

Clem Henricson

The Contractual Culture and its Impact on Children's and Family Services

Public service reform has been the hallmark of the New Labour administration and that of its Conservative predecessor, threading its way through government aspiration over some two decades. Inspection, targets stringent evaluation, a competitive ethos - are the tools to deliver efficiency and assuage the fear of misapplied, squandered investment opportunities. In searching for the ideal vision or simply better answers through the complexities of 21st century public administration, the government has swayed from the controls of centralisation to a tentative engagement with the new localism; arms length administration may well come to typify the next era of progressive reform. Yet for all the flurry of changing directions, whether nationally or locally driven, a common theme throughout public service enhancement is a tightening of the contract with those who deliver public services on our behalf.

How is this affecting children's and family services? Is what has come to be known as the "contractual culture" in public services meeting children's and families' needs satisfactorily? Is it working, - and significantly is it working for personal social services of the sort that comprise family support? There are reservations that are voiced in low rumblings of discontent amongst professionals in the field and commentaries on specific service issues. For example, child protection has been the subject of discussion around the issue of risk and whether ever more detailed procedural requirements and control structures are conducive to constructive working by social workers. Funding instability and the constant focus of attention on contract bidding is another sphere of operation across the sector attracting complaint. Targets have been the subject of vocal disquiet particularly in relation to the health service where they have received disproportionate attention at the cost of the totality of provision. Examples of target figure massaging because of the pressure on commissioners and professionals to deliver in accordance with procedures have been widely cited. Increasingly elaborate inspection regimes have also come to be perceived as onerous.

The premise put forward in this paper is that family support requires a fluid response to personally defined need, coupled with a synthesis of values of individual rights as a consumer power resource and caring as a professional motivational one. There is a discussion as to how these concepts should play out in the reform of children's and family services in the UK.

Clem Henricson

Family and Parenting Institute, UK

e-mail: Henricson@familyandparenting.org