# Children in Need Teams:
## Service delivery and organisational climate

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*Abstract: This article summarises a short research and development project undertaken in one UK Social Services Department. The project focused on skills and staffing requirements in 'Children in Need' teams and the support processes necessary for such teams to work effectively. The article discusses the concepts of organisational culture and organisational climate and highlights the value of distinguishing the two and of focusing on organisational climate. This provides a means of considering specific issues in a way which is more directly and immediately amenable to management and staff influence, than can be the case with prescriptions for 'culture change'. The potential impact of changes in organisational climate on 'Children in Need' services is also discussed. Summaries of the project findings and recommendations for further development within the department are presented to illustrate the importance and value of a focus on organisational climate.*

*Key words: Children in Need, organisational climate, organisational culture, staff support and development*

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Laming Report on the Victoria Climbié Inquiry (Laming, 2003) and related Government initiatives from the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) and the Children Bill to become the Children Act 2004, Social Services Departments were faced with the challenge of responding to wide scale recommendations for change in the way statutory services work with children, families and their communities. In responding to these developments, we were invited by one Social Services Department in late 2003, to undertake a project to explore the 'skills mix' and 'support needs' of 'Children in Need' Teams regarding work with children and families at risk of inclusion on the Child Protection Register

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and subsequent care proceedings. This project ran from late 2003 to mid 2004. A report was presented to the department in late 2004.

There is much exhortation throughout the public sector to address and improve organisational cultures (e.g. DoH, 1998) in order to accommodate the changes in public sector services which the current government's 'modernisation' agenda requires. This paper discusses the benefits of a focus on the concept of organisational climate rather than organisational culture and relates the project's findings to this discussion. Organisational climate can be seen as a contributor to culture. The advantage of using it in this project is that it focuses primarily on practical issues which are argued to have a more direct bearing on staff attitudes and thence on thequality of service delivery.

## Aims of the project

The project brief was, in the light of the developing policy and practice context:

- To explore the existing range of staff skills and support mechanisms, in order to identify development needs to enable 'Children in Need' Teams to respond effectively and safely to local service delivery requirements in Children and Families work.

Specifically the project aimed to cover these areas:

- Examine the current distribution of staff, available skills and support mechanisms.
- Identify available sources of information on systems management of a child's 'journey' from initial referral to case closure or hand over.
- Clarify departmental expectations of teams involved in Children and Families work, in the light of national frameworks and local developments.
- Develop a 'skills mix and support requirement formula', based on the above expectations and departmental 'vision'.
- Produce recommendations for the support and development of 'Children in Need' Teams.

This project built on previous work undertaken by our team in the same department between 2002 and early 2003, the focus of which was the systemic development of career pathways, to aid and promote recruitment and retention of staff. That work highlighted opportunities for an increase in systemic and reflective learning practices including: coordinated appraisal and supervision systems; mentoring; action learning; and continuing professional development. These activities were seen

to be potential contributors to the development of a more supportive and motivating organisational environment, which in turn could also enhance the effectiveness of service delivery.

## Philosophy and framework

Our approach to this project followed that of work previously undertaken with this organisation as noted above. The approach is founded on the value base of humanistic psychology. Rowan (1988, p.24) defined humanistic psychology as focusing on development through 'personal growth, existential choice and the fulfilment of human potential'. Reason and Rowan (1981) detail the 'collaborative inquiry' approach used in this project. Collaborative inquiry has a close affinity with action research in incorporating an emancipatory relationship with participants and valuing creative reflection (Hart and Anthrop, 1996). In the context of the project here, this approach placed a high emphasis on partnership and collaboration with contracting agencies and their staff, seeking to establish safe environments for dialogue and creative reflection, from which to identify sustainable ways to meet organisational and practice needs. staff support, retention and effective service delivery in the child protection field, formed key areas of focus.

Our analytical approach was informed by Senge's 'creative tension principle' (Senge, 1990). This recognises and highlights the tension between the reality of current practice and practice aspirations. Both aspects are kept in view, as plans are made to realize aspirations. Utilizing this principle, we: discussed and mapped perceived 'current realities' of practice and organisation; identified the key strategic aims or 'vision' inherent in departmental statements in response to the Laming Report, the Green Paper, Children's Trusts proposals and the range of local identified needs; identified 'gaps' between 'current reality' and 'vision'; and produced recommendations on necessary action to 'close the gaps', and to facilitate further support and development of 'Children in Need' Teams.

From these bases, the project focused on how the organisational environment assisted or hindered effective practice in terms of staff support, service delivery and management. A project liaison group was established from within the department to give advice and suggestions to the project team and to assist with access to the relevant information and staff with the organisation. Whilst mention was made of the organisation's culture from the outset, our focus was on practical systems and processes and the perceptions of staff as to how these affected their work. Thus, rather than focus on beliefs and values underpinning service delivery, which an examination of culture per se would entail (Schein, 1990), the more immediately practical concept of organisational climate formed our prime interest. These concepts are discussed in relation to each other below.

## Organisational culture and climate

The issue of the 'culture' of the organisation was raised as a feature of this project both at its outset and throughout, most notably in relation to 'fire fighting', crisis orientated work. A number of recommendations, which aim to assist in the longer development and sustenance of a positive, learning culture, are discussed in the closing sections of this paper. The term 'organisational culture' appears to be used and interpreted, both in this project and more widely, to include a number of factors including beliefs, behaviour, values, resources, processes, professional practices, and individual relationships, which in combination create the 'atmosphere' within which services are delivered. However, 'culture' can be a rather amorphous term. We argue here that, whilst organisational culture may well represent an important issue for this and other social work organisations, the concept of organisational climate might be more useful in the discussion of this project. It provides a way of indicating specific organisational initiatives which can impact positively on service delivery in both the shorter and longer terms. Whilst some of these recommendations may not be seen to impact on issues such as beliefs and values immediately, it is intended that they will ultimately influence those. To that end, this section outlines both organisational culture and organisational climate and relates those concepts. The recommendations later in the paper can then be seen as addressing issues of organisational climate immediately, with the intention of influencing organisational culture over time.

The literature on organisational culture is wide-ranging and multi-faceted, reflecting the complexity and intangibility of the concept. 'Organisation culture' has many definitions (Brown 1998); different methods are used to examine it (Hofstede, et al. 1990; Mallak, et al. 2003); there are differences in the focus of investigation, notably the difference between individual and group level focus (Lakomski 2001) and a range of different analytical perspectives are used to discuss it (Martin 1992; Cameron and Mah Wren 1999; Alvesson 2002).

A fundamental point of departure for its different interpretations, is that some infer that culture is an organisational attribute – something the organisation *has* – whilst others infer that it is a manifestation of the organisation – something the organisation *is* (Ormrod 2003). This is appropriately summarised by Franks (2001, p.18):

> Functionalists see culture as a variable (like structure) which affects the way an organisation 'works'. In other words culture is something an organisation has; if you can change the culture you can change inter alia productivity, levels of conflict and behaviour. By contrast, the interpretive school sees culture as a root metaphor (a fundamental image of the world under study); in other words organisations are cultures. Culture is a subjective experience and the concept of cultural change (as understood by the functionalist school) as a means to an organisational end, is a meaningless construct.

The concept of culture as a metaphor, referred to in the above quotation, has also had detailed exposition (e.g. Morgan, 1997).

There is a developing literature on organisational culture as a concept within public sector organisations. (Ormrod, 2003; Beil-Hildebrand, 2002; Mannion et al, 2005) This literature ranges from the descriptive to that which critiques and theorises. Implicit and at times explicit assumptions are made that a strong, identifiable culture is necessary for effective service delivery. The concept of culture, though, is open to considerable differences in interpretation as Peck et al (2001) in their study of health and social care, note:

> ... this research suggests that (these) groups are investing 'culture' with disparate meanings. The danger of mutual misunderstanding in these circumstances is obvious; for example the theories of change that might be implicit in these different meanings might vary significantly. (p.325)

Thus there may be a wide and disputed range of methods to influence an organisation's culture from different parties involved. One of the difficulties in drawing conclusions from projects such as this, where 'culture' appears to merit attention, is how to recommend steps which develop a more positive work atmosphere to contribute to more effective service delivery. If culture is founded on beliefs and values, how feasible is it to alter those, and over what timescale? If culture is to be seen according to the interpretative perspective noted above, there are considerable challenges to its influence, even if one does not accept that it represents an entirely meaningless construct in this respect, as Franks perhaps provocatively suggests. Ormrod (2003) notes that culture is often used as a 'residual' category in organisations. She sees it can be used as an unspecified, ill-defined aspect which is held to account for certain aspects of an organisation which cannot be easily explained otherwise: 'Fundamentally "culture" remains an unexplained catch-all, which appears to offer little of pragmatic value to [political change] programmes' (p.229).

Culture arises in this project in various ways which might be further developed and discussed. It was felt important though, to offer practical recommendations to improve service delivery and develop an effective culture in the longer term, rather than to make more general exhortations to address culture per se. In addition, a prime focus of this project was the aim of developing a 'skills and support mix', with suggestions for support requirements and specifying different roles. These in turn may impact on culture in the longer term, but a more immediately useful concept for examining the results of this project might be found in that of 'organisational climate' (Denison, 1996), which involves more practically focused aspects of organisation which also affect the 'atmosphere' of the work environment. In this way a distinction can be drawn between 'harder' or more tangible aspects of the organisation (such as perceptions of staffing numbers; range of available skills, etc.) to which climate

refers; and the 'softer' less tangible aspects, such as values, beliefs and behavioural norms, to which culture refers.

Brown (1998) notes that work in the 1970s focusing on organisational climate informed the broader thinking which developed into the field of organisational culture and that in some respects climate now receives less attention. Mannion et al (2005) also note the development of culture from its basis in organisational climate and that these two terms are at times confused or used synonymously. They make the distinction that 'Studies of culture attempt to access deeper values and assumptions than the surface perceptions that are the focus of climate studies.' (2005, 18). Whilst this may appear to relegate climate to being a superficial concept, other writers such as Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) believe such perceptions influence service delivery in important ways and continue, therefore, to merit attention. Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004) also note the confusion between the concepts in much writing. They draw from Denison (1996) who provides a detailed discussion of what he sees as the different theoretical foundations of climate and culture. He suggests:

> Culture refers to the deep structure of organizations, which is rooted in the values, beliefs, and assumptions held by organizational members. Meaning is established through socialization to a variety of identity groups that converge in the workplace. Interaction reproduces a symbolic world that gives culture both a great stability and a certain precarious and fragile nature rooted in the dependence of the system on individual cognition and action. Climate, in contrast, portrays organizational environments as being rooted in the organization's value system, but tends to present these social environments in relatively static terms, describing them in terms of a fixed (and broadly applicable) set of dimensions. Thus, climate is often considered as relatively temporary, subject to direct control, and largely limited to those aspects of the social environment that are consciously perceived by organizational members. (p.624)

Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) too, note the distinction between organisational culture and organisational climate. Their study indicates that the effect of climate rather than culture was the more significant in relation to the delivery of quality services for children. They note the increasing need for such services to be multi-disciplinary and inter-organisational. As a result, they argue, much attention has been given to inter-agency working, to the neglect of intra-agency issues, particularly that of climate. They note a wide range of studies in the commercial sector which take account of climate but a relative neglect of attention to this in the public human service sector.

Glisson and James (2002) seek to distinguish the individual and organisational aspects of climate:

> *Psychological* climate is defined as the individual employee's perception of the

psychological impact of the work environment on his or her own well-being (James & James, 1989). When employees in a particular work unit agree on their perceptions of the impact of their work environment, their shared perceptions can be aggregated to describe their *organizational* climate [Jones & James, 1979; Joyce & Slocum, 1984]. (Glisson and James, 2002, p.769. emphasis in original)

Thus organisational climate provides an aggregate view of work attitudes and is more amenable to management influence. This is not to suggest it is therefore more important but it does present the opportunity to produce service improvements in tangible ways over relatively short time periods. Furthermore, this is not to suggest that efforts to alter organisational culture are irrelevant. Rather it presents the chance to influence organisational culture through organisational climate improvement.

In summarising the above discussion, we suggest that climate constitutes a perception of or reaction to the work environment, whereas culture has a value basis for its actions. This implies it is easier to affect climate (e.g. changing physical resources) than it is to change culture, which requires long term effort and even then is likely to be more uncertain in its overall outcome. We believe it also likely to be easier to gain consensus on appropriate interventions to affect climate positively, than it is to influence culture, largely due to the differences of interpretation as noted above by Peck et al. (2001).

So from a management point of view there may be a benefit in viewing such issues from the perspective of organisational climate: what of the impact of climate on service delivery? Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) argue that staff attitudes are of prime importance in the delivery of high quality services which result in positive outcomes for children who use the service. Watson (2002) notes many factors affecting staff attitudes which in turn influence service quality in child care. Issues such as: staff consistency; adequate resourcing; adequate training, all constitute aspects of organisational climate. The basis of Glisson and Hemmelgarn's argument is that services to vulnerable children with a variety of difficulties, rely on effective relationships between caseworkers and children and families. In particular children and families require such social workers to be available and responsive (Dozier, Cue and Barnett 1994 cited in Glisson and Hemmelgarn). This in turn requires social workers to have positive attitudes to their work. The context of social work presents particular pressures: dealing with high levels of emotion from frustrated or angry people; dealing with emotionally disturbed people; handling difficult situations over a sustained time period. The result can be that social workers experience high degrees of stress in their work. Coffey et al (2004) found high stress levels among staff delivering services to children and families who 'reported the highest levels of absenteeism, poorest well-being; and highest level of organizational constraints' (p.736). Amongst 'organizational constraints', workload and management support appeared to be important issues which form significant aspects of organisational

climate. Difficult work in challenging circumstances may well detract from positive work attitudes.

> .... levels of conflict, role clarity, job satisfaction, cooperation, personalization, and other variables that characterize the shared attitudes and climate of their work environments should be powerful determinants of how caseworkers respond to unexpected problems, the tenacity with which difficult problems are solved, and the affective tone of their work-related interactions with children and families. (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998, p.404)

Some writers argue that a valorisation of crisis in social work is a feature of its particular occupational culture (Pithouse, 1987). However, this must be considered alongside other arguments, such as the above comments, which indicate that crisis and stress are endemic to social work because of the profession's fundamental ambiguity and complexity. Lloyd et al. (2002) note stress in social work as relating to issues of work complexity; Parry-Jones et al. (1998) highlight managerial responsibilities and increased workload as major stress factors. It is important not to dismiss the importance of any of these. The value of considering both culture and climate here is that we are able to separate those climate issues related to stress (poor administrative support, lack of peer support (Lloyd et al., 2002), and workload (Coffey et al., 2004; Parry-Jones et al., 1998) from occupational culture (Pithouse 1987) and distinguish what can be addressed more immediately, from that which is a more enduring feature of the work context.

Glisson and James (2002) note the wide extent of poor employee attitudes in public service organisations and the contribution to high staff turnover. Within the UK, the issue of staff recruitment and retention is recognised as presenting difficulties across the public sector, as noted by the Audit Commission. (2002) and in social work organisations in particular (Balloch et al., 1999; Revell, 2004). In addition to the question of whether an adequate service can be provided when departments are inadequately staffed, there is a concern for the quality of service. High vacancy rates may lead to discontinuity of staff (a possible mix of agency, on-call staff, supervisory staff being used as a stop-gap) in dealing with individual children and families and extra work and stress for remaining practitioners: an issue of concern also noted in the Laming Report (2002). Reder and Duncan (2003) note the need for time to reflect when decisions are made, the lack of which can diminish the quality of services to vulnerable children. The Laming Report also noted, in arriving at its recommendations, the negative impact of the working environment, (described as 'overcrowded', 'grotty', and 'neglected'. 2002, p.75). The details of the project and its resulting recommendations are summarised below. The main themes of much of the information generated through this project can be viewed usefully as relating to organisational climate.

## The project

### Data gathering

The project had three prime stages. The initial preparatory stage involved a search and review of existing documents, both public and internally produced, linked to relevant policy areas. This focused primarily on 20 documents from which a written analysis was prepared. The second stage focused on information and data gathering through: questionnaires to a sample of 'Children in Need' staff across the department; group discussions with a sample of staff and a full group of 'Children in Need' team managers; individual interviews with specifically identified relevant personnel. Stage three focused on: information analysis; findings, conclusions and recommendations, published in the form of an internal report for the department. In accordance with the practice and spirit of collaborative inquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Guba and Lincoln, 1989), opportunities were sought for as much dialogue as possible throughout the project, with as wide a sample of staff as possible within time constraints. Using this approach, participants in the research are regarded as collaborators (as the term indicates) rather than subjects or respondents, with a more active part in the process. Dialogue with them continued to inform the project throughout and emerging themes were discussed with them at each stage of the data gathering process.

### Questionnaires

Questionnaires were based on key points and themes arising from the document search. Questions were formulated around the following topic areas:

- Role and range of duties
- Working with other agencies
- Staff management and professional support systems
- Recognition, reward and retention of staff

Questionnaires were sent to: all 'Children in Need' (CIN) team managers; all senior practitioners; nominated qualified social workers from each CIN team (to reflect the range of experience in each team); social work assistants; team clerks. In total 59 questionnaires were distributed with 24 returned. Numbers returned from each staff group were as follows: team managers 3 (from 11); senior practitioners 2 (from 6); qualified social workers 11 (from 22); social work assistants 4 (from 11); team clerks 4 (from 9).

## Group discussions

Discussions were held with the following groups:

- 'Children in Need' Team managers (8 people plus 1 representative from children's senior management team and project liaison group)
- Qualified social workers including senior practitioners (14 people in 2 sessions)
- Social work assistants (7 people)
- Team clerks (10 people)
- Project liaison group members (5 people)

On the basis of themes and further issues emerging from the above discussions, we also held further individual interviews and discussions with an operations manager, to gain insight into the thinking of the management team, and with two team managers, to explore potential differences between 'Children in Need' teams in urban and rural settings.

Questionnaire responses helped confirm the original topic areas as relevant for group discussions with each staff group. Using this framework and further material from questionnaire responses, a range of specific discussion questions for each staff group was developed under 6 topic areas, as follows:

- Role and range of duties of staff
- Service delivery and expectations of staff
- Working with other agencies
- Staff management and professional support systems
- Recognition, reward and retention of staff
- Resources and systems information (for team managers' group only)

The final topic area was added, as a result of the questionnaire responses, for the discussion group session with team managers.

All group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed. An iterative analysis was made of the transcripts by members of the team, using the discussion and questionnaire topics as a thematic framework (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The process of analysis identified the key themes arising from discussions, focusing on specific issues for each topic area and identifying overall trends across groups. As part of the collaborative enquiry approach, these themes and issues were discussed with respondents and the project liaison group during the analysis stage.

## Findings: Gaps between 'current realities' and 'vision'

From our review of documentation and discussions on the responses from the questionnaires and interviews, a number of issues arose in trying to examine the gap between 'current realities' and 'vision'. These included factors relating to a wide range of organisational issues and dimensions, including those of organisational structure, (such as management systems, job design, staffing); cultural issues (values and beliefs) and how they affect behaviour and practice; organisational climate (such as perceptions of staff support and communication). The main themes of the project are summarised below under the thematic headings which informed the questionnaire and interview schedule.

### Role and range of duties

Many staff felt they were operating in a 'fire-fighting' culture (in the words of one respondent), and undertaking tasks which were not strictly within their job role or descriptions. This appeared to be due either to insufficient staff establishment or through maintaining a number of unfilled posts, either or both of which result in the failure to achieve optimum staffing levels in relation to workload. The most dramatic examples appeared to be roles of team managers (TMs) and senior practitioners (SPs). The TM's central role is seen to be that of providing a 'reassuring presence' for the team as a whole, whilst the SP role is seen primarily as workflow and assessment monitor and professional mentor. However, neither appeared to be able to fulfil these roles or function adequately due to them having to cover qualified social worker (QSW) tasks. Critically a layer of Level 3 QSW staff (able to undertake child protection investigations) was missing, hence a crisis or 'fire-fighting' culture predominated. This reverberated throughout the team, making it hard to plan strategically or release staff for the necessary post qualifying training to enhance service delivery and support for child protection work, and to enable career progression.

### Service delivery and expectations of staff

Whilst teams appeared to work under great pressure much of the time, they also felt they delivered good, tailored services, involved service users and supported each other. The majority of participants supported this view. Certain areas of service make specific and challenging demands, for example: drug and alcohol use; contact arrangements for very young children who are accommodated by the department. Service delivery was seen to be hampered by deficiencies in the referral system, particularly the 'gate keeping' performance of the 'first point of call' internal referral

and assessment agency. However, on the whole and despite these difficulties, the general picture presented was one of capable professionals working under very difficult circumstances, continuing to deliver professional services.

## Working with other agencies

The heads of service role appeared to be a key factor in developing effective collaboration between agencies working with children in need. Certain specific difficulties arose in this department, for example, 5 primary care trusts covering the area, complicating inter-agency working still further. There are reports of pockets of exceptionally good multi-agency practice, for example, that developed between the police and social services and certain agency professionals in specific areas. Following the 'solution focused approach' (De Shazer, 1985), we encouraged senior managers to identify the key factors in such 'exceptions to the rule', to see what potential exists for applying effective practices more widely.

## Staff management and professional support systems

Participants reported an inconsistent formal induction process, with some staff having undertaken induction training a considerable time after having taken up their posts and others still without any structured induction. Similarly, supervision seemed to be erratic, but viewed as useful when it occurred. Critically, it appeared to take low priority, as indicated by reports of it being interrupted or missed because of more pressing demands on team managers' time. Appraisals also appeared to be sporadic, and ranged from occurring annually to not at all. Appraisal where it was carried out, did not appear to be linked nor backed up by the supervision process. Supervision, where it occurred tended towards snatched dialogue concerning pressing case management issues.

    The potential of the supervision process as a regular opportunity to: (a) reflect on progress with a staff member's annual appraisal targets and in that context, take note of emerging developments in subsequent practice; (b) explore both 'task' and staff 'maintenance/support' around current work issues; (c) identify emerging professional skills development and subsequent training needs, appeared to be largely unrealised. Other support systems were cited as being useful but individually initiated rather than formally supported.

## Recognition, reward and retention of staff

Participants commented that they frequently felt undervalued and not recognised

as 'significant' within the department. They valued their own work and felt they did a good job. They considered managers less active in valuing their work or contributions to the team. We suggested a number of relatively small potential responses that may change this (e.g. overt praising and celebrating achievements and good practice within formal and peer supervision sessions and, in time, in self facilitated 'action learning' contexts) as well as others with resources implications (essential car user's allowance for SWA's; holiday entitlement for years of service). Stress was cited by respondents as a very significant factor in the work, but staff felt senior managers made little formal acknowledgement of this to staff themselves, or in written reports. The image of the department and profession was seen as being of concern to participants.

## Comment on findings

There may be ways in which staff reinforce the 'fire-fighting' culture through enacting what we might term 'self imposed circumstance', rather than exerting self responsibility and upholding personal boundaries more clearly - assertively deciding when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no'. One might argue that in the above circumstances, 'saying no' when engaged in such controversial and challenging work, is not a realistic option, but equally, the over-extension of roles serves only to collude in masking crises, whether they be in staffing levels, availability or use of resources, or damaging shortfalls in managing gate-keeping of referrals from elsewhere in the system. We suggested that what might be required is a shift in attitudes within the department, towards what humanistic psychology would call, 'existential choice' (Rowan, 2001). In our opinion, such a choice to 'name realities' i.e. to acknowledge overtly the difficulties faced, rather than collude (even unwittingly), comes primarily from within the individual, as part of an evolutionary process of emotional and professional maturation. However, it is made much easier and more powerful as a precursor to the greater evolution of organisational health, if recognised and supported by managers in the context of professional reflective space and dialogue with staff, within supervision, appraisal, mentoring or 'action learning' contexts. An increased awareness amongst staff at all levels of the distinction between issues of organisational climate (more amenable to change) and organisational culture (less amenable to change), we believe would be helpful in altering attitudes to the pressures of work.

Regarding staffing issues, three comments appear pertinent. Firstly, the lack of experienced staff, covering extra tasks, 'fire-fighting' case management rather than reflective supervision and (as a consequence?) delays in identifying and meeting training needs appeared to create a vicious circle. Team managers suggested as much with their observation that too many staff were waiting for training needs

to be identified and more staff were inevitably needed to cover for staff involved in PQ and other specific training.

Secondly, shifting the emphasis around the value and high priority of appraisal and supervision as cornerstones of strategic and reflective practice (and subsequent development of adequate support systems for staff in relation to induction, practice management and development), relies on freeing team managers and senior practitioners from extraneous duties. This might be addressed through the engagement of a limited number of extra staff; by changes in gate keeping practice at the internal referral and assessment stage; or by an increase in numbers of QSW's developing through PQ/Level 3 career pathways.

Thirdly, a constantly recurring theme was the inadequacy of the working environment. This appeared to be a negative influence on at least three further areas: service delivery, staff support, and reward and retention of staff. We suggested that attention should be given to the provision of light, quiet, spacious, comfortable and personalised environments within which staff must work. This is particularly critical when one considers that staff are working with a lot of children and families who are in a state of chaos. If this is 'mirrored' by staff themselves having no stable work base, with no sense of permanency nor personal identity, it is difficult to see how staff will be able to sustain creative interventions in casework with children and families, or for that matter, inter-agency liaison around families in crisis.

## Recommendations for 'closing the gaps'

As noted above, staff responses in this project identified the need for a shift away from 'fire fighting', (crisis case management and the somewhat addictive, adrenalin based responses to work demands), towards more reflective practice, strategic linking of appraisal and supervision systems and other forms of reflective dialogue, developed to enhance both service delivery and staff maintenance. A number of recommendations arose from the project, all focusing on the more immediate issues of climate. The impact of these changes would be on staff attitudes and ultimately on service delivery. These changes included the following.

### Staff issues

These include recommending the establishment of base levels of trainee and qualified social work staff and administrative support in each team; indicating the relevant levels of skill, training and career progression implications. This was emphasised with a view to enable the release of staff to act effectively in a number of ways. Firstly to enabling: team managers to act as a 'reassuring presence'; to be

practice supervisor of all social work staff; to coordinate reflective practice support systems throughout the team; and to take the strategic lead in inter agency initiatives in preventive and child protection work. Secondly, to enable senior practitioners to operate more effectively as both practice mentors and coordinators of service delivery (in dialogue with the team manager).

## Facilities issues

These include provision of essential car user's allowance for Social Work Assistants and others involved in transport duties (in order to release QSWs to focus their time on primary child protection work); improvements to telephone systems and systems information; improvements to work/office environments.

## Service issues

These include the establishment of a comprehensive range of available venues for supervised contact with children; improved departmental facilities for initial contact; more effective gate keeping of assessment of both preventive and also child protection cases, reviewing and improving the effectiveness of inter-agency processes.

## Professional and management issues

These include provision of effective appraisal and supervision training for team managers; identification of peer support and action learning opportunities throughout the team. This had the ultimate aim of supported self facilitation of action learning initiatives for all social work staff engaged in, or shadowing, direct child protection work. The action learning would be facilitated by senior practitioners and level 3 QSW's. Action learning sets were seen as potentially offering a key mechanism to develop a process in a number of respects towards reflective and strategic practice and away from crisis management; encouraging an individual professional paradigm based on notions of 'total self responsibility' (a key action learning value); and mature boundary management around roles, responsibilities, decision making and workload levels.

The recommendations concerning professional and management issues for staff were offered in the context of encouraging an awareness of the critical importance of reflective practice in supporting staff engaged in child protection work. This awareness would also ideally encompass the need for the development of a healthy organisational climate for social work and support staff, working within a frequently

experienced environment of potential crisis and blame. The recommendations aimed to support the following: retention and continuing professional development of staff; effective systems management of both service delivery and also staff support needs, within multi agency contexts; facilitation of the development of comprehensive systems of reflective and effective practice and management of that practice; identification, dissemination and celebration of examples of good practice within the department.

We viewed appraisal as offering the primary evaluative framework for the forthcoming year's work, providing an opportunity for each worker and manager to: map out potential work and continuing professional development plans, matched to projected team and organisational staff development and training programmes; ensure effective staff management; identify and establish ways to sustain support opportunities for staff. Supervision, offered on a regular monthly basis for each worker, provides an ideal monitoring opportunity for tracking how the annual plans are unfolding, as well as identifying new developments in perception and practice in the context of a regular and valued reflective space (Harlow, 2003). Together these provide a powerful framework for iterative learning, in the best traditions of a 'learning organization' (Senge, 1990).

Peer support and action learning opportunities were also seen as significant elements in the development of positive, effective practice and a move away from a crisis driven culture. Such initiatives are likely to progress if managers and/or staff have the opportunity to experience participation in externally facilitated action learning sets, followed by development of appropriate staff to undertake the role as action learning set facilitators for other groups of staff, engaged in both child protection work and preventive work. These recommendations, at the time of writing, are under consideration by the department with a view to developing a list of priorities and a plan for implementation.

## Concluding comments

Organisational culture appears to be emphasised, both implicitly and explicitly, in much policy and strategic documentation, nationally and locally. There is a need though to retain a practical focus to enable effective practice to develop and to address barriers to progress and development in other areas. Organisational climate appears to offer a fruitful means of addressing specific aspects of organisation which affect the attitudes of social work staff who deliver services, and which ultimately affect the quality of service delivered. The recommendations of changes to organisational climate made here have yet to be implemented in full and it is thus too early to be able to evaluate the impact of such interventions. Nevertheless, considering organisational climate and its constituent parts proves to be a useful means of

exploring organisational issues and staff reactions in order to recommend positive actions to improve service quality. It appears that organisational climate is much more amenable to change than organisational culture. Policy makers both nationally and locally, might be advised to argue for 'climate change' (of a different nature than in its general usage) rather than cultural change. They can also contribute to a more positive climate through encouraging regard for social workers and other providers of public services rather than as presenting the attitudes and values which contribute to their culture, as obstacles to progress.

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