MG

NJS.

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PRIME MINISTER

I asked for this, following our discussion of the appalling case of Lucy Gates. Shall I say that you were glad to see it, and hope that Mr Jenkin will keep up his interest in the issues?

MS
28/11

Prime Minister

Yes please MT.

Your Private Secretary's letter of 7 November asked for my views on the scope for further action to combat the problem of child abuse.

The case of Lucy Gates is most distressing. I have asked the local authority and the health authority for reports. The main thing, of course, is to do everything possible to prevent similar tragedies in the future. George Young and I have already spent a lot of time on this whole problem.

First, we must get the people on the spot to work together better. This has been the thrust of guidance from my Department since the Maria Colwell inquiry in 1974. I have been trying, with some success, to cut down the number of detailed guidance circulars, but I felt it right to make an exception in August this year when I issued a circular on the use of child abuse registers. I believe that better procedures do now exist in most places, and that cases are beginning to be dealt with more effectively. But I shall keep the situation under review and issue further guidance if necessary.

Second, the standard of professional practice must be improved. As a first step I have asked my officials to study all the reports of inquiries into fatal cases of child abuse to look for common features and lessons that can be learned for the future. We shall also be looking at each area's handbook of local child abuse procedures so that we can highlight examples of good practice. I shall give the findings of these studies the widest possible publicity among professional staff who deal with child abuse. I shall ask for the help of professional and voluntary bodies with this.

Third, we need to look at training. Social workers and other professionals have a difficult task. They must be adequately trained for this if cases are to be properly handled and mistakes - with their tragic consequences - are to be avoided. I was so greatly concerned over an earlier case that I asked my Chief Social Work Officer for a note on social work and child abuse, and I think you might like to see it. It makes the point that the basic social work training does not fully equip a social worker to deal with the difficult problems of child abuse. This means that in-service training is very important. I am pleased to say that most authorities do provide this. I think it is important that this should continue, though it will not be easy when local authorities are having to cut back. My Department's Regional Social Work Service is often able to help authorities plan these courses. In the longer term I hope we shall learn a good deal more about the best role for social workers and the training they need from the review of social work which is being set up by the National Institute of Social Work, at my suggestion.

[attached] MS

Fourth, I want to see the best use made of the voluntary sector. There are a number of developments here:

Last year the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (BASPCAN) was formed and George Young spoke at their meeting earlier this year. I very much welcome this body which will help to increase the understanding of child abuse within and between professions, and I am giving it every encouragement.

We are strengthening our links with the NSPCC. George Young spoke at their annual meeting in May, and my officials now have regular meetings with Dr Gilmour.

We are continuing to give financial support to the NSPCC, particularly for the valuable pioneering work of its special units and for staff training, and we have made a special grant of £100,000 this year in view of the Society's financial problems.

We are also making a grant to the National Co-ordinating Committee of Self Help Groups for Parents Under Stress and other voluntary organisations providing support for young families at risk.

We are supporting a project at the National Children's Bureau which will be publicising the many promising local initiatives to prepare and support new parents in their responsibilities.

I think you will also be pleased to hear that BBC television will be broadcasting a series entitled "When the Bough Breaks" in January 1981. This will aim to help parents who are having difficulties with their young children. From what I have heard it is likely to be very good.

I think that this brief account shows what we are doing to combat child abuse. However, it would be wrong of me to give you the impression that these steps could prevent every case. I am afraid there will continue to be cases which cause public concern. Further publicity is likely in the next few weeks. First, the mother of Lucy Gates comes back to court for sentence on 1 December. Then, in the middle of December we shall be publishing the report of the inquiry which I had to set up into the case of Paul Brown who died in 1976 as a result of neglect and ill-treatment by his grandparents in Wirral.

Although I have closed on this note of caution, I believe we are beginning to make an impact on this problem. I shall, with George Young, continue to take a close personal interest, and see that further efforts are made to protect children where these are needed.

28 November 1980

P.J.

SOCIAL WORK AND CHILD ABUSE

Inquiries into cases of child abuse often reveal a combination or accumulation of errors by the various professionals involved. This was so in the case of Carly Taylor. Failures by social workers in social services departments are particularly serious, however, because local authorities carry the principal statutory responsibility for taking action to protect children.

2. Social work in cases of known or suspected child abuse is technically complex and demanding, and even where workers have skill, knowledge and experience there always remains an element of risk. Nevertheless, the reports of the NSPCC on its Special Units suggest that social work can help in bringing about a reduction in deaths, serious injuries and re-injuries.

3. Developments in medical knowledge and equipment mean that more cases of injury to children are now diagnosed as non-accidental. Our understanding of the factors which lead to child abuse is incomplete, however: we know a good deal about the factors associated with it, but much less about direct causes. These factors may occur without a child being abused and some of them are undeniably present in many of the families with which social services departments work. Social workers and other professionals inevitably make mistakes in predicting how human beings will behave. What will with hindsight appear an obviously sinister factor may at the time have seemed a feature shared with a number of other families in which nothing untoward was going on.

4. The public attention afforded individual cases has influenced the policies of local authorities and the practice of social workers. The importance of sound procedures and of collaboration have been emphasised. Putting the child's safety first in cases of doubt led to a sharp increase in care orders under sub-sections of the CYP Act 1969 concerned with child abuse and neglect after Maria Colwell died. There were 1349 such orders in 1973; 2369 in 1974; and a peak of 2908 in 1975, declining to 2452 in 1978. Social workers have been criticised for being <u>too</u> ready to remove children or to place them on the register of children at risk.

5. The technical difficulty and peculiar pressures of this work do not account for some of the extraordinary lapses from good practice that have occurred. A particularly worrying feature in the case of Carly Taylor was the failure to assess correctly the observation of family behaviour offered by neighbours,

fr nds and relatives. Social workers are either making mistakes at critical moments, or operating temporarily or permanently below acceptable levels of competence. This has implications for the practice of social work in social services departments generally, not just for practice in child abuse cases.

Organisation of Social Work

6. Preventing child abuse is not an isolated area of practice. It depends on the development and availability of other services and is itself part of a wide range of services to children and families. These in turn are part of the total provision made by social services departments for all client groups. Priorities for some are frequently (but not necessarily) achieved at the expense of others. Public concern about child abuse has reinforced a situation in which a disproportionate amount of social work resources in SSDs are locked up in comparatively small numbers of families with intractable problems. Improvements in policies and practice in this sector of work are badly needed.

Specialisation

7. In 1971 many experienced workers from the former children's departments were promoted to senior posts in SSDs and in education. This experience is only now being replaced at field level, and specialist posts in child abuse, fostering and court work are returning. Some authorities now arrange for basic grade social workers to concentrate on narrower fields of practice which include work with families and children. Whole-time specialisation in work with cases of child abuse is rarely possible. We do not yet know if the new salary scales will provide an incentive for experienced social workers to remain in practice. The qualifications and experience of senior and supervisory staff remain especially important: several of the inquiry reports have confirmed the importance of good and objective supervision.

8. Specialisation is dealt with at more length in the annex. In current practice it means pursuing a particular function, rather than possessing particular skills or qualifications. Achieving basic levels of competence is an essential preliminary to the development of sound specialist practice.

Training

9. One looks to qualifying training to provide the foundation for this basic competence. The most recent figures (September 1977) show that only 56% of basic grade social workers (field) held a recognised qualification. Training expanded to keep pace with the staffing increases in the early 1970s, but the speed of growth has itself presented problems in maintaining satisfactory standards.

10. The basic courses now provide a broadly based general training. The adequacy of the two year course (even less for a small proportion of entrants) is increasingly questioned. Providing academic and practical foundations for all the tasks that lie ahead is impossible. When authorities insist that only qualified social workers deal with cases of child abuse they may not necessarily be getting workers who are fully equipped for this field of practice: we understand that the workers in the Carly Taylor case, for example, were trained.

11. In-service training is consequently essential. The training officers in SSDs are charged with meeting the training needs of the whole staff, not just those of social workers. The great majority of staff have not received any formal preparation for the jobs they do. Field social workers, who make up about 10% of the staff, are in any case the best trained. Nevertheless, most local authorities are able to arrange some programmes of in-service training on child abuse, often with other agencies. Social Work Service - because of the importance attached to the subject by the Departmentment - has advised on and participated in some of these courses. The Department has encouraged Area Review Committees to organise training for all the professions involved. Some training posts are shared by local authorities and health authorities and paid for through joint finance. The National Children's Bureau is arranging some workshops, and the new British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect has made an encouraging start.

12. The effectiveness of providing a broadly based general training depends upon making opportunities available also for more specialised training after qualification. The post-qualifying courses recognised by CCETSW are only now getting under way. There are only eight active courses on work with children and families: with not more than 68 places filled in the academic year beginning Autumn 1978.

Voluntary Organisations

13. Voluntary organisations make an important contribution to prevention. The NSPCC Special Units lead the field in this country in work with cases of child abuse. A healthy partnership exists between local authorities, the NSPCC, the major national child care organisations and the self-help movement in work with families with children at risk.

WBU

W B UTTING
Chief Social Work Officer
Social Work Service

3 July 1980

BACKGROUND NOTE

a. Case of Lucy Gates

Lucy Gates, aged 2, died in hospital in June 1979 from injuries received on 31 May when an electric fire fell on top of her at her mothers flat. Her mother was out at the time and had left her three children alone. Mrs Gates has pleaded guilty to manslaughter and neglect and has been remanded for 28 days for reports. The family had been known for ten years to the Social Services Department, who had visited regularly and provided practical help as Mrs Gates found it difficult to cope on her own. The case was reviewed every six months and it was felt best to keep the family together, though the children were received into care for short periods when their mother required a break. All three children were on the register of children at particular risk of neglect or abuse because of the general home situation. The case has recently received considerable publicity in the press and on TV. (Press cuttings are attached). Reports have been urgently requested from the Area Health Authority and the local authority on their involvement with the family and on any further action they now propose to take.

b. Public Concern about Child Abuse

There has been considerable public concern since the Maria Colwell inquiry in 1974. In recent months, several tragic cases of child abuse, in which a child died, have attracted wide attention, but the increase in awareness of child abuse is not thought to reflect an increase in the incidence of cases. There is considerable pressure from the public to institute inquiries into cases which have gone wrong. DHSS policy has been to encourage authorities locally to establish their own inquiries where the circumstances indicate cause for concern, and to use the Secretary of State's power to establish an inquiry only as a last resort.

c. Government Plans

DHSS and other central Government Departments have given a lot of guidance to authorities locally over the past 10 years on how they might tackle the problem of child abuse, most recently in a circular issued in August this year on the organisation and management of registers of children thought to be at risk of abuse or neglect. Further action is proposed as follows:-

i. The Departments concerned are studying the published reports and other information about the handling of child abuse to see what lessons can be learned and made widely known for the future.

ii. DHSS propose to review the manuals of procedure laid down locally for the handling of cases to help authorities to improve them if necessary.

iii. The work of voluntary organisations concerned with preventing child abuse, such as the NSPCC and the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse are being encouraged and given grant support.

BRIEFING FOR PM'S QUESTIONS ON 4 NOVEMBER 1980

What action is the Government taking, in the light of the death of Lucy Gates, to prevent further tragic cases of child abuse?

My colleagues and I were deeply concerned to hear of this most distressing case. My rt hon Friend the Secretary of State for Social Services has asked the local authority and health authority involved for urgent reports on the events leading up to the child's death and on any further action they propose to take.

Action to prevent and deal with these tragic cases must essentially be a matter for the local authorities and other agencies. The Government has, however, issued guidance from time to time, most recently in August this year, and is planning a number of further measures to promote good practice.

Will cuts in local authority expenditure put more children at risk?

It is for local authorities to determine the use of their resources according to local needs and priorities. We have, however, made it clear that we expect services for the most vulnerable groups, including children at risk of abuse, should be protected as far as possible.