



PRESS RELEASE

19 April 2012

New research explodes myths about Independent Social Work Experts

Groundbreaking research from Oxford University challenges concerns about duplication and delay through the use of independent social work (ISW) assessments in Family Court proceedings. On the contrary, the report argues that delays might be reduced by the earlier appointment of ISW experts.

The Oxford study examined independent social work expert reports and found that they added considerable value in cases of high complexity.

Reports provided transparent, forensic, evidence-based assessments which gave clarity around complex issues, supporting better welfare decision-making for children and families within Family Courts.

Indeed in the light of the proposed six month target for completion of cases, the research suggests that without access to ISW experts, courts may be severely hampered in attempts to speed up proceedings.

The researchers argue that results to date challenge critical views about ISWs and the work that they do. They indicate that ISWs could make an important contribution to the success of the family justice modernisation programme.

CISWA-UK: The Confederation of Independent Social Work Agencies, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Nagalro, professional association for ISWs and Children's Guardians and many children's organisations are supporting the research. They believe that restricting access to ISWs will lead to poor decision making with more children being exposed to further risk of abuse or being removed unnecessarily from their families.

John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research and Development at British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) said:

"The research from Oxford University provides real insight into this work and a positive perspective on the professionalism of the social workers. It is clear that there needs to be a re-evaluation of the negative picture that is currently driving reform. This must include a robust evaluation of what is at danger of being lost to court processes that make life changing decisions on the future of children."

Hilton Dawson of British Association of Social Workers commented:

"At last we have an evidence base to give us a true indication of the value added to family court proceedings by highly experienced independent social workers. The research challenges the views presented in the Family Justice Review."

Ann Haigh, Chair of Nagalro said: “Rather than hampering the proposed reforms, ISWs can be a major asset in helping courts to meet new government targets. The quality of their work helps family courts who make such profound decisions about some of the most vulnerable children and families in the country”.

Philip King from the Confederation of Independent Social Work Agencies (CISWA), said:

“With a dramatic rise in the numbers of children coming into care, the research highlights that Courts may be severely hampered by a lack of access to these experts who have been shown to be able to provide high quality, forensic reports to meet deadlines”.

“The government needs to urgently rethink its policy towards social work experts if it is to meet its own agenda for more decisive and speedier justice for the most vulnerable children within our society”

ENDS

Note to Editors

Within care proceedings, courts deal with the most vulnerable children within our society; they are forums where profound decisions are made about their future. Independent social work (ISW) experts assist with this important decision making. However, criticisms about their use, submitted to the Family Justice Review (FJR), included claims that such assessments cause delay, add nothing new and duplicate existing local authority assessments. The FJR was persuaded by these criticisms and government accepted recommendations that the use of ISWs should be exceptional.

Dr Julia Brophy and her colleagues at Oxford University have undertaken the first research into this complex area of work. The findings from the first stage will be published on 19 April 2012 - *The Contribution Of Experts In Care Proceedings: Evaluation Of The Work Of Independent Social Work Assessments*.

The research challenges submissions to the FJR. It argues that far from detracting from the proposed programme of reform in family justice, ISWs could be of considerable assistance in helping Courts and parties to meet new targets, whilst maintaining the quality of assessments.

The findings to date demonstrate:

- There was no evidence that ISW reports cause delay to court hearings
- They produce high quality reports to deadlines
- ISWs have ‘added value’: they are independent, highly skilled and experienced [median 24 years in child protection work]
- They are child focused and successful in engaging parents with a history of non cooperation with local authorities
- There was no evidence of routine duplication with a current local authority core assessment.
- Appointment of ISWs do not result solely from parents seeking second opinion evidence based on human rights claims
- Parents were involved in most instructions but most were joint, involving the local authority and the child/children’s guardian

Launch event Thursday 19th April 2012 in London

An Executive Summary of the research will be provided at the launch event, with a download of the full research document available at www.ciswa-uk.org/

Dr Julia Brophy from Oxford University will be available for interview.

Also available for comment will be:

John Simmonds [BAAF]; Martha Cover [Chair of ALC]; Nushra Mansuri [BASW]; Ann Haigh [Chair of Nagalro]; Mark Willis [Chair of CISWA] Philip King and Jimmy Jack [Directors of CISWA]

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