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The Contemporary Refocusing of Children's Services in England

Abstract

Purpose: To provide an analysis of the changes in child protection policy and practice in England over the last thirty years. In particular, to critically analyse the nature and impact of the 'refocusing' initiative of the mid-1990s.

Approach: Policy analysis

Findings: While the period from the mid-1990s until 2008 can be seen to show, in a very uneven way, how policy and practice attempted to build on a number of the central principles of the 'refocusing' initiative the period since 2008 has been very different. Following the huge social reaction to the death of Peter Connolly, policy and practice rapidly moved in directions which were quite contra to the 'refocusing' initiative's aims and aspirations such that we can identify a 'refocusing of refocusing'. Such developments were given a major impetus with the election of the Coalition government in 2010 and have been reinforced further following the election of the Conservative government in May 2015.

Value: Places changes in child protection policy and practice in England in their political and economic contexts and makes explicit how the roles and responsibilities of professionals, particularly social workers, have been subject to change.

Keywords: Child protection; policy; practice; politics

Article Classification: General Review

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of the changes in child protection policy and practice in England over the last thirty years. In particular it provides some critical reflections on the nature and impact of the ‘refocusing’ initiative of the mid 1990s and how far developments in recent years can be seen to be consistent with the changes it was aiming to bring about. The paper will argue that while the period from the mid-1990s until 2008 can be seen to show, in a very uneven way, how policy and practice attempted to build on a number of the ‘refocusing’ initiative’s central principles, the period since 2008 has been very different. Following the huge social reaction to the tragic death of Baby Peter Connolly, policy and practice moved in directions which can be seen as being almost contrary to the ‘refocusing’ initiative’s aims and aspirations such that it is not unreasonable to suggest that what we have witnessed is a ‘refocusing of refocusing’. Such developments were given a major impetus following the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government in May 2010 and have been reinforced further since the election of the Conservative government in May 2015.

The Children Act 1989 and the 'Refocusing' of Children's Services

Following the public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974) and a series of other high profile child abuse scandals in the 1970s and 1980s, child welfare services in England came under growing pressure and were increasingly dominated by a narrow, reactive and forensically-orientated focus on child protection (Parton, 1985; 1991). It was in this context that the Children Act 1989 tried to establish a new set of balances between the state and the family in the care and protection of children. The Act attempted to keep to a minimum the situations where social workers would rely upon a policing and investigatory approach, and aimed to put in its place an emphasis upon providing help and support to children in need by working in partnership with their families. Rather than focus narrowly upon whether the child concerned was 'suffering or likely to suffer significant harm' (Children Act 1989 s.31(2)(a) the work was intended to prioritise the much broader general duty placed on local authorities by Section 17(1) of the Act to 'safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area who are in need'.

However, from the outset local authorities clearly experienced major problems in developing the family support aspirations of the Children Act. *The Children Act Report 1993* neatly summarised the situation:

A broadly consistent and somewhat worrying picture is emerging. In general, progress towards full implementation of Section 17 of the Children Act has been slow. Further work is needed to provide across the country a range of family services aimed at preventing families reaching the point of breakdown. Some

authorities are still finding it difficult to move from a reactive social policing role to a more proactive partnership role with families (DH, 1994; para. 2.39).

It was in this context that a major debate opened up in the mid-1990s about the direction and balance of child protection policy and practice (Parton, 1997). The publication of *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (DH, 1995), which summarised the key findings from a major government research programme on child protection practices, proved very influential in framing the debate. It argued that far too much time and resources were spent on forensically driven child protection investigations concerned with establishing whether a child had been injured or not, and if so, who was responsible. As a consequence there was a failure to develop longer term coordinated strategies. The report's authors asserted that there was a need for a refocusing initiative relocating concerns about child protection in the much wider context of providing services to children 'in need', particularly where there were concerns about, what *Messages from Research* called, 'emotional neglect' and 'parenting style'. This refocusing was intended to ensure greater integration of children's services with a much greater emphasis being placed on family support.

New Labour and the Move to ‘Safeguarding’

While John Bowis, the Conservative Under Secretary of State, wrote the Foreword to *Messages From Research* and the government seemed supportive of the attempts to ‘refocus’, there was no extra resource made available and it was left to local authorities to take the initiative forward. However, this was to change significantly with the election of the New Labour government in May 1997. What quickly became apparent was that the new government was keen to broaden the ‘refocusing’ initiative beyond simply rebalancing family support and child protection. Concerns about parenting, early intervention, supporting the family and regenerating communities became part of the policy agenda in order to address a number of social ills where the prime focus was ensuring that the development of children and young people could be maximised (Home Office, 1998; Featherstone, 2004). This was to be a key responsibility for local authorities generally rather than just social service departments, and would reposition the role of health trusts, education authorities, and non-government agencies, who were all encouraged to develop accessible, non-stigmatising, preventive approaches aimed at improving the welfare of all children. There was to be a new and significant role for early year’s services and the development of *Sure Start Centres* in the most deprived communities was to be a priority (Glass, 1999).

Such developments were taken much further with the launch of the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (ECM) programme in 2004 (DfES, 2004). Although ostensibly launched as the government’s response to the high profile child abuse public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) its scope was far wider than trying to deal with problem child abuse cases where the focus was upon the risk of

significant harm. The priority of ECM was to intervene at a much earlier stage in children's lives in order to prevent a range of problems in childhood and beyond, including poor educational attainment, unemployment, crime and anti-social behaviour. The over-riding vision was to bring about 'a shift to prevention whilst strengthening protection' (DfES, 2004, p.3). The ambition was to improve the outcomes for *all children* - defined in terms of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing - and to narrow the gap between those who did well and those who did not. It was felt that any child, at some point in their life, could be vulnerable to some form of risk and may require help and it was the duty of the state to provide that help.

It was a very ambitious programme. The role of prevention was not only to intervene in problems before they became chronic but to enhance the opportunities for child development. The notion of protection was thus much wider than simply protection from harm or abuse and was very much concerned with maximising childhood strengths and resilience.

The ECM agenda came into English law with the Children Act 2004. It signalled a considerable expansion in the remit of the state towards all children and required a considerable increase in both the size and complexity of the systems designed to screen and identify those in need of attention. In the process a much wider range of agencies and practitioners became responsible for safeguarding the welfare of children, providing the conditions for the emergence of, what might be called, the 'preventive-surveillance state' (Parton, 2008). It was clear that the changes would take some time to fully implement and bear fruit. However, because the *Every Child Matters* reforms had been

introduced in response to the scandal arising from the death of Victoria Climbié the government was always likely to be politically vulnerable if and when a similar scandal arose in the future, thereby, appearing to demonstrate that the reforms had failed. This is precisely what happened.

Peter Connolly and the Re-discovery of Reactive Child Protection

On 11 November 2008 two men were convicted of causing or allowing the death of 17-month-old Peter Connolly, one of whom was his step-father. The baby's mother had already pleaded guilty to the charge. There had been over 60 contacts with the family from a variety of health and social care professionals and he had been the subject of a child protection plan with Haringey London Borough, one of the local authorities which had been at the centre of the failures to protect Victoria Climbié in 2000.

The media, public and politicians alike united in blaming the social work and medical professionals who had been involved with the child's care together with Haringey's Director of Children's Services Sharon Shoemith for the child's death (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2015; Shoemith, 2016). *The Sun* (Britain's best-selling tabloid newspaper at the time) attracted 1.5 million signatures to its petition demanding the sacking of all the professionals involved in the Baby P case giving some indication of the depth of public fury at this death and who was considered responsible. In an effort to control the unfolding events, on November 13th 2008 Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for the Department of Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) ordered a number of official investigations into the actions of the local authority, health authority and the police. On receipt of the Joint Area Review of safeguarding in

Haringey on December 1st 2008 Balls ordered Haringey to remove Shoemith as Director of Children's Services, and later that month Haringey sacked her without compensation and with immediate effect. Haringey Council went on to dismiss four other employees connected to the Baby P case and two doctors who had been responsible for the child at some point (a family GP and a paediatrician) were suspended from the medical register.

The political and media reaction to the death of Peter Connelly had an immediate and wide-scale impact on child protection professionals and child protection practice. This was the first instance in which such senior managers had been dismissed as a result of apparent child protection failures. There was a sense of very high anxiety amongst government officials, children's service managers and practitioners. Very quickly reports surfaced about the increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in children's social care and the morale of existing staff was said to be at an all-time low (LGA, 2009). A narrowly focused and reactive form of child protection was once again positioned as the central focus of safeguarding policy and practice. A number of influential commentators (including the House of Commons' Children, Schools and Families Committee) argued that the threshold for admitting children into state care was too high (House of Commons, 2009). Applications for care orders rose by 50% in the second half of 2008-9 compared with the first half of the year (CAFCASS, 2009) and the period after November 2008 produced a large increase right across child protection practice – in respect of referrals to children's social care, inquiries conducted under s47 Children Act 1989, the number of children subject to a child protection plan, and the number of children taken into care (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2010). Increasingly it seemed that early intervention was being interpreted as the need

to intervene authoritatively at an earlier stage and using the full weight of the law (Hannon et al, 2010).

Locate Table 1 here

By the end of the New Labour government in 2010 there was a growing range of criticisms about the direction of policy and practice. These criticisms were no longer related solely to the failure of professionals to protect children from maltreatment and death but were framed more widely on the ECM agenda which it was argued may have impacted negatively on professional practice. Particular criticism was directed at the introduction of a range of electronic ICT systems which detractors stated both increased the range and depth of state surveillance of children, young people and parents (Parton, 2006; 2008a; Roche, 2008; Anderson et al, 2009) and served to undermine professional practice. Such systems were held to deflect front line practitioners from working directly with children and parents (Hall et al, 2010); to increase the bureaucratic demands of the work (Broadhurst et al, 2010a; 2010b; White, Hall and Peckover, 2009); and catch practitioners in an ‘iron cage of performance management’ (Wastell et al, 2010) preventing them from exercising their professional judgement to safeguard children and promote their welfare (Peckover, White and Hall, 2008; White et al, 2009). Rather than overcoming the defensive, risk avoidance practices associated with the narrow, forensic and reactive forms of child protection practice evident in the early 1990s it seemed that these characteristics were more than ever permeating the children’s services of the late 2000s (Parton, 2011).

Child Protection and the ‘Authoritarian Neoliberal State’

Upon taking office in May 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (‘the Coalition’) signalled it was abandoning ECM and established an independent review of child protection in order to identify the problems and recommend ways forward. The review was chaired by Eileen Munro, a qualified and experienced social worker and Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, and was published in three parts (Munro, 2010; Munro, 2011a, 2011b). It aimed to bring about a paradigm shift in child protection policy and practice (Parton, 2012) and was centrally concerned with placing professional expertise at the centre of a reformed child protection system. To this end the review recommended revision of the previous government’s statutory guidance in order to ‘remove unnecessary or unhelpful prescription and focus on essential rules for effective multiagency working and on the principles that underpin good practice’ (Munro, 2011b, p.7).

The Munro review was one of a number of reviews of child protection practice carried out under the Coalition. Increasing disquiet about the way in which the system as a whole was seen to be failing to protect children resulted in first the Norgrove Family Justice Review (2011) and then in 2012-13 The House of Commons Education Committee holding an Inquiry into the child protection system (Education Committee, 2013). What was clear from these reviews along with other related reviews of policies towards children more generally (e.g. Field, 2010; Allen, 2011a, b; Tickell, 2011) was that a new emphasis was being placed on the importance of child development and the availability of child developmental knowledge in policy and practice. In particular, the importance of help during the ‘early years’ was emphasised and the detrimental effects

of delays in receiving help on the child's development was elaborated from the research (Brown and Ward, 2013).

While the Coalition was supportive of the Munro review and clearly saw it as consistent with its overall approach to the reform of public services (DfE, 2011) there were a number of problems with it (Parton, 2012). Most immediately, the review at no point defined what it meant by 'child protection', or set out proposals for how to deal effectively with the social problem of child maltreatment, which is generally agreed to be around ten times higher than the number of cases that are ever referred to official agencies (Radford et al, 2011). If the state was to make serious efforts to reach and protect all abused and neglected children, agencies would be completely submerged. Rather than be concerned with developing policies and practices which would help reduce child maltreatment in society the review was much more concerned with how best to manage the increasing numbers of cases being referred into child protection agencies.

It was also that the political climate had changed considerably. While the New Labour government had placed children at the centre of its welfare reforms, following the financial and economic crisis of 2008/9 the Coalition declared 'the reduction of public finance debt to be its overriding and most urgent political priority'. On taking office it introduced major plans to reduce public expenditure, including cuts of 28% for local authorities over the course of the Parliament. Under the mantle of 'austerity', the Coalition reform of public services was far more radical than that conducted by any previous government, including previous Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major.

The Coalition approach to child welfare and protection can be characterised as a move to an ‘authoritarian neo-liberal state’ (Parton, 2014), which has a number of characteristics. New Labour policies requiring the ‘opening up’ public service delivery to a wide range of providers were made much more wide-ranging and sweeping under the Coalition’s *Open Public Services* White Paper (HM Government, 2011). In addition it was clear from the cuts to both services and welfare benefits that families with children were no longer a priority for the government (Stewart, 2011; Churchill, 2012; Brewer, 2010). A survey by the Directors of Children’s Services estimated that the cuts in local authority children’s services for the financial year 2010/11 averaged 13% (Higgs, 2011) while research carried out for the NSPCC (CIPFA, 2011) found that local authority children’s social care budgets faced reductions of over 23%. Early intervention and preventative services such as Children’s Centres and early years’ services took a disproportionate cut in the overall reductions to education budgets (Chowdry and Sibieta, 2011), and the voluntary sector, which relied on central and local government for much of its income, was particularly hard hit. (Gill et al, 2011). These cuts had the effect of making the Munro Review emphasis on the importance of ‘early help’ very difficult to deliver as the resources were not there for such help to be provided.

At the same time the Government made it clear that it felt a much more authoritative form of intervention was required with certain families. In a significant speech Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education, made it clear that it was the government’s view that more children should be taken into care so that tragedies like Baby P could be avoided in the future. He argued that for far too long child protection practice had

wrongly prioritised the interests of inadequate and failing parents over the needs of their children (Gove, 2012). This failure to act was seen as responsible for a variety of developmental deficits, a view Gove (2012) claimed to be backed by current neurobiological research. In addition, local authorities were considered to be further letting children down by failing to place children removed from their birth families within new adoptive families where their needs could be properly met. Following a major campaign for reform in *The Times* newspaper fronted by Martin Narey (Narey, 2011), the former Chief Executive of Barnardos, the Coalition launched a major initiative to ‘speed up adoptions and give vulnerable children loving homes’ (Department for Education, 2012). The Children and Families Act (2014) sought to reposition adoption as a mainstream option for children in care, requiring local authorities to reduce delays in adoption, ending ethnic matching, introducing a hybrid status of fostering-for-adoption allowing children to be placed with pre-approved adopters while the court considers their future, and creating a new national Adoption register for all children not placed with adopters within 3 months.

The Coalition government’s approach to child protection was enshrined in the revised statutory guidance published in March 2013 (HM Government, 2013). Whilst the guidance retained the title and definitions of key concepts used within the previous guidance (HM Government, 2010) its aim and rationale was very different. It was not simply that any reference to ECM had been dropped but that the idea of ‘supporting families’, which had been so central to guidance since the mid/late 1990s had all but disappeared. The 2013 guidance adopted what it called ‘a child-centred and coordinated approach to safeguarding’ (para.8), and the rights of children and parents were once again placed in opposition to one another. For:

Social workers, their managers and other professionals should always consider the plan from the child's perspective. *A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes.* (p.22, emphasis added).

The theme of 'rescuing children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes' ran through the guidance and very much reflected the emphasis in other elements of the Coalition's policies of intervening early, admitting more children into care and investing in adoption.

It also seemed that 'the politics of outrage' that had characterised much of the public reaction to the case of Baby P in 2008/9 (Parton, 2014; Warner, 2015) became normalised in the day to day media and political context in which child protection policy and practice operated. There followed a series of high profile scandals: e.g the Edlington Case in Doncaster (Carlile, 2012), the deaths of Hamzah Khan in Bradford (Bradford Safeguarding Children Board, 2013) and Daniel Pelka in Coventry (Wonnacott and Watts, 2014) where practitioners and their senior managers were seen to have failed in their primary responsibility to protect children from harm. In each of these cases senior politicians publicly declared their lack of confidence not only in the professionals and statutory agencies involved but also in the way local reviews of the cases had been carried out and the way professional services had been held accountable. These perceived failures of local authorities gave rise to an increasingly interventionist position from a central government willing to appoint outside managers or put completely new governance arrangements in place to manage the services.

Political and media anger about local authority failures to protect children reached a new level of intensity in August 2014 following publication of an inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham (Jay, 2014). One of the key findings of the report was that approximately 1400 children had been sexually exploited in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013, and that just over a third of them had previously been known to services because of child protection concerns. The issues in Rotherham were particularly politically combustible because of the ways in which ethnic, gender and social class elements were perceived to have undermined professional child protection practice. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) – fresh from its successes in the Rotherham council elections and seeking to build a national political platform – argued that the Rotherham scandal represented a prime example of a local authority failing to protect vulnerable, working class, predominantly white children and young people from largely non-white men, because those in power were afraid of being deemed racist. This interpretation had also been dominant in the media coverage of the scandal.

These failures brought about in quick succession the resignation first of the leader of Rotherham Council and then the Chief Executive, and then, the strategic director for children and young people's services. However, the greatest opprobrium was reserved for Shaun Wright who had been Rotherham's deputy leader with lead responsibility for children's services from 2005 until 2010. At the time of the Rotherham Inquiry into child sexual exploitation, Wright was the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner (a post he was appointed to in 2012). Extraordinary political pressure was placed on him to resign this post – an outcome called for by the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the chair of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee.

This call was echoed by Labour's Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, and when this was not forthcoming Wright's membership of the Labour Party was suspended. Nearly four weeks after the publication of the inquiry report Wright finally resigned following a vote of no confidence from the South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commission Committee.

In the wake of this scandal Eric Pickles (then Minister for Communities), and Nicky Morgan (then Minister for Education), circulated copies of the report to all local authorities and wrote to council leaders saying:

We cannot undo the permanent harm that these children have suffered. But we can and should take steps to ensure that this never happens again and make sure that *local authorities deliver on their essential duty to protect vulnerable children*. (Pickles and Morgan, 2014, emphasis added).

Local authority responsibilities were now explicitly in relation to all *vulnerable* children in their borough and not only to those on a statutory order or who were deemed to be 'children in need'. No longer were child protection scandals seen to result from individual professional failures alone. What we were witnessing was the media and senior politicians assailing local authorities and increasingly the police with accusations of major institutional failures so that those who were deemed to carry the major responsibilities for those organisations were subject to high profile criticism and anger when they were seen to be failing.

These themes of increased austerity, the privatisation of services and a more authoritarian form of intervention into 'failing families' were reinforced further following the election of the Conservative government in May 2015. The first twelve

months of the new government were taken up with the political preparations for the referendum about the future of UK membership of the European Union which took place on 23 June 2016. As a result the government's legislative programme was very limited. However, right at its core were proposals to further reform child protection. In his first major post-election speech the Prime Minister, David Cameron, pledged to continue much of the work of the Coalition but with a much more explicit focus on opening up 'opportunity' for the most disadvantaged and the importance of having 'a complete intolerance of government failure' (Cameron, 2015). He asserted that the changes to adoption had been a success story, citing the more than doubling of the capacity of voluntary adoption agencies to recruit adopters, and the reduction in the time it took to approve prospective adopters; changes which he was determined to take further.

However, adoption - a key government policy to revolutionise the care system – had begun to falter. Initially the different adoption initiatives were said to have resulted in 5,050 children in local authority care being adopted during the year ending 31 March 2014 - an increase of 58% from 2010 (Department for Education, 2014). However, the cases of *Re B* (2013) and *Re B-S* (2013) served to remind decision makers that adoption was a draconian step requiring the highest level of evidence and under the current law it was the duty of the state to take the least interventionist approach to the upbringing of children. In *Re B (A Child)* [2013] UKSC 33 the Supreme Court took the view that adoption was "a very extreme thing, a last resort", only to be made where "nothing else will do", and in *Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146 Munby J had criticised social workers for moving too quickly to a decision on adoption without conducting the required analysis of all the alternatives (Gupta and Lloyd-Jones, 2016). This had an

immediate effect on practice with social workers interpreting the case as stating that adoption can only be considered where nothing else will do. The continuing confusion about adoption resulting from Re B-S and subsequent case law was held to be responsible first for slowing the initial government mandated increase in adoptions of children in care (5,360 by the year ending March 2015) and then for reversing it (4,690 by the year ending March 2016).

David Cameron was clearly unhappy with these challenges and committed to further reforms in adoption and to a major overhaul of child protection practice more generally, which would include significant changes to the training and accountability of social workers and their managers. Child tragedies were seen to result from a combination of failing families, failing practitioners, failing managers, and failing local authorities; and the government made it clear that it was prepared to intervene authoritatively at all these levels of failure where this was thought necessary. The changes were to be underpinned by legislation and the Children and Social Work Bill was published in May 2016 to bring this about. This ‘transformation’ (DfE, 2016) in children’s services was to be accomplished at a time of further cuts to the public sector as detailed in the July 2015 post-election Budget and the November 2015 autumn Spending Review. Once again the negative effects of the austerity mandated changes to tax / benefits and services were to fall disproportionately upon the poorest sections of society, particularly women and children (De Henau and Reed, 2016; Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). However, on 24th June 2016, after little more than a year in office, the EU referendum result brought about the resignation of David Cameron and the appointment of Theresa May as Prime Minister.

In April the following year after a lengthy and difficult passage through parliament the Children and Social Work Act 2017 received royal assent. It aimed to overcome some of the obstacles to using adoption for children in care and to strengthen the support for children leaving care. However, the sections on the role of the Secretary of State in controlling the training, education and practice of social workers and those concerned with exempting local authorities from certain legislative requirements – thereby opening up the increased possibility that local authority functions could be taken over by private, voluntary or third sector organisations – were subject to considerable criticism and were substantially changed. It also provided the legislative basis for establishing a new regulator for social work and aimed to raise the standards of practice by introducing a new system of assessment and accreditation whereby all social workers would be accredited in the scheme by 2020 and would be required to be re-accredited at regular intervals thereafter. While the control of secretary of state in these matters was much reduced compared to what was included in the original Bill, it was clear that the oversight and control of social workers would be increased and centralised as a result of the changes. It was also clear that the key standards and requirements have as their focus a narrow view of child protection. While somewhat watered down from the way the legislation was originally drafted there is no doubt that the Children and Social Work Act 2017 has the effect of further reinforcing many of the changes that had been taking place in the role and tasks of social workers over the previous ten years.

Current Challenges and Future Directions

Since 2008 we have witnessed a considerable ‘refocusing’ of children’s services which, in many ways is the opposite of what was being recommended by the ‘refocusing’ initiative of the mid/late 1990s - what we might call a ‘refocusing of refocusing’, and this has had clear implications for the role and tasks of social workers. A closer look at Table 1 (above) clearly demonstrates that the increased use of the more authoritative forms of intervention were not restricted to the immediate fallout from the Baby P case, these trends have been maintained. The number of referrals to children’s social care increased by about 12% between 2007/8 to 2009/10 but this has since levelled out and been subject to both small annual increases and decreases since then and now stands at 621,470 in 2015/16.

However all the other figures in Table 1 show steady – sometimes dramatic - increases over the same period. The number of children looked after by the local authority has gone up nearly 20% during , from 59,360 to 70,440, while the increase in registered child protection plans has nearly doubled, up from 34,000 to 63,310. The number of applications to court for public law orders has more than doubled from 6,241 to 12,781 and the number of Section 47 Enquiries/Investigations has gone up from 76,800 to 172,290. This points to a significant shift in the overall balance of the work towards a much greater reliance on investigations and a reliance on statutory interventions. The significance of the changes since 2007/8 are not so much in the increases in referrals to children’s social care as, following the initial increase in 2009/10, these figures have

been fairly constant. The significance, we would argue, is in the overall balance of the work, in effect a ‘refocusing of refocusing’. These changes have been taking place at the same time as we have also witnessed cuts to a range of universal services and benefits for families and children and where the levels of poverty and deprivation in the poorest sections of society have been increasing. Not only has the state become more commercialised and residualised over recent years it has become more authoritarian for certain sections of the population. All are key elements in what we can characterise as the emergence of the authoritarian neoliberal state in services for children and families in England (Parton, 2014), and there is little to suggest that these lines of development will not be advanced further during this Parliament.

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