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In the eye of the storm: The implications of the Munro Child Protection Review for the future of probation

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Abstract
On their election the new coalition government appeared to be keen to review and revise child protection policy following the fallout from the Baby Peter case and the consequent crisis in confidence in social work. This article re-examines the underlying motives for this review and then investigates what the implications of the Munro review are for the future of public protection and the probation service generally.

Keywords
child protection, desistance, privatization, probation, public protection, relationships, risk assessment, social work

The Munro Review and the Baby Peter case
Following on from the extremely high profile murder of Baby Peter in August 2007, closely after the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, both in the same London borough of Haringey, Eileen Munro was appointed by the new coalition government in June 2010 to undertake a complete review of child protection. Munro’s role was to analyse the current problems with child protection social work and her child...
Munro, 2011), suggested new solutions to resolve these issues.

Munro consulted widely with practitioners and managers as well as academics. The key points raised in the Munro review will now briefly be summarized. Social workers are spending too much time on paperwork and focusing on managerial targets. This is diverting their attention away from the important work of developing relationships with the children and families that they are employed to help. Munro also concluded that when things did go wrong – as in the Baby Peter case – the investigations undertaken during the serious case reviews did not attempt to analyse in-depth what had gone wrong or what lessons could be learned.

Munro has suggested various reforms and policy revisions. She believes Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) should move from announced to unannounced inspections only. At present too much time and effort is being spent by professionals preparing for inspections and meeting the bureaucratic requirements deflecting their attention away from their core task of relating to the families and children in their care. Frontline social workers should also have greater autonomy to exercise their professional judgment. This involves a need to revise statutory, multi-agency guidance to remove unnecessary or unhelpful prescription and focus only on essential rules required to undertake the role. For example, the prescribed timescales for social work assessments should be removed, since they distort practice. The review also proposed that there should be a reduction of the statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department for Education, 2010), which is now 55 times longer than it was in 1974, and that the core rules should be separated from professional advice. It recommended that allied professionals in health, police and family support should have improved and easier access to social work advice when they have concerns re: child abuse and neglect. Finally Munro recommended the appointment of a Chief Social Worker within the Government; their duties would include advising the Government on social work practice and progress and responsibility for increasing the public’s awareness and the media image of social work:

Instead of ‘doing things right’ (i.e. following procedures) the system needed to be focused on doing the right thing (i.e. checking whether children and young people are being helped). (Munro, 2011: 6)

Many of these points echoed some of the comments she had written at the time of Baby Peter. Laming undertook the case review of Victoria Climbie (Laming, 2003) and was requested to compile another review in 2009 after the death of Baby Peter (Laming, 2009). Eileen Munro, writing after the return of Laming to chair the second inquiry following the death of Baby Peter, insisted that social workers do not intend to make mistakes, and that it was important not to just criticize them but to look further to see why their misguided actions looked reasonable at the time. Munro maintained that Laming’s 2003 report into the care provided to Victoria
Climbié failed to do this. It gave a detailed account of what went wrong but no understanding of why it had gone wrong. Laming was unable to understand what is happening in social work but instead insistend that people improve and expressed his frustration saying: ‘NOW JUST DO IT’ (Munro, 2009). However Munro posed the key question: ‘Why have the well-intentioned reforms, implemented by well-intentioned people, led to such disarray?’

This is due to an accountability shift. There has been a shift from the relationship between the practitioner and the client, essential from the standpoint of rehabilitation, to the public and to the audit of efficiency (Munro, 2004) essential from the standpoint of public protection. The client or offender becomes increasingly marginalized. The main problem with the existing regime for Munro is that:

... compliance with existing procedures, rules and audit regimes is the key focus of appraisal rather than whether those procedures, rules and so on are the best way of protecting children. (Munro, 2010: 1139)

The key question to be debated here is whether themes raised in Munro’s review have a relevance for probation practice which, formerly, was regarded very much as part of social work. Can we transport lessons and recommendations of Munro to probation and public protection?

Public protection and the Sonnex case

Criticisms levelled at the London probation service at the time of the brutal murder of two French students — Gabriel Ferez and Laurent Bonomo — by Dano Sonnex and his accomplice Nigel Farmer in 2008 shortly after Baby P’s death identified similar themes. Sonnex at the time of his offences was on licence following a prison sentence for four offences of robbery (Ministry of Justice, 2009). The first common issue was one of lack of resources. In Lewisham where Sonnex was supervised, the probation office was said to be in a state of ‘meltdown’. Not only that but Sonnex was supervised by an inexperienced probation officer, qualified for nine-months, with a caseload of 127. This was not uncommon in London Probation with inexperienced practitioners coping with absurdly high caseloads (Fitzgibbon, 2009).

As a consequence probation staff had insufficient time to check their information, or to re-examine the recent developments in a particular case. Subsequently there was confusion over the risk of harm levels regarding Sonnex. He was placed as a tier three (i.e. medium) risk on supervision. Risk assessment tools however had previously placed him at a higher level of risk (OASys-Offender Assessment System) and consistently assessed his behaviour as a high risk. This lowering of Sonnex’s risk level on release from prison had implications for resource allocation and the Multi-Agency Public Protection Panel (MAPPP) referral. Sonnex had been referred to MAPPP but this was not followed up due to administrative errors and his existing medium risk level. Other incidents, which should have changed Sonnex’s risk
level — notably his attack on a pregnant woman and her partner to extort money — were not included. It later transpired charges had been dropped due to victim intimidation (Fitzgibbon, 2009). The lack of co-ordination and information sharing between agencies: probation, social services, police, medical services and, in the case of offenders, the prison service was as evident in the case of Sonnex as it was in the case of Baby Peter. Even when the order was issued to recall Sonnex to prison, the police delayed acting upon it.

The Sonnex murder came only four years after the murder of City financier, John Monckton, by Damien Hanson and Elliot White and the murder of Naomi Bryant by Anthony Rice. In both cases the perpetrators were under probation supervision at the time (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2006a, 2006b). This raises the additional question of why such major failures in probation have not provoked anything similar to the Munro review? The fact is that probation has not come under anything like the scrutiny (as a result of Sonnex) that child protection social work has come under in the wake of Baby Peter.

**New public management and the culture of tick boxes**

Probation and child protection social work have certain key similarities. Firstly, the fact that new public management techniques have affected both services increasingly over the last decade and, secondly, the principles of risk assessment by tick box are now common to both services. Broadhurst et al. (2010) contend that the ability of practitioners to go beyond formalized risk assessments is undermined by a central government tendency to over-prescribe and this is reinforced by inspection regimes that focus on compliance with national targets and procedures. Practitioners are left floundering with poorly designed assessment tools which encourage limited time-scales to promote speed and electronic workflows which prioritize completion, i.e. OASYS probation and Integrated Children’s System (ICS) re: child welfare in England and Wales. Thus judgements are being made on slender grounds (Broadhurst et al., 2010: 1049; see also Munro, 2004).

In both probation and child protection there has been a shift in the type of knowledge which forms the basis of practitioner decisions. Parton (2008) describes this as a shift away from ‘social’ towards ‘informational’ knowledge. In a similar vein Aas (2004) describes a move from ‘narrative’ to ‘database’. Such shifts have dire consequences for practitioners as the client becomes deconstructed into a bundle of risks identified in computer based tick-box databases and the holistic picture of the client’s social and personal context is lost.

By following the two cases of Sonnex and Baby Peter major failures are illustrated where practitioners fail to follow the rules, to co-ordinate information, to pass information on, to make the correct risk assessments for whatever reason. Secondly, both the Sonnex and Baby Peter cases were the occasion for vitriolic media coverage at level moral panic and symbolic assassinations of service heads, which in similar ways revealed much about both public anxieties and the working of the political system. (See Fitzgibbon 2011 for extended discussion.)
The changing face of probation and child protection social work

By comparing these two recent cases with two famous ones from the 1970s, namely Graham Young and Maria Colwell, the changes that have occurred over time towards professions in public protection are evident.

Graham Young (the ‘Bovingdon Poisoner’) like Sonnex also killed while on licence. He killed two work colleagues and injured 70 others by poisoning the factory tea. Young was on licence to probation following a life sentence in Broadmoor for murdering his step-mother by poisoning. At that time there was little focus on the role of probation in Young’s supervision, even though the allocated probation officer made little attempt to discover much about him or communicate with his family and post-release employers. The only focus by politicians and the press was on those who supervised him in Broadmoor Hospital and how treatment of mentally ill released patients could be improved and the supply of poisons restricted in the community (Aarvold, 1973). The focus was concerned with improving policy. There were no high profile pre-emptive moves involving the dismissal of senior officials: this probably never even occurred to them. There was no sense of a moral or political panic.

A similar approach was taken with the case of Maria Colwell who like Baby Peter was murdered by her stepfather. Maria Colwell, a child of seven murdered by her stepfather in 1973 was the subject of a media panic about parenting and led to committees of experts. The Colwell inquiry was a public inquiry, followed by the national press in a fairly restrained manner. There was a calm atmosphere in which an elite of professionals and experts could deliberate, learn what went wrong and devise policies to avoid future recurrence. Although the allocation of blame and the documentation of failure was an aspect of the inquiry, it was subordinate to wider concerns (Field-Fisher, 1974). Ministers, in particular Sir Keith Joseph in the Colwell case, awaited the conclusion of these inquiries and then formulated policy. Again there were no high profile pre-emptive moves involving the dismissal of senior officials.

By the time of Baby Peter and Sonnex it was a very different story. Both social work and probation were then subject to inquiries, which basically urged ‘more of the same.’ The Laming Review (twice in 2003 and 2009) basically urged ‘just do it’ and recommended a profusion of rule tightening. The more sober in-house reports in probation following Hanson and White (H.M. Inspectorate of Probation, 2006b), Rice (H.M. Inspectorate of Probation, 2006a), Sonnex (National Probation Service, 2009), took exactly the same approach of rule tightening.

Munro criticized Laming extensively and posed the key question: ‘Why is it that practitioners don’t appear to be following the rules?’ Munro’s argument (which is echoed by many others) concerns a return to the centrality of ‘the relationship’ between practitioner and client (Munro, 2010).

In probation there are many reasons, supported by abundant research especially regarding desistance (Farrell and Maruna, 2004; Fitzgibbon, 2007, 2008; Maruna and Immarigeon, 2004; Maruna et al., 2004), which substantiate a move
back from tick-box risk assessments to focus on the relationship as a relevant reform. Research by Annison and colleagues (Annison, Eadie and Knight, 2008), McNeill (2006) and others (Burnett and McNeill, 2005) shows practice is still concerned with helping clients to change positively. Recent research conducted in 2010 by the author consisted of interviews with 15 public protection/child protection practitioners (Fitzgibbon, 2011). One of the practitioners interviewed summarized this commitment to providing assistance:

I would like training to emphasize working with offenders more closely. They may lose some of their fear and remember that offenders are just people. I would like a lot more emphasis on interviewing skills and setting the technologies around that. To keep engaging with people and not feel they are outside or other than you. More time which would pay dividends. (Marvin, probation manager)

This is reinforced by much of the academic discussion on the dynamics of desistance which has stated that:

... interventions are unlikely to ‘work’ unless the individual themselves are able to move towards adopting a non-offending or pro-social identity, in a supportive environment, matched by the existence of wider structural opportunities. (Burke and Collett, 2010: 364)

Three classic bodies of research robustly defend the centrality of the relationship between practitioner and client in probation.

Firstly the studies on the dynamics of desistance by Maruna et al. (2004) who in their Liverpool Desistance Study concluded success or failure had less to do with appropriate programme referral based on risk assessment than stressing the client’s strengths and future potential such that:

... to reintegrate ex-prisoners back into society, it may make sense to balance talk of risks and needs with an emphasis on the person’s potential ‘strengths’. (Maruna et al., 2004: 228)

Offenders have to come to terms with their past and the most effective means available is their evaluation of their own biographies. The use of therapeutic techniques which focus on the ‘whole individual’/whole life context not just an artificial ‘data-vidual’ (Aas, 2004) assembled from ticked boxes is the most effective means of engaging clients.

This interviewee agreed wholeheartedly:

Key is to treat offenders with more respect. We have too short a time with offenders being mindful of time pressures. Offenders see us as housing officers, employment advisers, but we’re not — we are brokers. We’re meant to refer to other people but there is no housing or jobs. There is no answer. The volume of what was required is we don’t have the resources. It’s an endless cycle if I had to wish list I’d put in more housing, more jobs. (Sharon, probation officer)
Pro-social modelling, developed by Trotter (2009) was also concerned with what probation officers should do to reinforce ‘pro-social’ (i.e. non-criminal) attitudes on the part of clients:

... providing reinforcement is through body language (e.g. smiling, attentive listening,) and the use of praise. Rewards providing positive evidence, reducing the frequency of contact, helping the client find a job or accommodation, doing home visits or meeting a client outside the office, doing a positive report for a court or parole board. (Trotter 2009: 141)

Helping the client to find a job or accommodation relates directly to the research by Farrall (Farrall, 2004; Farrall, 2007) on the importance of community resources rather than cognitive skills as the key driver in desistance from crime.

However important the interpersonal interaction, if the practitioner can get the offender into a worthwhile job this substantially increases the chances of desistance. Both are important. The offer of employment may be insufficient if there is not already a supportive relationship. Desistance-supporting interventions need to:

... be based on legitimate and respectful relationships... to focus on social capital (opportunities) and... to exploit strengths as well as addressing needs and risks. (McNeill, 2006: 55)

Probation research is equally as developed therefore, and echoes many of the same themes, as Munro’s work in child protection. Just as a closer relationship between social workers and Baby Peter, Connelly Baby Peter’s mother and Barker (his step-father) might have averted his death. Maybe a closer relationship between Sonnex and an experienced casework practitioner might have averted the murders of the French students. It must be emphasized, however, that Munro was sniping from the fringes for many years — rather like Rod Morgan as regards to the probation service. So the question is: ‘Why has Munro now been adopted by the government to review child protection policies while no-one has been tasked to review public protection?’

Part of the answer is the different status of social work and probation, which have moved increasingly apart in recent years. In 1997 the training was separated and this linked the probation service much closer to the criminal justice system. Probation then began to employ large numbers of semi-skilled or differently skilled probation service officers without a qualification in probation studies to do aspects of POs traditional work. The focus became on compliance and punishment away from welfare and rehabilitation (Farrant, 2006).

A comparison between Sonnex and Baby Peter cases shows how far probation and social work have moved apart. In terms of status the probation practitioner has become absorbed into the criminal justice system as the offender manager. This shields them, in a similar way to the police, from public scrutiny. Probation can thus hide behind legitimacy of criminal justice system, the courts and the penal system.

Secondly, probation work with offenders who are on the margins of society. The fact that they are convicted and recognized as deviants in some ways has protected
probation from the high levels of media/government scrutiny experienced by social work. Ironically this is despite working in the stimulating area of crime. Usually crime stories are popular and used to sell papers, are the subject of numerous films and programmes. However, it seems that interest in crime centres on the points of detection/ investigation rather than what happens after conviction to the offender.

This is reflected in the more low key treatment of David Scott, head of London Probation Area at the time of the Sonnex murder compared to Sharon Shoesmith, Director of Haringey’s Children Services. The Guardian, in the week of the release of the Haringey report and the sacking of Shoesmith, ran 35 stories and The Daily Mail ran five stories. In comparison with the publication of the London Probation report on Sonnex and David Scott’s resignation, The Guardian and The Daily Mail did not even cover the story (Fitzgibbon, 2011)

However it could be argued that there were other factors associated with this lack of focus on probation and the swift refocusing of media attention onto Jack Straw (the Justice Secretary at the time) and the Government. Many believed that the lessons the probation service had learnt from Hanson and White enabled it to mobilize itself better with the press when the Sonnex murders occurred. Also, at the time of Sonnex the Labour Government was rapidly losing support and certain sections of the press had more to gain by highlighting the government’s failings than the probation service. By comparison with the media assassination of Sharon Shoesmith, the head of Haringey Children’s Services, David Scott remained a shadowy figure and indeed resigned soon after the case (albeit under pressure from Jack Straw) so the focus of blame had to move elsewhere. As an interviewee stated:

It seems like London Probation had a better outcome than Haringey. Maybe they got what they wanted quicker in that David Scott resigned quickly. They got their scalp early on in the process. Perhaps it was a more open approach with the criminal justice system . . . . Also I can remember how she (Shoesmith) behaved with the press, making a very strong statement early on saying she had no responsibility for Baby P. or something like that. This wasn’t the best way to manage the case. I think probation and criminal justice very early on in the Sonnex case admitted they were to blame, saying they would look at things and learn things and I think that’s got more to do with it. (Morgan, probation manager)

Social work has always been vulnerable to public and political scrutiny as it is closely associated with local politics; it is a branch of local government and funded locally.

The Government, they set up society with huge expectations which is politics. There is no way anybody can meet them and then when you don’t meet them the reaction is, isn’t this terrible, this is unacceptable, let’s blame someone. I think sometimes social workers are their own worst enemies in terms of how they portray themselves. We allow ourselves to be a bit of a punch bag. We just sit and take it — a lot of the time. (Pippa, social work manager)
Social work, although dealing with society’s deviants is still trying to support and reclaim them – via rehabilitation – whereas probation work with convicted offenders is now much more about risk management or, as Rod Morgan put it, ‘self rehabilitation’ (Morgan, 2007).

Thus, when risk management fails it is much more obviously a question of tightening up the rules for probation. So critics like Farrall and Maruna, and others, although saying things very similar to Munro, don’t get the space or opportunity to voice their concerns. In fact the Sonnex case was the first case to have the internal report go public. It therefore marked a new era:

Sonnex was interesting because it was the first time that a serious further offence resulted in ministers deciding that they were going to blow probation’s cover. They did that by releasing into the public domain all of the relevant internal reports... The internal report, which up to then had always been understood as being an internal matter... I can remember actually seeing it on the News At Ten... it was there, they had a copy of it, it was on the screen! (Philip, senior probation manager)

What now? The coalition’s vision of the future

So what will the future bring for social work and probation? Will probation get a Munro equivalent or has Kenneth Clarke, the Justice Secretary, got something else in mind? Clarke has, after all, announced a return to rehabilitation as the main focus of the penal system. This would, on the face of it, bring social work and probation closer together as formerly. Rehabilitation is in fact the best guarantee of public protection (Morgan, 2007). So is it simply a matter of time before Munro is applied to probation?

The coalition government obviously wants to discredit Laming and the whole ‘Every Child Matters’ apparatus of massive state surveillance put in place by New Labour (Education and Skills Select Committee, 2005). So the coalition government immediately appointed Munro who had been critical in academic journals and the media against New Labour’s target driven culture.

Other academics like Liz Davies also voiced criticism, suggesting that:

... social work professionals overwhelmed with meeting performance targets, responding to low level concerns, preoccupied with data entry, and under pressure to close cases within predefined timescales for assessments, find it difficult to focus their attention on children at risk of harm (Davies and Duckett, 2008: ix)

However Davies is concerned by Munro’s recent report. She fears that if the government get rid of initial and core assessments, as Munro proposes in her review (Munro 2011), without reinstating rigorous child protection investigation jointly with police, it will mean running the services down and getting rid of even more staff, who now are not even doing assessments let alone investigations (Davies, 2011).
It is important, in any case, to be a little sceptical about the government motives particularly in the current economic climate. Have the expected ‘go’ at New Labour, certainly, but what are the cost implications of a child protection service based on low caseloads and closer practitioner—client relations? In particular what are the implications of the privatization of the whole service with Tim Loughton’s desire for outsourced ‘child protection volunteers’:

‘You have volunteers working alongside professional social workers, on child protection cases. They have had a fantastic success…. I don’t see why it couldn’t apply everywhere…. At a time when the number of children going into care is still rising as an after-effect of the Baby Peter case, and when the amount of money councils have available to spend on them is diminishing’, Loughton said, ‘we have got to do more for less’. (Gentleman, 2010)

Social worker professional bodies for some years have welcomed voluntary input. Pilot projects involving volunteers giving parenting help to the families of children at risk of neglect have been around since 2005 and recent research confirms their useful role (Valios, 2010). However this can never be a substitute for close supervision of children at risk by professional social workers. Tim Loughton’s convenient ‘discovery’ of such schemes in climate of ‘we have got to do more for less’, i.e. during massive cuts in local authority spending is conveniently legitimized by reference to a ‘Big Society’ of volunteers. This makes it more likely that children at risk of serious neglect end up with unskilled volunteers, just as the worst case scenario of probation’s serious offenders being managed by an untrained/semi-trained private sector.

Is Munro being used as a cover for a massive privatization programme? The deskilling and tick-box culture introduced by new public management will be exaggerated by the employment of a new army of semi-skilled volunteers with no therapeutic or casework experience.

In a similar way the ‘return to rehabilitation’ offered by Clarke involves massive privatization, including of probation services. This is not a remote possibility. Group 4 Security is already bidding for probation programmes such as unpaid work supervision following on from an expanded presence in criminal justice system as it is widening its brief from just prisons and security screening. Birmingham prison being privatized indicates a growth of private providers into existing and new areas in CJS and other public areas (Allison, 2011).

However the concern is how will the private sector monitor practitioner standards and skills — difficult enough in a single national probation service — when there is a medley of different providers chosen less because of their skill base and experience than because they are the cheapest in terms of contract.

Part of the motive for privatization is undoubtedly cost reduction. Private sector organizations already involved in public sector and criminal justice work such as Group 4 Security are explicitly competing for government contracts on the basis of cost reduction. In November 2010 Group 4 Security said it had signed a memorandum of understanding with ministers setting out £10 million of savings. G4S said
the deal would mean ‘efficiency savings’ on things such as maintenance regimes and cleaning:

G4S added that it believed there are ‘a number of areas where the private sector can deliver further cost savings to the Government’ and earmarked the operation of police custody suites, the Welfare to Work programme, and the probation service as areas where it could ‘grow its market share’. (Tobin, 2010)

The prospect of Group 4 or similar organizations growing their market share in probation through efficiency savings while simultaneously investing in the training and employment of skilled practitioners is just not credible. Indications are that a tendency to deskilling, underway for some time in probation in the form of PSOs handling lower risk offenders, would increase to save money.

The idea that unqualified personnel are capable of monitoring and supervising offenders not just in unpaid work but in the crucial area of motivating offenders to desist from crime – which requires skills experienced probation officers take years to acquire – is quite frankly absurd. To provide pro-social modelling for offenders who experience authority in a negative and challenging way and skillfully engage with anti-authoritarian challenging behaviour in order to reduce offending inexpensively is impossible. There is a real danger that the desistance focus becomes simple supervision and control and community punishment becomes ‘warehousing the poor’ (Wacquant, 2009).

The coalition government has introduced its own ‘logo’ in the form of the ‘Big Society’ in which social inclusion will be associated with volunteering and participation based on the private and voluntary sectors. David Cameron, in a speech in July 2010, opined:

The Big Society is about a huge culture change… where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace… don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face… but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. It’s about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders. (Cameron, 2010)

This orientation marks a shift away from the surveillance and controlling state which many see as characterizing attempts by New Labour to produce community cohesion and towards the minimal state of American-inspired neo-liberalism in which large areas of welfare and criminal justice services are privatized or left to communities to provide themselves on a voluntary basis.

As critics have pointed out, the obstacles to the big society and rehabilitation revolution from the fragmentation of the traditional working class community since 1960s are profound (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008; Jordan, 2010).

When charged with these responsibilities some richer communities will be able to provide resources but for many poor, fragmented communities unable to cope the
future looks bleak indeed. The weakening of social networks linking the offender or problem family to the wider community was rationalized in neo-conservative theorizing about the poor as an underclass with a different set of values from the rest of society (see Murray, 1984). It followed that criminality or family failure was a product of this separate dysfunctional subculture. Thus individuals were entirely responsible for their own life courses – including criminality or the failure to form stable family relations. Rather than examining structural means to promote and encourage responsibility, the poorer communities/families are blamed and dismissed. Poor families with children, unstable marriages or short-term cohabitees, ex-offenders seeking a route out of crime will all find new obstacles to their desire for stable lives (see Farrall et al., 2010). They will have few resources and little experience to cope with these responsibilities.

But the hope lies in continued concern by practitioners in both probation and child protection to maintain and develop close work with their respective client groups:

To do this job it’s not a tick box job and if it does become a tick-box job that’s when you should stop doing it. You have to have a dynamism . . . Ultimately you end up with families in an abusive situation and you’ve got to go in there with really dynamic thinking, what is really going on: who is that, what does this mean? You have to think about child development, someone’s mental state, family dynamics, community dynamics, it’s such a complex situation. It’s complicated and difficult stuff and it’s demanding and requires demanding training in order to understand the kind of work that they’re getting into. (Kristy, social worker)

There is a desire to move away from a one-dimensional orientation to risk management and to develop multi-dimensional relationships with the families of children at risk of neglect to help them out of isolation and child abuse and with offenders to help them get back into a normal social life. Desires, which in the area of child protection at least, may well be legitimized by the policy review by Munro (2011).

In fact there have been innovations in one or two individual social services departments around the UK which have carried these desires into effect long before the Munro Review. Cooper et al. (2003) refer to a project initiated by Nottingham City Social Services Department in 2000 which gave increased autonomy to social workers in service delivery. More recently, following the murder of two children by their mother, widely criticized as preventable if social workers had been doing their job, the London Borough of Hackney re-organized its children’s services away from the hierarchical model:

Instead of the usual hierarchy, with front-line social workers at the bottom, Hackney created a system of small units, each headed by a consultant social worker. These consultants are key. They are highly experienced, able, well-trained . . . . The units include therapists, clinical practitioners, and co-ordinators. All work closely together on cases, with the consultant taking responsibility, usually handling between 30 and 40 cases in all (Berg, 2010).
It is undoubtedly easier for such innovations to take place in social services than probation. Social work is, by comparison, already decentralized in that it is organized at the local authority level while probation is part of the centralized NOMS.

However some pilot projects are occurring as part of the Offender Engagement Programme, e.g. the Surrey and Sussex ‘Professional Judgement’ model. There have indeed been some recent moves towards organizational decentralization. The 2009 Offender Management Act enables high performing probation areas to become Trusts which deliver services under contract to NOMS with the Trust deciding the best way to deliver those services.

For example Surrey and Sussex Probation Trust (SSPT) was selected to pilot a project, which allowed probation officers to exercise more professional judgement by the Ministry of Justice when managing cases. Probation staff have more purposeful and better focused contact with offenders when they are allowed to exercise their professional judgment in deciding how to work with each individual. Frontline staff thus utilize their professional skills to cut reoffending and protect the public. Offender managers focus their work on the most serious offenders, and are not consumed by tick-box exercises. The success of this model means that it will be implemented across England and Wales and revised Probation National Standards have already been published on the Ministry of Justice website to be implemented over the next year. These new National Standards allow frontline probation staff more discretion to manage their work with offenders as the risks of each case demands, using their knowledge and drawing on their professional training and experience (Surrey and Sussex Probation Trust, 2011).

Similarly to the new methods introduced into some social services departments these new probation standards will hopefully remove the unnecessary prescription that restricts frontline decision-making. So have these localized changes pre-empted a need for a Munro Review equivalent for probation? Have the more powerful and successful probation trusts acted like the more innovative social services departments mentioned above and professionally solved their own local problems? These localized professional developments would seem to offer practical community-based solutions which bypass and overtake the endless reviews of procedures and policies initiated by the government. Maybe probation’s lack of a ‘Munro Review’ will free practitioners to implement and develop their own professionally driven solutions.

For both groups of practitioners the building of strong communities is a central part of the process of turning offenders away from crime and breaking down the isolation of children at risk of abuse. The resistance and will of the public as shown by the demonstration on 26 March 2011 indicates that this split between government policies and practice/public values will not disappear. A political clash between the privatization and neo-liberal orientations of the coalition government and the needs of professionals working in probation and child protection seems therefore inevitable. A frontline worker sums up this article’s main concerns:

I think it’s a real worry about the amount of money we have to save and where it’s going to come from and what the impact is on the front line services. They may not cut the number of child protection social workers but other things that are in place that
support families and what we do potentially could be cut. And the resources we have for the work with the families will also potentially be affected. It’s increasingly difficult to get funding for all kinds of things agreed. I think that’s only going to get worse.

(Emma, social work manager)

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