

# The 'commodification' of 'children in need' in welfare markets: Implications for managers

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**Abstract:** *The well-being of children and young people in the UK has been shown to be poor compared to most other affluent countries. This paper argues that the market paradigm in welfare, ideologically driven not evidence-based, requires managers to implement services for 'children in need' that are short-term and fragmented and developed to suit the needs of adults. These services do not provide the well-researched conditions needed for the optimal development and well-being of children and young people. A deficit model of children is embedded in welfare assessment templates and the 'child in need' must be objectified, standardised, costed and subject to quality control mechanisms by managers at all levels in order to meet targets and performance indicators. This, in turn, has undermined the 'helping relationship' with professional adults. The article begins by reviewing the move from the Welfare State to welfare markets, current evidence as to the outcomes for children and young people in the UK compared to other countries and the conditions necessary for optimal development. The discourse of consumption and how this combines with market processes and leads to the 'commodification' of children is then explored. In conclusion it is argued this has undermined the 'helping relationship' and that a return to professional identities and practices, detached from party political considerations, is imperative.*

**Key words:** *welfare markets; children in need; child development; 'helping relationship'*

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The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies into which they are born (UNICEF) 2007, pp.1).

## Introduction

The impact of the market paradigm and performance indicator management in welfare<sup>1</sup> has commodified 'children in need', undermined the 'helping relationship'<sup>2</sup> and is a significant factor in the well-documented poor outcomes for children and young people in the UK that will be discussed later. This paper has been informed by my professional experience as a social worker, manager and policy officer, and subsequent research as an academic during the changing landscape of welfare in the UK since the 1970s.

Although there are now four administrations in the United Kingdom since devolution in 1999 the UK will be used throughout as the over-arching term when discussing issues prior to devolution or where policies and practices are similar. Notwithstanding the different combinations of laws and policies. England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales share comparable approaches to 'children-in-need' (sec.17, Children Act (CA) 1989). For example apart from some country-specific amendments the CA 1989 remains the overarching legal framework for 'children in need' and applies to all administrations. By statute each country now has a commissioner for children and a four administration collaborative approach was adopted to review of the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) to which all countries are signatories (DCSF;WAG, TSG, NIE, 2009).

Major policies are also congruent in many respects. For example in England the five objectives of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2005a) are for children and young people to be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Similar aims are evident in Northern Ireland, *Our Children and Young People: Our pledge* (OFMDFM, 2005); in Scotland, *Getting it Right for Every Child* (TSG, 2008) and in Wales *Children and Young People: Rights to action* (WAG, 2004).

As a foundation for arguments later in the paper the main changes for welfare management, organisational structures and culture brought about by the gradual move from the Welfare State to welfare markets that have influenced all four countries will be reviewed. This is followed by an analysis of the impact of markets on children and young people. Current challenges and possible future strategies for managers of services for 'children in need' will conclude the paper highlighting at this point the diverging approaches to welfare provision for 'children in need' emerging in the four administrations.

## **From the Welfare State to welfare markets**

My interest in the consequences for children and young people of the introduction of the market paradigm into children's services has been stimulated by two aspects of my professional career.

First was my experience of working within different approaches to welfare. I began working as a child care officer when the Welfare State was the primary mechanism for delivering welfare and continued working throughout the shift towards what Le Grand calls 'quasi-markets' (Le Grand, 1990, 1993). At that time I became aware that the organisational structures and management processes being developed by local authorities in response to the Children Act (CA) 1989 were mirroring those required for adult services by the National Health Service and Community Care Act (NHS & CC) 1990, although there was no statutory duty to do so (Petrie and Wilson, 1999). The key market characteristics that impacted on children's welfare services in all administrations were:

- an increase in the mixed economy in welfare;
- internal and external markets between assessors of 'need' and providers of services and
- the introduction of cost considerations at individual level when professional assessments of need were made.

Secondly the changing nature of the 'helping relationship' in human services in the UK, particularly in social work, was immediate and significant. Not only did the organisation of children's services change but this triggered a shift in professional language and interactions suggesting a fundamental alteration in the nature of the 'helping relationship'. 'Clients' became 'service-users' and 'partnership' the primary service model (Petrie, 2007). A contract rather than grant-aid became the vehicle through which the relationship between third sector providers and the State was managed changing their role and leading to short-term services (Gutch, 1992). Terms such as 'partnership', were not evident in statute and had not been clearly defined in policies and as a result attempts to operationalise these imperatives were difficult as neither agencies nor service-users shared the same understanding of what was meant in practice (Novak, *et al.*, 1997). Care management emerged and post-holders held budgets that were used to purchase services on behalf of service-users; a new and highly significant change in direction for welfare professionals. As the regulatory duties of local authorities increased the surveillance aspects of welfare were codified and, more rigidly than ever before, separated from other educative, supportive and advocacy functions (Petrie, 1995). There was increasing evidence that the main preoccupation of welfare managers was the meeting of performance indicators or contractual targets set by national or local government (Townley, 2001; Laming, 2003).

As an academic in England I have three main areas of study: children's day care; child protection services; and services in the community for 'children in need'. All of these areas overlap, for example children's day care is a service often used as part of a child protection plan or to enable parents to enter the labour market. Children and young people, including young parents, encountered during these studies indicated they often met professional adults who did not respond to their unique circumstances and with whom they were unable to establish a consistent, respectful and helpful relationship (Bell, *et al.*, 2004; Fiorelli & O'Donnell, 2004; Petrie, *et al.*, 2006). This was unexpected as the 'partnership' focus of 1990s welfare 'best practice' had been superseded by an emphasis on 'participation' (DfES, 2005b).

By the beginning of the new millennium there had been many developments in ways of involving children and young people in policies and services in the UK. Consultation with young service-users had become a contractual requirement for most service providers and was mandated by statute in some circumstances (Franklin, 2002). These legislative and strategic imperatives generated a proliferation of initiatives designed to empower children and young people and bring their voices into policy and service planning processes. Despite a presumption about what participation means and involves (DfES, 2005b) there are still contested issues evident in welfare provision (Evans & Spicer, 2008).

Some children and young people experience participation as tokenistic – in place to meet contractual or legislative requirements but giving them no real say in the decision-making that affects their lives (Hill, 2006; Woolfson, *et al.*, 2009). This may be because legislation and policies are not formed or implemented in a social and cultural vacuum. Welfare practices are affected by how children and young people are constructed and understood by the powerful adults around them. It has been argued that children and young people are a marginal group with little power whose realities have been unrecognised and whose competencies are discouraged (Qvortrup, 2004). Those who are 'different' because of ethnic origin, migrant status, physical or learning impairments are even more marginal (Kohli 2006, Clarke 2006). Children and young people in contemporary UK society are confronted by many, and often conflicting, demands and requirements imposed by adults. Although the debate on the meaning and nature of citizenship has begun to consider children and young people (Lawy & Biesta, 2006 ) they are still regarded as non-adults. These contradictions are apparent when services for 'children in need' are considered.

## **The lives children and young people in the UK**

The concept of a 'child in need', which includes young people in early adulthood in specified circumstances, was brought into UK law by section 17 of the CA 1989 as a legal passport to state provided or paid for services in the community. A 'child in

need' includes all disabled children (sec. 17 (10) (c)) and children at risk of significant harm (sec. 47) but must also include all 'children in need' in the community. A range of services have to be provided by statutory, third sector and 'for-profit' organisations although the local authority retains responsibility. The over-arching principle of the CA 1989 is that a child's welfare shall be paramount (Part 1, section 1) and this is reflected in the policies for children and young people in all four administrations. This principle is supported by resource allocation as investment in children in the UK is higher than the OECD average standing at £90,000 per child from birth to 18 years compared to £80,000 (OECD, 2009).

Nevertheless the well-being of children and young people in the UK, compared to their European peers, is deficient in several key areas according to three recent international comparative studies of more than 20 affluent countries, the findings of all three being based on comparable national statistics. They reveal higher rates: of teenage pregnancy, underage drinking, and young people not in education, employment or training (OECD, 2009); infant mortality and low birth weight (CPAG, 2009); and child poverty (UNICEF, 2007) than most countries sampled other than the USA. 'Well-being' is a socially constructed term but is defined as 'the many different factors which affect children's lives: including material conditions; housing and neighbourhoods; how children feel and do at school; their health; exposure to dangerous risks; and the quality of family and classmate relationships children develop (CPAG, 2009a, pp.2)'. Child abuse scandals have also drawn attention to systemic failings in services for 'children in need'. Public inquiries and government inspections have leveled criticism at all agencies involved, including health, education, probation and non-statutory organisations as well as children's services (Laming, 2003; The Lord Laming, 2009, Ofsted, 2008). Poor management; shortages of staff, both in terms of numbers and skills; poor communication within and between agencies and so on are common themes. The lack of consistency in the professional relationship with 'children in need', that has been revealed in many inquiries and inspections, is particularly concerning. Continuity of knowledge about a child as a necessary condition for decisions supporting optimal childhood development has been well understood for many decades.

### **Conditions necessary for the optimal development and well-being of children and young people**

Professionals and managers responsible for services for 'children in need' can draw on many decades of research evidence as to what is required for optimal childhood development. There is greater consensus about what is needed by children in order to achieve their potential than in almost any other area of research into human well-being. These needs are common to all children whatever their society, ethnic origin,

culture, affluence level, physical or learning capacities. Key theorists and researchers have demonstrated that as well as basic needs for food, shelter and so on, children also need a consistent and positive emotional relationship with one or a small number of adults especially during their early years (Bowlby, 1965; Erikson, 1965; Piaget, 1970; Ainsworth, *et al.*, 1978; Oaklander, 1978; Robertson & Robertson, 1989; Kellmer-Pringle, 1992; Fahlberg, 1994, Crittenden, 2008). Although all children are similar each child is unique and their development patterns vary as do the demands they place on those who care for them. Individual characteristics such as ethnicity, culture, gender, affluence, and physical or learning impairments also affect a child's developmental needs and pathways and the potential harms they face, as do the societies in which they live.

Professionals and their managers are charged with making decisions that safeguard 'children in need' and promote their well-being. This can best be achieved through decision-making that rests on a consistent 'helping relationship', as many decades of research into the effectiveness of human services has shown (Petrie, 2007). This requires continuity over time even when the identified problems appear to have been resolved. Organisational and management effectiveness is judged, however, by a complex array of performance indicators and inspections focused on outputs that can be measured quantitatively. Managers are additionally pressurised by other forces as the control and punishment of the young and professionals judged as inadequate are often the primary objectives of public and political opinion. The market polarises responses to the most difficult situations because 'children in need' have to fit adult constructions – are they 'at-risk' or 'in need?' victims or criminals? socially achieving or socially excluded? Outcomes have to be subject to quantitative measurement and so the operation of the market requires 'children in need' to be categorised and prioritised before they can receive a service.

The problems of managing services for 'children in need', it seems, have deeper roots than resource shortages or organisational configuration. These problems lie in the way in which the market paradigm in welfare has not only altered the way in which services are configured and distributed but altered the fundamental relationship between professional adults and 'children in need'. The discourse of consumption and the market paradigm, within which policies are formulated and services managed, pervades all aspects of our social life and, according to some commentators has had a profoundly negative effect on UK society (Bauman, 1995; Leonard, 1997; Bauman, 1998; JRF, 2008).

## **Children, young people, consumption and the market paradigm**

The impact of the market paradigm on children and young people has barely been explored and inquiry has tended to focus on commercial goods and services. Martens *et al.*, (2004) argue there are a number of methodological and theoretical limitations in research examining the impact of consumption and markets on children and young people as they have received little theoretical attention within the sociology of consumption and the sociology of childhood has concentrated primarily on the production of consumption:

[M]uch work on children's consumption shares an apparently uniform point of departure in that it focuses on the relationship between the market and children to the neglect of other pertinent social relationships (Martens *et al.*, 2004, pp.158).

Academic interest has focused mainly on the type of commodities consumed such as toys, clothes, computer games and so on and the activity of children and young people as consumers (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). The effects of consumption, such as whether violent computer games stimulate violent behaviour, have also been studied (Anderson & Bushman 2001; Mitchell & Ziegler, 2007). Scant attention, however, has been paid to the symbolic meanings given by children and young people to the goods and services they consume although the 'commodification' of childhood (Langer, 2002; Cook, 2004) has been explored. It has been argued that the consuming experience has 'a *psycho-social* impact (Miles, 1998, pp.5)' and is a bridge between the individual and society. Psychological and social identities are simultaneously constrained and enabled through the consuming experience.

According to some commentators (Cook 2004; Crewe & Collins; 2006, Boden, 2006), children's identity and status are becoming inseparable from branding and investment. Some such as Seabrook (1985) perceive the impact on children of markets and consumerism as entirely negative. He argues that, as in the nineteenth century, children are still working for capital but as consumers not labourers and furthermore that poor children are not expected to desire the same goods and services as their more affluent peers. Langer (2002), however, argues that children can use consumer culture as a social resource 'a way of moving from "I" to "We" (2002, pp.71)'. It has also been suggested that

children's consumption is the means ... [whereby] parents and children gain a sense of acceptance and belonging within their desired social group (Martens, *et al.*, 2004, pp.169)

and perhaps strengthen their mutual bond. Martens, *et al.*, (2004) refer to Bourdieu's concept of '*habitus*' to illustrate how children learn competence in consumption not only through their families but also through social networks and institutions. The

nature of the consuming experience in complex affluent societies is mediated by such factors as economic and social status, gender, ethnicity, physical or learning impairments and other signifiers of difference.

The variations experienced by some children as they move towards adulthood, therefore, may have negative consequences for them. Indeed the 'psycho-social' impact of the consuming experience is often negative for 'children in need' who are unable to act as consumers in ways that are considered appropriate or desirable within their social location. For example clothing is an important contributor towards identity construction:

In late modernity, the visual styles adopted by young people through the consumption of clothing are regarded as having become increasingly central to the establishment of identity and to peer relations (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, pp.83).

Young women described this to me most powerfully in relation to poverty, fashion and bullying in school (Petrie, *et al.*, 2006). But children have other roles in markets too as there is evidence to suggest that in some transactions they have become mere commodities with an exchange value.

### **The 'commodification' of children in markets**

Legal and medical ethics theorists and business analysts (Yngvesson, 2002; Dorow, 2006; Baird, 1996; Shuster, 2003; Spar, 2006) have shown that children have been 'commodified' in relation to the trans-national trade in adoptable children, surrogacy and cloning. It is easy to see in relation to these market transactions (David and Kirkhope, 2005) how children have a use-value and are subject to commercial exchange. In other markets, such as the sex and leisure industries, young people, especially young women, have become 'commodities' also in order to meet adult needs with extreme and harmful consequences for some. During one study with which I was involved (Bell, *et al.*, 2004) a disclosure by a young woman was linked to the disappearance of the teenager Charlene Downes. This investigation led to the establishment of a multi-agency project aimed at preventing the child sex industry in the town (*Blackpool Gazette*, 2004a, 2004b). It was commonly stated by young people that under-age young women are encouraged as customers by nightclubs and pubs, in seaside and rural localities,

'If you're a girl and smile at the bouncers you get in unless you look like 10 ... Easy. The thing is if you're attractive then you're in (Year 10, Young Men, Bell, *et al.*, 2004, pp.26)'

Young people were acutely aware of their 'market value' in these circumstances.

In many transactions in markets, therefore, children and young people have become mere commodities with an exchange value. This process can be conceptualised in a similar way to the 'commodification' of body parts – a prominent theme in contemporary debates about the body:

[A] process of objectification or reification is required, in which case it is first necessary mentally or physically to separate the materials from the body so that they may become objects. Once objectified ... a body part may have a social life as a thing and, ultimately, as a commodity ... There is in this process a potential violation to personal identity ... this is quite apart from any scientific or economic exploitation that may occur (Seale, et al., 2006, pp.26).

It is clear, therefore, that children's locus within markets of all kinds is evident and multi-faceted. They are consumers, perhaps powerful and discerning or exploited and manipulated or are objectified and constructed as commodities with an exchange value.

### **The 'commodification' of children in welfare markets**

In welfare markets 'children in need' have no purchasing power and little or no choice about the kind or length of services they receive and so cannot act as consumers. Furthermore a deficit construction of children is embedded in the welfare market paradigm. Although the legal definition of a 'child in need' has remained the same since the CA 1989 it is the powerful discourse of adults that constructs the child inhering in policies, legislation and practices. The 'child in need' has been constructed as a social problem with costs attached; for control, treatment or protection. Public interest and welfare policies target issues such as teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual behaviour and exploitation, drug and alcohol consumption, obesity, anorexia/bulimia, behaviour in school and educational under-achievement, anti-social behaviour and so on. Emphasis is placed on the cost-burden to society of what children do or do not do and how to change their behaviour. The current discourse constructs children as 'bad', 'mad' or 'sad'. Children as individuals or in groups are dangerous, frightening or victims. Attention and resources are given to ways in which children can be controlled, because of 'criminal' behaviour, treated because of 'psychiatric disorder' or saved from child abuse. Although the focus of this paper is on welfare services for 'children in need' in the community it is interesting to note the approach in the major policy for children in care in England *Care Matters: Time for Change* (DfES, 2007). The policy rests on a deficit model of children since low levels of educational achievement and high rates of those not in employment or training, and high rates of criminal activity are of primary concern. Proposals for

action focus mainly on administrative and structural change including an 'Annual Stocktake' of the outcomes for children in care. The first of these has taken place (DCSF, 2009) and two of the four key messages are concerned with strengthening inspections and regulations. Will further regulation and attention paid to structure and process fundamentally improve outcomes for 'children in need'?

'Children in need' have become objects of market interactions in transactions between welfare purchasers and providers albeit for services which are meant to safeguard and promote their well-being. The operation of welfare markets however contributes to the process of objectification by codifying and quantifying 'needs' against which children are ranked and prioritised (Burden, *et al.*, 2000; Lyon, *et al.*, 2003; Johnson & Petrie, 2004). In order to operate within market mechanisms services are predicated on commonalities and distributed according to adult needs although children's optimal development and well-being requires an individualised response to their individual needs. To fit within welfare assessment templates in statute and policies the 'child in need' has been objectified, standardised, costed and subject to quality control mechanisms. The Laming Inquiry identified this approach to assessment as highly unsatisfactory and a contributory factor in the appalling suffering and death of Victoria Climbiè. 'The use of eligibility criteria to restrict access to services is not found in either legislation or in guidance and its ill-founded application is not something I support (Laming, 2003, pp.13)'. Short-term and fragmented services for 'children in need' framed around crude definitions of problematics and developed to suit the needs of adults cannot provide the well-researched conditions needed for optimal development. Performance indicators, imposed on local authorities and derived from macro patterns of 'need' such as indicators of deprivation distort responses by individual workers to individual children and their families. The emphasis, despite child-centred rhetoric, is on achieving the targets set by governments which has created 'short-termism' in services for children. The Association of Directors of Social Work in Scotland in a submission to TSG argue for:

A move from 'short termism' to 'long termism': Children grow up over a period of 20 years or more. A series of short term initiatives aimed at having specific targeted outcomes don't allow for the building of strong community foundations to deliver long term support and development to children and their families [necessary] to see improved outcomes over time (Main:2006, pp.2)

Short-termism undermines the possibility of effective 'helping relationships' between professional adults and 'children in need.'

## **The demise of the 'helping relationship'**

Concern has been raised from different quarters and disciplines about the changing construction of the welfare professional and their relationship with the recipients of welfare. It has been argued (Leonard, 1997; Walklate, 1999; Orme, 2001; Watson, 2002; Orme, 2002; Powell & Gilbert, 2006) that the centrality of the 'helping relationship' in welfare has been adversely affected by the market paradigm. This shift has occurred because the focus of policies, inspections and guidance has been on multi-agency work within a market paradigm:

...[These] are mostly structural changes attempting, probably with great difficulty, to alter the way in which adult professionals relate to each other. They will not necessarily alter the way in which they relate to children (Petrie & Owen, 2005, pp.132).

In all studies with which I have been involved children and young people, including young parents, gave great importance to the quality of the 'helping relationship' which they shared with welfare professionals. No single agency or professional predominated when positive or poor services were described. If respect was not present in their relationships with professional adults, however, services did not engage them:

But some teachers insult you and then the people who've been insult [sic], they don't like the lessons and they skive off it, (School F, Year 9, Petrie, et al., 2006, pp.33).

Midwives and health professionals, I found them degrading actually, putting us down because of our age – their comments and looks and attitudes towards us (Young Father, Bell, et al., 2004:38).

Managers' attention has been directed to improving communication between professionals as a primary objective. The welfare market processes focus on relationships between assessors and providers formalised in contracts concerned with costs and timescales. These adult concerns have not improved the ability of organisations to provide 'children in need' with a consistent long-term relationship with a skilled and competent professional.

The mixed economy in welfare has led not only to a proliferation of providers but also to a fragmentation of professional roles and functions. Although the neo-liberal government headed by Margaret Thatcher first introduced the market paradigm into public sector services the New Labour government elected in 1997 embraced this approach arguably creating additional difficulties for welfare professionals:

A continuing commitment by New Labour to the mixed economy of welfare introduced with the community care reforms of the Conservative administration led to a plethora of providers or 'stakeholders'. These bodies and individuals on the one hand had to

be regulated, and on the other were to be involved in the evolving arrangements to achieve the necessary standards (Orme, 2001:613).

Multi-agency work is supposed to bring together a range of skills and breadth of knowledge whilst simultaneously unifying different professional cultures and values yet, as outlined earlier, evidence of poor outcomes for 'children in need' continue to emerge. The operational effectiveness of welfare markets for all services have been critiqued comprehensively almost since their emergence in the early 1990s (Clarke & Newman, 1993a, 1993b; Flynn & Hurley, 1993; Young and Wistow, 1996; Boyne, *et al.*, 2003; Micheli, *et al.*, 2007), but particular damaging consequences for children are embedded in the methods of costing services and distributing resources (Wilson & Petrie, 1998; Statham, *et al.*, 2001; Platt, 2001; Skinner, 2003; Margo, *et al.*, 2006). Performance indicator management, the deficit model of children inhering in welfare markets, and the 'commodification' of 'children in need' in market interactions have all combined to undermine the professional 'helping relationship' – the essential element in effective services for children and young people.

## **Implications for managers**

Welfare in the UK has undergone a fundamental reconstruction in its relationship to the state and to welfare recipients because social and political attitudes towards welfare provision have changed since the late 1970s (Bauman, 1998). I have argued in this paper that 'children in need' are now commodities to be exchanged for payment between needs assessors and welfare providers mediated by short-term contracts. Furthermore the market paradigm operates on a construction of the 'child in need' as a costly social burden rather than a potential social asset. Different professions involved with 'children in need' are in danger of losing their distinctive skills and knowledge and although regulation of welfare has increased professionalism has diminished.

Despite their laudable aims the current policy programmes for children and young people in all four countries in the UK, have failed to prevent the deepening divide between children, young people and professional adults; the widening gap between professional knowledge and operational demands or redirect the attention of managers away from the demands of politicians towards 'children-in-need.' Yet there are indications that some administrations in the UK are seeking to move away from the market paradigm in welfare. For example in a review of social work by the Scottish Executive, Roe (2006) highlights research findings revealing the importance of the quality of the 'helping relationship' in successful outcomes in human services, evident in research into the helping professions for the last 40 years (Petrie, 2007).

One reason why social workers leave the profession, it was suggested in the review, is that they can no longer work in this way:

The inability to operate according to core principles may also in part account for the fact that many social workers leave the profession ... the situation in which they practice does not allow them to fulfil their commitment to key principles (Asquith, et al., 2005, 4.7).

Wales has made a clear commitment to move away from the market paradigm in public services (Gibbons, 2007), based on the Beecham Report two years earlier:

In England, the Government is seeking to respond to the new public service challenges through a customer model which emphasises choice as the means to meet consumer expectations with competition, contestability and elements of market testing as the way to achieve efficiency ... this has not found favour in Wales, on grounds of both principle and practicality (Beecham Report 2006:5)

And England, at least as far as domiciliary social care for adults is concerned, is now modifying the market (BBC, 2nd Feb 2010).

The market paradigm in welfare has been driven by ideology not evidence and there is no statutory requirement to separate the management of assessment from the management of commissioning or provision in children's services. Fragmenting decisions about children's lives in this way runs contrary to all that is known about how children develop and relate to those around them. Managers must prioritise safeguarding 'children in need' by safeguarding the consistent, long-term 'helping relationship' between professionals and young service-users. Without a major effort to detach welfare from party political agendas and recover distinct and necessary professional identities in ways similar to our European neighbours, outcomes for children and young people in the UK will continue to be poor.

## Notes

- 1 Within this article 'welfare' refers to aspects of social work/ social care, health and education services for 'children in need' and their families in the community.
- 2 I define a 'helping relationship' as an interpersonal, accountable relationship between a welfare professional and a 'child in need' that improves the child's well-being whilst 'managing expectations and reducing complexity' (Luhmann (1979) cited in Powell & Owen, 2006, pp.113)

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