including:

- taking forward the recommendations of the Independent Management Review via working groups of councillors and officers

- reviewing child protection arrangements, including how Islington Child Protection Committee dealt with allegations of organised abuse. This review would be done by the Social Services Inspectorate and the results would be made public.

- considering lessons which could be learned from a

study of the cases of two children by three external and independent consultants, Eva Learner, Jo Moad and Emlyn Cassam.

- addressing the specific allegation about 'missing files' and non-cooperation with the police. This to be done by Brian McAndrew

- independent inspection of all of Islington's children's homes by the Inspection Unit of Croydon Council.

- updates of the welfare of individual children identified from the Evening Standard articles to be provided by the Neighbourhood Services Department to the Social Services Inspectorate.

- comments on matters still outstanding from the original allegations and the previous reports. This to be done by Emlyn Cassam and Brian McAndrew. It was envisaged that these comments would be published in the same way as the first two reports.

1.5 This report, therefore, is the last item referred to above.

2. SCOPE OF THIS REPORT.

2.1 We have tried to balance two (sometimes conflicting) interests:

- first, the public needs to know how Islington Council has dealt with criticisms of its services. Failure to do this adequately would lead to a justifiable loss of confidence.

- second, the management review pointed a way forward for Islington to rebuild its child care services. That rebuilding has now started. It would be counter-productive if too much delving in the past hampered that renewal.

2.2 We have not seen as our function the ascribing of 'blame' or the recommending of disciplinary action. That is a matter for the Council itself.

2.3 Some further enquiries would be hampered by staff no longer being in post. Not only have five senior managers (excluding the Director of Neighbourhood Services who retires at the end of March 1994) left within the last three years, but many of the middle managers, fieldworkers and residential staff are no longer in post.

2.3 We have looked at all the complaints and allegations. It could take years of investigation to form a definitive view on all of them. We have however commented on all the allegations and submitted a confidential report to the council. The reason for not making the report public is that some of the young people could be identified. The conclusions we drew from that work is the basis of our previous recommendations.

3. THE WELFARE OF INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN.

3.1 Some of eight children and young people who could be identified from the articles in the Evening Standard were interviewed prior to the publication of the Interim Report. We have not interviewed them again, but have examined reports from the Council to the Social Services Inspectorate concerning their current welfare.

3.2 The Interim Report described children who were disappointed with the level of support and care that they had been offered and which they were receiving at that time. Some, indeed, were very angry.

3.3 The circumstances of all eight now have shown some improvement. Their accomodation problems have been eased, sometimes with considerable assistance from the Neighbourhood Services Department. Social work contact is being maintained with seven of them, some via Islington social workers, others through a voluntary organisation or the probation service. One young person has declined offers of contact. Three have accepted offers of specialist counselling.

3.4 It is encouraging that all eight appear to be more settled than at the time of the Interim Report, although several of them are still facing serious problems. On the more positive side, one young person has returned to full-time education, and the head teacher of another has described 'much improved behaviour'.

3.5 It is believed that four of the young people are receiving advice on whether they can seek compensation from Islington Council.

3.6 From the information we have seen, it appears that Islington is making positive and appropriate responses to the needs of these children and young people.

3.7 The circumstances of these young people were examined as far as possible in the Interim Report. The Independent Management Review drew general inferences from those situations and made recommendations. How organised abuse is currently handled in Islington is being reviewed by the Social Services Inspectorate.

3.8 We do not consider that further independent enquiry into the circumstances of these young people would be appropriate.

4. ORGANISED ABUSE.

4.1 It is not within the terms of reference of this report to deal with allegations of how Islington responded to concerns of organised child abuse. Nevertheless, having heard a great deal about the allegations and looked into some aspects of them, we think that it would be helpful and informative in a public document to make a few comments.

4.2 In very general terms the allegations were that senior management did not make adequate responses to the concerns of staff in one neighbourhood office that organised child abuse may well be occurring within their neighbourhood and outside. It was also suggested that the Neighbourhood Services Department may have hindered police enquiries by withholding information held on file.

4.3 We know that the following pieces of work have been carried out which might reflect on what happened:

- a review by a Social Services Inspector into how senior managers in the Neighbourhood Services Department and Islington Child Protection Committee dealt with organised abuse concerns from June 1990 to October 1992.

- a full scale inspection was been carried out in January and February 1994 by the Social Services Inspectorate into current policy and practice of the Child Protection

Committee; this included arrangements for dealing with allegations of organised abuse

- Brian McAndrew has completed an investigation into the 'missing files' and suggestions that information was withheld from the police

- Emlyn Cassam has completed a review into the case of one boy where allegations of organised abuse were made (referred to as EC).

- Islington commissioned (and received) an investigation by other independent consultants (Jo Moad and Eva Learner) into how the Neighbourhood Services Department dealt with another child who had been abused.

4.4 Some of the lessons learned by these pieces of work have already been reflected in the recommendations contained in the Independent Management Review, for example

- a fundamental change in management organisation, systems, style and culture

- more specialist child care workers and managers

- better administrative support and systems

- a resolution to the unclear responsibilities of the Child Protection Unit and the Neighbourhood Managers

- recording to be clearer and more focussed

4.5 Other points flowing from these pieces of work are:

- Islington Child Protection Committee did set up two special working groups to look at specific allegations in 1990 and 1991. There did however seem to be an unresolved tension between these groups and staff in the neighbourhood, leading to frustration on both sides. (Recommendations in the Independent Management Review would help to prevent a repetition).

- The police carried out investigations into any complaint of a criminal nature. We are not able to pass an opinion on the effectiveness of their actions in relation to 'Hot Houses', but following the report into the case EC, there may be advantages in the police themselves reviewing what they did in that particular case.

- In the case of residential and field staff communicated quickly and openly with each other. There were, however, allegations in other cases that residential managers discredited the concerns of residential workers. In two cases those concerns seemed to be well founded. Social work practice in Islington has changed and the situation should not reoccur.

- Although there does not appear to have been any deliberate withholding of information from the police or obstruction of other agencies, much needs to be done to avoid serious failures, including having a standardised procedures, clear guidelines, better recording and improved administrative support.

4.6 The Social Services Inspectorate, having been given all the papers relating to inter-agency working at the time of the allegations, have concluded that further investigation of those matters would not be fruitful.

4.7 Child protection is an area of activity in which it is essential that the general public has confidence. It is a matter of judgement how far to investigate alleged deficiencies

involving staff who are no longer employed. We do not believe that additional examination of the cases referred to in the Evening Standard will yield more lessons for Islington. The door must be left open, however, for further reviews if new allegations or worries emerge.

4.8 The report of the the inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate into present child protection arrangements will be published shortly, and we understand that an Inquiry has been commissioned by the Child Protection Committee following the death of a child.

We believe that these two pieces of work are likely to have a major influence future policy and practice of child protection in Islington.

5. ALLEGATIONS OF MISCONDUCT BY RESIDENTIAL WORKERS.

5.1. During the two previous stages of the Review, information was received alleging that 31 members of staff or agency workers employed by Islington had acted towards children in ways which caused concern. Some of the incidents related to staff long since departed from Islington, in one case as long ago as 1977. Some of the allegations were extremely serious, eg involving abuse or drugs or inappropriate relationships; others less serious, eg passing information to a cab driver. Some of the allegations were specific; some vague in the extreme. There was one example of two complaints being made concerning the same individual, one saying that (s)he should not have been dismissed, the other saying the the person's conduct was worse than the disciplinary hearing had heard.

5.2 All the allegations have been put to the Director of Neighbourhood Services and we have examined his replies.

5.3 From the information we were able to give, seven of the people have not been identified. This is not surprising, bearing in mind that in several instances no names were given and identifying factors were scarce. Several of them were agency workers, and in view of the dates of the alleged incidents, it is unlikely that they are currently being employed. Although it may well be possible to go back to informants for more details, we do not think that such efforts would add more to our knowledge of how children's homes have been operating over the last ten years.

5.4 We have received no information concerning two complaints, first that an unidentified worker had called a resident a 'bum boy', and second that an unnamed officer in a unit (since closed) told residents not to make adverse comments to the Review as this could lead to the unit being closed. (In passing, we would like to say that the young people who gave evidence did not appear to be inhibited in the comments that they made to us). We do not think that further enquiries are now necessary.

5.5 Five members of staff are currently still employed by the Neighbourhood Services Department. Of these, two are being re-deployed, one is subject to current disciplinary action, and one has been subject of a disciplinary investigation which has found no case to answer. One has no disciplinary record at all; indeed, his/her name was given to us in a list of others but with no specific allegation made about their conduct.

5.6 Of the 17 staff no longer employed, eight were subjects of disciplinary inquiries or proceedings at some stage of their career (often immediately prior to their

resignations), two were agency workers, and seven left or retired without any record of disciplinary action.

5.7 The Director of Neighbourhood Services comments: "In the 1970's and early 1980's allegations of abuse in residential care were not properly dealt with. This has certainly not been the case since the Neighbourhood Services Department was created, and neither was it in the late 1980's from the information supplied in respect of individual workers set out above". Without looking at the papers in detail, it is not possible for us to pass an opinion. We can however say two things:

- we received enough disquieting information about sloppy practice some years ago for us to believe that for whatever reason (and we heard of several) disciplinary investigations in some of the allegations were not carried out with rigour that they should have been

- recent allegations which we have examined or which were passed on by us have been pursued energetically.

5.8 The number and nature of the allegations does give rise to concern. But if the Council implements the recommendations contained in the Independent Management Review, we are confident that continued improvements will be seen. If implemented, these recommendations would improve the selection, training, management and supervision of all staff, as well as checking on the quality of their work output through regular inspection.

6. STANDARDS OF CARE IN CHILDREN'S HOMES.

6.1 The Interim Report dealt in detail with the allegations made in the Evening Standard about two residential

homes. During interviews, however, for the first two stages of the review, other allegations were made about the way other children's homes in the Borough were operating.

6.2 During the Independent Management Review, five other homes were visited. An analysis of what we found (together with recommendations) can be found on pages 52-58 of that report.

6.3 Full scale inspections of all homes are being carried out by the Inspection Unit of Croydon Borough Council.

6.4 We are confident that the vast majority of the lessons that could be learned from complaints about children's homes have already been picked up by the methods described above, and we therefore do not see the need for further general investigation.

6.5 It is not part of the function of this report to comment in detail on what steps Islington Council are taking (and intend to take) to improve their children's services, we do commend the following action which has already taken place:

- a massive refurbishment and re-decorating programme
- the placing of all children's homes and day centres under one specialised management
- the appointment of a head of children's residential services
- the continuing of the contract for Croydon Inspection Unit to inspect all the homes

This is however only the start of a long process to improve management, change attitudes and give staff the knowledge and skills they need. It should always be remembered that, as in

most local authorities, some of the children being accommodated are amongst the most disturbed and disturbing within the Borough. Crises will no doubt still occur, but we are confident that if the Council implements the recommendations contained in the Independent Management Review and the advice given by the Croydon Inspection Unit, children will get a better deal than they have had in the past.

7. OTHER MATTERS.

7.1 The climate of the organisation.

Complaints have been received that there existed in parts of the Council a climate of secrecy, favouritism and fear, compounded by poor communication; information and action relied on who you knew rather than formal systems.

This was dealt with to some extent in the Independent Management Review, where in paragraph 5.5 we state as one of our standards '...staff need to be enthusiastic, are motivated to achieve quality, are constantly searching for service improvements and are proud to be working for the Department'.

We know that there have been increased efforts to consult with staff and that six working groups of officers have been set up to report to members on how best to take forward the recommendations of the Independent Management Review.

How successful this has been in improving the climate can only be tested in the fullness of time. We hope that the Council will seek an external review of the current morale among staff within the next 12 months.

One particular point was made about the threat of disciplinary action if staff talked to the media. We think that

employers do have the right to require individual employees not to talk to the press without permission, especially bearing in mind the particular duty of confidentiality posed by child care responsibilities. But the obligation of the employer is to set up systems whereby staff can air their worries openly and with confidence that action will be taken on genuine complaints and grievances. Mechanisms should be set up where apprehensive staff could channel their worries through a specially nominated member of staff or through a Trade Union or Professional Association. For whatever reason (managerial or political) some members of staff did not think this was possible.

7.2 Arms-length Inspection

Allegations were made that the Director of Neighbourhood Services suppressed a report on children's homes which was critical of the standards.

We have taken this up at length with the Director and have seen the 'suppressed' reports. We accept that the Director has the responsibility for the quality of departmental reports which are to be put to the committees of which he is the professional advisor. In this particular instance he did not consider the draft reports to be comprehensive. That is his right.

The Interim report recorded disappointment, however, that these reports were not produced to the enquiry at that stage. We think it would have been prudent for him to have alerted the enquiry to the existence of the documents - with whatever caveats he considered necessary.

We do not consider that the Director was trying to hide the true state of the homes. His decision to call in the Inspection Unit of Croydon Council to carry out inspections

which would be of the standard he required hardly seems to be the action of a manager seeking to suppress the facts.

7.3 The replacement of stolen or lost property

This was an issue which was raised during both the previous stages of the review. We understand that Islington Council does have a policy whereby ex gratia payments can be considered in respect of children's property which has been lost or stolen. Following the Management Review, guidelines have been sent out to staff which should ensure that appropriate cases are considered without delays.

8. CONCLUSIONS.

8.1 Together with the other pieces of work referred to in the Introduction, this report is intended to round off the investigations originally made in the London Evening Standard about the child care services in Islington.

8.2 Some people may be disappointed that we have not commented in detail (or even investigated) every single complaint and allegation. So be it. We are confident that the various interviews and reports have already uncovered the lessons that had to be learned. We do not think that further retrospective looks will reveal much more about how the services operated than is already known.

8.3 Investigations and enquiries have a cost in terms of diverting management and staff from the present and the future. They can be demoralising and sapping of morale. For seventeen months, child care services in Islington have been subjected to a number of enquiries. We believe that enough lessons have been learned.

8.4 Like many inner city areas Islington is under severe pressure. Our reports and those of others have raised deep concerns about various aspects of how the Borough organised and managed its Social Services. We have looked at the past in order to learn what must change to give young people and their parents the best possible service. Comprehensive recommendations have been made in that spirit.

8.5 What now needs to happen is to focus all the available energy and resources on making the necessary changes. Effective managers and leaders learn from the past but do not live in it. Islington has responded to these reports by setting up bodies to implement change. We wish them well. Anything that unites and supports members and officers should be encouraged.

8.6 For public confidence to be restored, we do think it necessary for there to be an independent review before the end of the year into action taken by the Council and of the effects it has had. Islington should be measured again by the standards set out in Chapter Five of the Independent Management Review.

8.7 We do not recommend any other enquiries into the allegations made in the Evening Standard. Unless new complaints are received or unless the treatment of a child demands it, we think that it is time to draw a line under the past and to concentrate on the action needed to put things right.

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